

2021

General Synod

Workbook

Reformed Church in America

The Westin La Paloma
Tucson, Arizona

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Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum

In order to have a fruitful, Spirit-led atmosphere on the floor of General Synod, it is important that all delegates observe some simple rules of decorum. These rules are not meant to stifle conversation or the expressing of opinions, but simply to ensure that all delegates are able to focus on the business before the synod. People should act in a courteous and considerate manner at all times and should be respectful of others, regardless of their opinions.

1. Come to General Synod prepared: read all of the reports in the workbook. Come to synod ready to ask questions for clarification and to speak to the reports through your prayerful discernment of the topics at hand.
2. When seated at tables with fellow delegates, be careful not to engage in distracting behavior. Silence your computers, tablets, and mobile phones. Take necessary phone calls away from the synod floor. In short, be courteous to those seated around you. Be aware that your conduct may affect the people around you.
3. When the time comes for debate on an item of business, you may desire to speak to that business. Stand and wait to be recognized by microphone number. When the chair recognizes you, begin by stating your name and the assembly from which you are a delegate. Then address your comments directly to the chair.
4. When it comes time to vote, you might be filled with joy or disappointment at the results. Remember that there are other delegates who feel differently than you do, and extend them the courtesy of not outwardly expressing your feelings. Maintain a respectful atmosphere, taking into account individual circumstances or opinions. This will show proper respect for the decision the synod has made.

Following these simple rules of decorum is each delegate's responsibility. There are no "police" to monitor your behavior. It is a matter of honor. However, those who are found to be in violation of these rules of decorum are subject to discipline at the discretion of the chair of the meeting.

This statement was written and approved for inclusion in the General Synod workbook by the General Synod Council at its March 2017 meeting.

Roll Call of General Synod

This list represents voting delegates submitted and confirmed by their sending bodies as of September 9, 2021. The number of voting delegates to which each classis is entitled is computed according to BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 (2019 edition, p. 67) and Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1b (2019 edition, p. 105). Some classes are still finalizing their delegate lists, and additions, drops, or changes may still occur. A report listing updates to this delegate roster will be issued shortly before the General Synod meets in mid-October.

REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY

Stephen Norden

Classis of Albany

Ministers

Rick Behan

Mashona Walston

Elders

Tina Marie Bottini

Noreen Fargione

Classis of Columbia-Greene

Minister

Charles Wiessner

Elders

Savitri Devi Mark

Bret Smith

Classis of Montgomery

Ministers

Matthew Draffen

Brian Engel

Elders

Randy Karcher

Lynne Stenberg

Classis of Rochester

Minister

Sarah Palsma

Elders

Robert Knapp

Loretta Rolle

Classis of Schenectady

Ministers

Megan Hodgkin
Matthew van Maastricht

Elders

Bradley Lewis
Linda Young

Classis of Schoharie

Ministers

Robert Hoffman
Sherri Meyer-Veen

Elders

Daniel Fiske
Susan Pendergast

REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA

Willie Si

Classis of British Columbia

Elder

Gail Hughes

Classis of Canadian Prairies

Ministers

Albert Plat
John (Doug) Smith

Elders

Rita Burkard
Bev Topola

Classis of Ontario

Ministers

Bart Keefer
Arthur VanSlageren

Elders

Mark Heeringa
Gildo Vieira

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST

Mark Sanders

Classis of the Americas

Ministers

Carole Barber
Kenley Korver

Elders

Lorena Serrano
Richard Spurling

Classis of California

Ministers

Richard DeBruyne
Joel Plantinga

Elders

Susan Davis
Eric Moreno
Peter Watts

Classis of Cascades

Ministers

Kyle Nesbitt
Charles Swoboda

Elders

William Dennis
Ben Keller

Classis of Central California

Minister

Russell Siders

Elders

Martin Mora
Glenn Spyksma

Classis of Rocky Mountains

Ministers

Eric Carpenter
Bradley Kautz

Elder

Brandon Goad

Classis of the Southwest

Ministers

John Stapert
Ted Vande Berg

Elders
June Denny
Les Heitland

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES

Gregory Brower

Classis of Great Lakes City

Ministers
Jay Carroll
Darrell Dalman
George Grevenstuk
Bruce Osbeck
Jonathan Sherrill

Elders
Michelle Chahine
Melinda Davey
Mark Howard
Clyde Richardson
Christy Slabbekoorn

Classis of Holland

Ministers
Jonathon Brown
Jonathan Brownson
Sharon Knibbe

Elders
Andrew Bast
Jennifer Van Regenmorter
Hugo Vasquez

*Missionary**
Rowland Van Es

Classis of Muskegon

Ministers
Miriam Bush
Steven Hyma

Elders
Ross Falkowski
James Smith

Classis of North Grand Rapids

Ministers
Benjamin Bruins

David Mayer

Elders

Sara Melton
Ronald Schollaart

Classis of Northern Michigan

Minister

Drew Peterson

Elders

Richard Shooks
James Van Sickle

Classis of Southwest Michigan

Ministers

Robert Link
Kevin Sanders
Jonathon VanderWall

Elders

Joel Messenger
Bruce Stohrer
Mary Zwart

Classis of Zeeland

Ministers

Douglas Baker
Eric Barnes
Thomas Grabill
Gary Jarvis
Mary Lokers Merrill

Elders

Terry Ebels
Lloyd Redder
Mike Teunis
Scott VanHaitsma
Dirk Weeldreyer

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND

Janet Van Wyk

Classis of Central Iowa

Ministers

Ross Davidson
Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell
Bethany (Bep) Reeves

Andrew Schmidt

Elders

Steve Heerema
David Kermode
Lee Vande Voort

Classis of Central Plains

Ministers

Mark Bradford
Quinn Tirrel

Elder

Jennifer Decker

Classis of Dakota

Ministers

D. Marc de Waard
Gary Hegstad
Cody Raak

Elders

Dennis Olsen
Jeff Patzlaff
Duane Wolbrink

Classis of East Sioux

Ministers

Kurt Bush
Cory Grimm
Brandon Morrow

Elders

Daryl Haack
Kimberly Van Es
Jay Wielenga

Classis of Minnesota

Ministers

Cornelius Moss
Aaron Punt

Elders

Calvin Brouwer
Daniel Korbel

Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Ministers

Susan Klimstra

Brian Steenhoek

Elder

Shawn Dietz

Classis of West Sioux

Ministers

Gerald Norman

Debra Rensink

Thomas Smith

Scott Van Ravenswaay

Elders

Mark DeKock

Matthew Kock

Brian Renes

Jerry Vermeer

REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA

Jose Rea

Classis of Chicago

Ministers

Frederick Wezeman

Steve Young

Elder

Richard VanSwol

Classis of Illiana

Ministers

Thomas Archer

Shawn Gerbers

Elders

Clair Hoeksema

Dean Schramm

Classis of Illinois

Ministers

Brion Brooks

Scott Stephan

Elders

William Reeher

Sheryl Ver Meer

Clasis de las Naciones

Ministers

Dylan Kallioinen
Patricia Simmons

Elders

Sebastian Gimenez
Lionel Rogers

Classis of Wisconsin

Ministers

Timothy Ehrhardt
Jonathan Garbison

Elder

Dennis Beach

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS

James Brumm

Classis of the City

Ministers

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
Frances Nelson

Elders

Michael Ehrenfried
Michael Molling

Classis of Delaware-Raritan

Ministers

Bethany Devos
David Haddorff

Elders

Robert Fodera
Sarah Gorton

Classis of Greater Palisades

Ministers

Dominick Apollo
Dwayne Jackson

Elders

Lisa Bontemps
Marenda Perry

Classis of New Brunswick

Ministers

Seth Kaper-Dale
Benjamin Lin

Elder

Robin Suydam

Classis of Passaic Valley

Ministers

Nathan Busker
Jill Fenske

Elder

David Sippel

REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK

Albert Potgieter

Classis of Brooklyn

Ministers

De'Lafayette Awkward
Carlos Rivera

Elders

Devonna Cousins
Michael Schroder

Classis of Mid-Hudson

Ministers

Renée House
Gloria McCanna

Elders

Christine Nickel
Robert Sweeney

Classis of Nassau-Suffolk

Ministers

Aric Balk
Joshua Scheid

Elder

David Philips

Classis of New York

Ministers

Patricia Sealy

Elizabeth Testa
Susanah Wade

Classis of Orange

Ministers

Stacey Duensing
Stanley Seagren

Elders

David Haldeman
Zach Pearce

Classis of Queens

Ministers

Pedro Agudelo
Jae Bong Lee

Elders

Kevin Huang
Jidong Shan

Classis of Rockland-Westchester

Ministers

Grace Jeeyoon Rim
Edward Schreur

Elders

Karie Brown
Mertella Munroe

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSORS

Carol Bechtel
James Brownson
Cornelis Kors
Chad Pierce

GENERAL SYNOD PRESIDENT

EJ de Waard

GENERAL SYNOD VICE PRESIDENT

Philip Assink

**Denotes missionary delegate per BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5 (2019 edition, p. 69).*

CORRESPONDING DELEGATES

GENERAL SECRETARY

Eddy Alemán

COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE (GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL)

Pedro Agudelo
Ned Beadel
Michelle Chahine
Devonna Cousins
Susan Davis
Bruce Deckinga
Jamie Dykstra
Hellen Harvey
Robert Johnson
Kathryn Lohre
Kent McHeard
Michael Meyer-Veen
Eric Moreno
James Nakakihara
Eric Nichols
Albert Plat
Neale Roller
Glenn Spyksma
Lee Vande Voort
Kimberly Van Es
Leigh Van Kempen
Harris Van Oort
Shuo-min (Imos) Wu

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Board of Trustees

Gregory Dunlap

President

Micah McCreary

Students

Vivian Campbell

Arlene Romaine

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Board of Trustees

Gail Ebersole

President

Felix Theonugraha

Students

James Donahue

Nathaniel Ryan

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY

Board of Trustees

Scott Christiansen

CHURCH GROWTH FUND BOARD

Michael Bos

CENTRAL COLLEGE

Students

Caleb Kuiper

Elise Visscher

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE

President

Gregory Christy

Students

Jordan Blok

Jillian Simon

GENERAL SYNOD COMMISSIONS

Commission on Christian Action

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Mark Swart

Commission on Christian Unity

Carlos Corro

Commission on Christian Worship

Dirk Gieser

Commission on Church Order

Howard Moths

Commission on Judicial Business

Brion Brooks

Commission on History

David Zomer

Commission on Nominations

Carol Mutch

Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Kelvin Spooner

Commission on Theology

David Komline

ADDITIONAL COMMISSION DELEGATES

Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Riana Shaw Robinson

Commission for Women

Danielle Postma

REGIONAL SYNOD EXECUTIVES

Regional Synod of Albany

Abigail Norton-Levering

Regional Synod of Canada

Marijke Strong

Regional Synod of the Far West

Bruce Bugbee

Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

John Messer

Regional Synod of the Heartland

Thomas Smith

Regional Synod of Mid-America

Wayne Van Regenmorter

Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic

Stephen Eckert

Regional Synod of New York

Micheal Edwards

REGIONAL SYNOD WOMEN

Regional Synod of Albany

Bethany Popkes

Regional Synod of Canada

Thais Lima

Grace Slot

Regional Synod of the Far West

Leonor Caballero

Natalie Yungner

Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Nancy Boote

Jennifer Holmes Curran

Regional Synod of Mid-America

Jane Carlson

Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic

Elizabeth Estes

Claudette Reid

Regional Synod of New York

Jennifer Bendelius

REGIONAL SYNOD YOUTH

Regional Synod of Canada

Felipe Carvalho

Regional Synod of Mid-America

Francisco Principal

Regional Synod of New York

Robert Bendelius

ECUMENICAL DELEGATES

Christian Reformed Church in North America

Colin Watson

United Church of Christ

Mark Pettis

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE

General Synod Chaplain

Judy Nelson

Parliamentarian

Russell Paarlberg

Seminarian Seminar Leader

Tim TenClay

Call Waiting Leader (Youth and College Delegates)

Annalise Radcliffe

SEMINARIAN SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

Zacharia A. DeWitt

Gelky Arvelo Montes

Joshua Pruis

New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Elba Arias-Lopez

Vivian Campbell

Patricia Johnson

Arlene Romaine

Heather Wilson

Western Theological Seminary

Brett Busch

James Donahue

Nathaniel Ryan

Permanent Commissions, Boards, and Agencies 2021–2022

*Indicates serving a final term

**Indicates term ends at the conclusion of the October 2021 General Synod

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

Pedro Agudelo	2023*	CHM
Philip Assink, <i>second vice moderator</i>	2021**	VP, GS
Ned Beadel, <i>moderator</i>	2022*	RSFW
Michelle Chahine	2024*	
Devonna Cousins	2024*	
Susan Davis	2025*	
Bruce Deckinga	2023*	RSGL
EJ de Waard	2021**	P, GS
Jamie Dykstra	2023*	
Hellen Harvey	2022*	AABC
Robert Johnson	2022*	
Kathryn Lohre	2025*	Ecumenical - ELCA
Kent McHeard	2022*	RSA
Michael Meyer-Veen	2025*	
Eric Moreno	2022*	
Sheila Moses	2024*	RSNY
James Nakakihara, <i>first vice moderator</i>	2021**	PP, GS
Eric Nichols	2025*	RSMAt
Albert Plat	2023*	RSC
Neal Roller	2025*	RSMAM
Glenn Spyksma	2025*	
Lee Vande Voort	2025*	
Kimberly Van Es	2024*	
Leigh Van Kempen	2023*	
Harris Van Oort	2024*	RSH
Patricia Varga	2024*	
Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu	2022*	CPAAM
Vacancy	2023	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

RACIAL/ETHNIC COUNCILS

African American Black Council Executive Committee

Sharon Atkins, *chairperson*
 Dwayne Jackson
 Earl James, *vice chairperson*
 Regina Reid
 Maudelin Willock

Council for Hispanic Ministries Executive Committee

Pedro Agudelo, *president*

Nora Aguilera

Fabio Sosa

Rafael Martín Torrealba

Ana Cristina Zarate

Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries Executive Committee

Stephen Kim

Kelvin Kong

Shi Yang Lin

Lynn Min

Grace Rohrer

Ancela Fransisca Rumokoy

Kyunghoon Suh, *president*

David Theonugraha, *ex officio*

Gerri Yoshida

COMMISSIONS

Christian Action

Scott DeLeeuw 2022*

Leah Ennis 2024

Mark Ennis 2023*

Edward Lungu 2022

Bradley Prince 2023

Dianna Smith 2024

Mark Stephenson (*interim Reformed ecumenical observer*) 2024

Robin Suydam, *secretary* 2022*

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead, *moderator* 2024*

Kim Winchell (*ELCA ecumenical observer*) 2023*

Vacancy 2023

Christian Discipleship and Education

Ellen Balk 2022

Rebecca Koerselman 2023

Troy Nanninga 2022

Mark Swart, *moderator* 2024

Pamela Van Beek 2023*

Bradley VanderWaal 2024

Jason White 2024

Christian Unity

Dale Buettner 2024

Nathan Busker 2024

Carlos Corro, <i>moderator</i>	2024*	
Stacey Duensing	2022	
Anthony Elenbaas (<i>CRCNA ecumenical</i>)	2023	
Carol (Kitt) Jackson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023	
Sun Jong Ju	2022*	
Jeffery Lampen, <i>secretary</i>	2023	
S. Mark Veldt	2023	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

Christian Worship

Geimy Alvarado	2023
Kent Frens	2024*
Dirk Gieser, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
Steven Granlund	2022
Cory Grimm	2022
Dennis TeBeest	2022*
Troy Van Beek	2024*

Church Order

Brian Andrew	2024
Christopher Jacobsen	2024
Howard Moths	2022
Joshua Scheid, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
Jennifer Van Regenmorter	2023*

History

Corstian Devos	2023
Lynn Japinga	2022*
Daniel Meeter	2024
Steven Pierce, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
Douglas Shepler	2024
David Zomer	2022

Judicial Business

Stephen Breen, <i>secretary</i>	2023*	RSH
Brion Brooks	2024	RSMAm
Erin Parker	2022	RSA
John (Chip) Sauer	2022	RSGL
Thomas Terpstra, <i>vice moderator</i>	2022*	RSFW
Kendra Van Houten, <i>moderator</i>	2023*	RSNY
Carl Visser	2024	RSC
Vacancy	2024	RSMA ^t

Nominations

Gregory Alderman	2022*	RSFW
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Ock Kee Byun	2024*	CPAAM
Rainey Enjady	2023*	
Jose Garreton	2024	RSC
Rebecca Hudak, <i>secretary</i>	2022*	RSA
Carol Mutch, <i>moderator</i>	2023*	RSMAt
James Nakakihara	2021**	PP, GS
Judith Nelson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2022	RSGL
Dean Schramm	2023	RSMAm
Patricia Sealy	2024	RSNY
Jael Serrano	2022	CHM
Vacancy	2023	AABC
Vacancy	2024	RSH

Race and Ethnicity

June Denny	2023*	
Rolfi Elivo Lopez	2024	
Earl James	2022	
Stephen Kim, <i>secretary</i>	2022	CPAAM
Janice Merino	2024	
Young Na	2023	
Nathan Pyle, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023	
Kelvin Spooner, <i>moderator</i>	2024*	AABC

Theology

Aaron Baart (<i>Reformed ecumenical observer</i>)	2023	
Steven Bouma-Prediger	2023	
James Brownson	2022	
William (Ruggles) Church	2022	
Elizabeth Estes	2023*	
David Komline	2022*	
John Lunn	2023	
Micah McCreary	2024	
William Russell (<i>ELCA ecumenical observer</i>)	2023*	
Stephen Shaffer, <i>moderator</i>	2022*	
Robert Whittington	2024	
Vacancy	2024	

Women

Philip Bakelaar	2024	
Melisa Blankenship, <i>secretary</i>	2024*	
Florence Dekker	2023	
Jane Dickie	2022	
Dwayne Jackson	2022*	
Mary Morgan	2023	
Claudette Reid	2024	
Debra Rensink, <i>moderator</i>	2022	

AGENCIES

Board of Benefits Services – New York

Philip Assink	2021** VP, GS
Lynn Barnes	2022
Ned Beadel	2022* GSC Moderator
Dana Chapman	2024*
Ralph Condis	2024*
Timothy Cumings	2023
EJ de Waard	2021** P, GS
Jack Doorlag, <i>president</i>	2023*
Joseph Laswell	2022
Douglas Struyk	2023*
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

Board of Benefits Services – Michigan

Philip Assink	2021** VP, GS
Lynn Barnes	2022
Ned Beadel	2022* GSC Moderator
Dana Chapman	2024*
Ralph Condis	2024*
Timothy Cumings	2023
EJ de Waard	2021** P, GS
Jack Doorlag, <i>president</i>	2023*
Joseph Laswell	2022
Douglas Struyk	2023*

Church Growth Fund, Inc., Board

Michael Bos, <i>president</i>	2023
Larry Koops	2022*
Nicole Kouba, <i>secretary</i>	2023*
Anne Putnam	2024
Ronald Rukambe	2022
George Schneiderman, <i>vice president</i>	2023
Karl Silberstein	2024
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)	<i>Ex officio</i>

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency Board of Trustees

Scott Christiansen, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Norma Coleman-James	2022
Dustin DeVriend	2023*
Robert Johnson	2022* GSC
San-Yi Shirley Lin	2024*
Frances Nelson	2023*
Willie Si	2022
Nancy Van Heerde, <i>secretary</i>	2022

Cathleen Wolff, <i>vice moderator</i>	2022	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

Israel Camacho	2024	
Norma Coleman-James	2022	MFCA
Gregory Dunlap	2023	NBTS
Daniel Gillett	2023	
Kristen Johnson	2024*	WTS
Eun Jae (Dan) Joo	2022	
Micah McCreary		NBTS president
Eric Moreno	2022*	GSC
Carol Mutch	2022	CPAT
Chad Pierce	2023	
David Schutt		MFCA interim exec. director
Cora Taitt	2024*	
Felix Theonugraha		WTS president
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

ECUMENICAL DELEGATIONS

Christian Churches Together

Monica Schaap Pierce (steering committee)
 Andres Serrano (Hispanic network)

Christian Reformed Church (Reformed Collaborative)

Eddy Alemán
 Anna Radcliffe
 JP Sundararajan
 Christina Tazelaar
 Jill Ver Steeg
 Randy Weener

Creation Justice Ministries

Sun Jong Ju (board member)
 Jill Ver Steeg (board member)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Dale Buettner (Church Council)

Formula of Agreement

Eddy Alemán

Global Christian Forum

Stacey Duensing (young adult consultant)
Wes Granberg-Michaelson (executive committee)

National Council of Churches

Eddy Alemán (governing board)
Jeff Lampen (Christian Education Table)
Carol Jackson (Faith and Order Table)
Laura Osborne (Interreligious Table)

Presbyterian Church, USA

Paul Janssen (Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations)

Sojourners

Wes Granberg-Michaelson (governing board)

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Lisa Vander Wal (executive committee)

World Council of Churches

Eddy Alemán (central committee)
Stacey Duensing (young adult consultant)

INSTITUTIONS

New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees

Valerie Arthur	2022	
David Choi	2023*	
Brittnee Crawford	2023*	RSNY
Samuel Cruz	2023	
Gregory Dunlap	2024*	RSMAt
Cambria Kaltwasser	2023	
John Kapteyn	2023*	RSC
Denise Kingdom Grier	2024*	RSGL
Therese McCarty	2022	
Felicia McGinty	2023	
Michael Morris	2024	RSFW
Abigail Norton-Levering	2022	RSA
Amy Nyland	2022	
Russell Paarlberg, <i>moderator</i>	2023*	RSMAM
Wilfredo Rodriguez	2022	
Ming-Chen (Grace) Rohrer	2024	
Ronald Slaughter	2023*	

Elizabeth Testa	2024	
Anthony Vis	2023	RSH
Dean Zimmerman	2023*	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

Western Theological Seminary Board of Trustees

Kate Bolt	2022	
Kermit Campbell	2022*	
Chris Crawford, <i>treasurer</i>	2022	
Sandra DeYoung	2022	RSMAt
Gail Ebersole, <i>chairperson</i>	2022*	
Percy Gilbert	2023	
Andrea Godwin-Stremmer	2024*	
Matthew Haworth	2024	
Alden Highstreet	2024	RSFW
Timothy Hillegonds	2024	
David Izenbart	2023	RSMAM
Fred Johnson	2023	
Rebecca Renner Anderson	2022	RSGL
Beth Snyder	2023	
Steve Spoelhof, <i>vice chairperson</i>	2024	
Cora Taitt, <i>secretary</i>	2024*	RSNY
Tite Tiéno	2023	
Carol Van Andel	2022	
Lisa Vander Wal	2022	RSA
Evan Vermeer	2024	RSH
Emilie Wierda	2023	
Vacancy	2022	RSC
Vacancy	2023	
Vacancy	2024	
Eddy Alemán (<i>general secretary</i>)		<i>Ex officio</i>

COLLEGES

Central College Trustees Appointed by the General Synod

The terms for all General Synod–affirmed trustees ended June 30, 2020; since General Synod did not meet in 2020 or in June of 2021 to affirm new trustees, there are no names to be listed for Central College as of the date of this report.

Hope College Trustees Appointed by the General Synod

Eddy Alemán	2023
Michael Pitsenberger	2023
Eugene Sutton	2023
Matthew Wixson	2023

Northwestern College Trustees Appointed by the General Synod

The terms for all General Synod–approved trustees for Northwestern College ended June 30, 2020; since General Synod did not meet in 2020 or in June of 2021 to approve new trustees, there are no names to be listed for Northwestern College as of the date of this report.

A CHURCH ORDER PRIMER

The Commission on Church Order has written and maintains the following brief primer on the church's order for delegates to General Synod in the hope that it will aid delegates in doing their work. For a more detailed orientation, the commission recommends the Preamble of the Book of Church Order and BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, "Responsibilities of the General Synod" (2019 edition, pp. 67-68).

Foundations. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The RCA has a Constitution that orders its life and theology in light of God's Word. The Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, Belhar Confession), the Liturgy, and the Government and Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (found in the *Book of Church Order*). The church's order therefore is much deeper than merely a set of rules for running or organizing the church as an institution. The church's order is a set of covenants by which we agree to live out the theological beliefs we confess.

Nature and Work of Church Assemblies. Assemblies of the church, of which General Synod is one (others are consistory, classis, and regional synod), are not the same thing as *the church*. Assemblies of the church are the church's governing bodies. They are gatherings of the offices of the church (deacon, elder, and minister) for the purposes of governing the life and activity of the church and administering its affairs.

Scope and Limits of Assemblies' Responsibilities. Broader assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the more local assemblies—they do what the more local assemblies cannot do on their own—without infringing upon the responsibilities of the more local assemblies. The RCA is not a hierarchical church. Its assemblies are not arranged one over the other. Each assembly is given responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, and all functions not specifically delegated to other assemblies are given to the classis.

Office Bearers. Church assemblies are different than legislatures of representative democracy. Because office bearers receive their authority from Christ and are responsible first of all to the Lord of the church, they primarily represent Christ to the church and world. They can be said to represent their churches, consistories, classes, and synods in, at most, a secondary sense. Delegates' votes and consciences cannot be bound by their sending bodies.

Nature and Work of General Synod. The General Synod is the geographically broadest and most diverse assembly of the church. Its responsibilities are those that the more local assemblies cannot do on their own. General Synod's responsibilities primarily pertain to the General Synod itself, including its various agencies, boards, institutions, and commissions. It is also the highest court of appeal in the church and the assembly charged with offering to the church changes to the Constitution.

Scope and Limits of General Synod's Responsibilities. Because assemblies are not the same as the church, it is seen that General Synod speaks and acts above all for itself, the General Synod, *within* the church and world. When General Synod determines policy, the synod instructs itself and its agents in its work and offers its wisdom to the world, to other churches, and to the other assemblies. General Synod can direct its boards, commissions, officers, and agencies. Because General Synod is the broadest assembly in the church, it alone has the

authority to speak on behalf of the entire church. It speaks for the whole church frequently in areas like ecumenical relations and vis-à-vis the state and society. It can also encourage and offer wisdom to other assemblies and the local churches, such as it does through papers and resolutions. As with the other assemblies, the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. The Scriptures are understood as summarized in the Standards, which stand as the teaching of the church. As a part of the church's Constitution, the teaching of the church can only be determined by the entire church through the procedures for amending the Constitution as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*. General Synod is charged with interpreting the Scriptures and the Standards in those instances outlined in its responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, such as in judicial deliberation and in its relationship to the seminaries.

A PARLIAMENTARY AND PROCEDURAL PRIMER

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 10 of the Book of Church Order states, "The rules of order of the General Synod shall be those set forth in the most recent edition of Robert's Rules of Order except as is otherwise specified in the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod" (2019 edition, p. 124). Following is an explanation of some of the procedures and rules that the synod adheres to as it conducts its business.

1. Parliamentary procedure is intended to provide for an orderly transaction of business.
2. **The General Synod Workbook**
 - a. Contains reports of the various commissions, agencies, boards, and institutions of the General Synod.
 - b. Contains reports of those agencies, boards, councils, and task forces that report to the General Synod Council (GSC).
 - c. Contains overtures from classes and regional synods.
 - d. Contains recommendations for the synod to act on.
 - e. New business is referred to the Committee of Reference before it comes to the floor.
3. **On the podium**, you will find
 - a. The **president** of General Synod. He or she is the presiding officer of the meeting. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.
 - b. The **general secretary**, who is the stated clerk of General Synod and is available to the president for any assistance needed. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.
 - c. The **parliamentarian**, who offers the president advice on order, procedure, and house rules.
 - d. The **recording secretary**, who records the acts and proceedings of the synod.
4. **Terms**
 - a. **Regular (or voting) delegates** fully participate in General Synod, have privilege of the floor, vote, make motions, and are elected to office.
 - b. **Corresponding delegates** have privilege of the floor but cannot vote, make motions, or be elected to office.
 - c. A **recommendation** is a call for the General Synod to act. Recommendations from General Synod committees, commissions, and agencies are motions that do not need to be seconded.

- d. An **overture** is a request that comes from a classis or regional synod. It is not a recommendation but will be addressed by a special advisory group.
 - e. The General Synod has **advisory committees** to which delegates are assigned. Special advisory committees are assigned certain technically related recommendations in the workbook and the overtures. The special advisory committees may form recommendations of their own in response to the business assigned to them. They also form recommendations based on the overtures.
 - f. A **motion to amend** can take the form of striking out words or phrases of the text of the motion being considered, inserting new words or phrases into the text of the motion being considered, or a combination of both striking out and inserting words or phrases. The passage of a motion to amend only puts the amended motion before the house; it does not approve the contents of the newly amended motion.
 - g. A **motion to substitute** (a form of amendment that involves striking out and inserting a full paragraph, multiple paragraphs, or the entirety of the text of a motion with new text) must be germane to the question being amended. The passage of a motion to substitute only puts the substitute before the house; it does not approve the contents of the motion to substitute. No independent, new questions may be introduced through a motion to substitute.
 - h. **Calling the question** or **moving to cease debate** or **moving the previous question** is a motion to end debate. It is therefore a suspension of the right to free and full debate. Because debate is a basic right of an assembly, it should be curtailed only when the group's welfare is furthered, and approval of such a motion requires a two-thirds vote of the assembly.
 - i. When there is a question about the validity of something within the order, a **point of order** is raised. The president will decide whether or not order is being maintained.
5. **Procedure for addressing the synod**
- a. Delegates seeking the floor should approach a microphone. After being recognized by the presiding officer, delegates should give their name and the name of their sending body.
 - b. Delegates desiring action by the General Synod should offer motions. General Synod does not act on suggestions.
 - c. Motions must be written prior to coming to the microphone and must be given *in writing* (preferably sent via email to motions@rca.org) to the general secretary and to the staff at the back table. If an amendment to the motion currently before the assembly is being proposed, the written amendment must indicate what changes are being proposed (striking out deletions and underlining additions), not simply how the delegate proposing the amendment would like the motion to read if it is amended.
 - d. Delegates may not speak more than twice to a single motion unless given special permission by the General Synod.
 - e. Delegates address the presiding officer, not the assembly.

FUNCTION OF GENERAL SYNOD COMMITTEES

The annual meeting of the General Synod carries out much of its work on the floor of General Synod during plenary, but it also does work through committees of various kinds. This explanation highlights ways the work is accomplished.

Committee of Reference

The Committee of Reference is made up of the members of the General Synod Council—the body elected by the synod to serve throughout the year to oversee the implementation of the mission and ministry of the RCA, to serve as the synod’s executive committee, and to serve as its board of trustees. The Committee of Reference receives proposed new business that comes before the synod, recommends to the synod whether or not to accept it as new business, and, if accepted, determines its placement on the agenda.

The Committee of Reference also receives recommendations for the establishment of special committees and task forces. It evaluates the request, determines whether the work falls within the responsibility of an existing commission, committee, or agency, and makes a recommendation to the synod to either establish the proposed committee—including clear reasons for doing so, its manner of appointment, length of service, source of funding, and means of reporting to the General Synod—or to assign the work to an existing entity. If funding is not available in existing budgets, it is the responsibility of the Committee of Reference to inform the delegates and to propose an adjustment in the assessment budget to secure funds for the new task.

The agenda of the General Synod is set by the General Synod Council (GSC), which also approves the placement of reports and the schedule. Some recommendations will be assigned to a special advisory committee on order and governance, or a special advisory committee on overtures and new business, or another named special advisory committee.

Advisory Committees

Order and Governance Advisory Committee. The president has appointed a small advisory committee to review all matters pertaining to church order and governance issues, including any proposed changes in the bylaws of General Synod institutions, agencies, and corporations. The committee will receive and review the reports and recommendations, prepare advice on specific recommendations, and provide additional recommendations if necessary.

Overtures and New Business Advisory Committee. The president has appointed a small advisory committee to receive and review all overtures from classes and regional synods and any new business that may be brought before the synod in its opening sessions.

Additional specialized committees may be formed by the Committee of Reference after a final review of the business coming before the assembly and will be announced in the opening session and materials.

Plenary Discussion

Reports addressed only in plenary session may be discussed at tables. Delegates will have opportunity for questions and to address concerns to the reporting body. Recommendations for action will be addressed directly in plenary sessions. Reports coming directly to the synod will likely include:

- a. Reports from RCA seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.

- b. Reports from RCA colleges.
- c. Reports from General Synod commissions.
- d. Reports that can benefit from the process of discussion at each table during the plenary session (e.g., a commission seeking wider discussion of work in progress).
- e. General Synod Council (GSC) reports on Transformed & Transforming.

ELECTION OF PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF GENERAL SYNOD

Each General Synod elects a president and a vice president to serve the following term. The newly elected president and vice president begin their terms upon installation at the worship service on the last day of General Synod.

Procedures for Election

The president and vice president are elected by ballot. Only regular delegates to the General Synod may vote. (Corresponding delegates do not vote.) A two-thirds majority of the ballots cast is required for election on a nominating ballot; a simple majority is required for election on an electing ballot. Tellers are responsible for distributing, collecting, and counting the ballots.

Election of the President

The first ballot cast will be an electing ballot. The current vice president will be the sole nominee. If the vote is affirmative, the vice president will be declared elected.

If the vote is not affirmative, the election for president will follow the process prescribed below for the election for the vice president.

Election of the Vice President

The first ballot cast will be a nominating ballot. Only regular delegates to this General Synod may be nominated. (Corresponding delegates may not be nominated.) If any delegate receives at least two-thirds of the votes cast, such delegate will be declared elected.

If there is no election on the nominating ballot, every delegate receiving at least ten votes will be considered in nomination and will be introduced to the General Synod. The General Synod will then proceed to an electing ballot. If there is no election, the General Synod will proceed to a second electing ballot limited to the two persons receiving the largest number of votes on the first electing ballot.

Duties of the President and Vice President

Election to the office of vice president of the General Synod implies a three-year commitment to the General Synod Council, which meets three times a year; to the Board of Benefits Services, which meets two times a year; as well as to the work of their committees and other responsibilities.

The vice president serves at the pleasure of or in the absence of the president. If elected to the office of president the following year, the person then assumes the duties of the president.

The president and vice president of General Synod have traditionally traveled in order to listen for the joys and concerns of the church and ascertain the gifts and needs of the world through the RCA mission program. It is expected that the president will visit at least seven or eight geographically diverse classes and one of the RCA's mission areas, and that the vice president will visit at least four geographically diverse classes. Special attention will be given to those areas of the denomination that have not been visited recently and to those areas that are not familiar to the president and vice president.

The president of the General Synod performs a listening function, seeking to discover the concerns and aspirations of the church. Possibilities for fulfilling this function include attendance at meetings of the church's assemblies, boards, agencies, committees, commissions, and special meetings, as well as visits to various areas of the church. The president also represents the denomination at public, ecumenical, and denominational functions.

The president gives a report of activities at each meeting of the General Synod Council and makes a final report to the General Synod at its opening session.

The president arranges for all opening and closing prayers and worship services, including the closing communion service at General Synod.

As presiding officer of the General Synod, the president must be familiar with the *Book of Church Order* and the basic rules of parliamentary procedure so that decorum and dignity are maintained in the church of Jesus Christ.

THE BYLAWS AND SPECIAL RULES OF ORDER

Chapter 3 of the Book of Church Order provides the bylaws of the General Synod and explains the special rules of order that are in use at the synod meeting. Here you can find information on the seating of delegates and required attendance as well as information about the election of a president and vice president of synod. If you are wondering about the executive committee of the synod, look for Article 3, General Synod Council; Article 8 covers advisory committees, and Article 9 is about corresponding delegates. The special rules of order in Part II discuss the order, presentation, and transaction of business at synod. You can click on the links below to access Chapter 3.

Part I, ***The Bylaws of the General Synod:***

images.rca.org/docs/bco/2019BCO-Bylaws.pdf

Part II, ***Special Rules of Order of the General Synod:***

images.rca.org/docs/bco/2019BCOSpecialRules.pdf

THE FORMATION OF GENERAL SYNOD

Before the synod can act on the business brought before it in the General Synod Workbook, the synod must be “formed.”

A. Seating of Delegates

Irregularities—The general secretary will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

Limits of the House—Delegates have been assigned seats at tables. Rights of participation are restricted to those within the limits of the house, which extend only to the area of the delegates’ tables. Due to capacity and spacing limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be no guest or visitor gallery in the plenary meeting room this year. Non-delegates are invited to watch the General Synod video stream on the RCA website.

Privilege of the Floor—All regular and corresponding delegates have the privilege of the floor (privilege to address the assembly).

Voting Rights and Motions—Although corresponding delegates do have the privilege of the floor, they do not have the right to vote or to make motions. Only regular delegates may vote or make motions. Staff, visitors, and guests may not address the assembly unless granted privilege of the floor by action of the assembly.

- B. Declaration Concerning a Quorum—As of August 20, the possible membership of General Synod is 232, and the enrolled membership is 223. The general secretary will declare whether a quorum is present.
- C. Reading the Minutes by Title—The general secretary will read the minutes of the preceding session by title. Hard copies of the minutes from 2015 to 2019 are available at the back platform; the minutes from 1771 to 2019 can also be found online at www.rca.org/minutes for use throughout the week.
- D. Procedure for Approving the Journal—A record of General Synod actions will be posted on the General Synod page of the RCA website at www.rca.org/journals for information and review by delegates. Any corrections to the journal should be given to one of the recording secretaries (Angela Worthley, or Terri Boven, or Gael Uwera) or to Paul Karssen (seated at the operations platform at the back of the plenary room). The General Synod will be asked to authorize its officers to approve the journal for the meetings on Friday through Tuesday.
- E. Presentation of the Rules of Order—The Bylaws and the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod may be found by accessing Chapter 3 of the *Book of Church Order* at www.rca.org/bco.
- F. Selection of Parliamentarian—Russell Paarlberg was selected to serve as parliamentarian at the 2021 General Synod.

- G. Appointment of Tellers—The president has appointed as temporary clerks and tellers for the sessions of the 2021 General Synod: participants in the Seminarian Seminar; Committee of Reference members Bob Johnson and James Nakakihara, and representing the Commission on Nominations, Carol Mutch.
- H. Approval of the Agenda and Schedule—The general secretary will call attention to the agenda and schedule in the workbook. Synod will be asked to approve the agenda and schedule.
- I. New Business—The general secretary will call attention to the schedule and procedure for presentation of new business and will read the appropriate rule of order (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 8 [2019 edition, p. 128]).

GUIDE TO ALPHABETESE

AABC	African American Black Council
AAR	Approved Alternate Route
BCO	<i>Book of Church Order</i>
BOBS	Board of Benefits Services
CCA	Commission on Christian Action
CCDE	Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
CCO	Commission on Church Order
CCT	Christian Churches Together in the USA
CCU	Commission on Christian Unity
CCW	Commission on Christian Worship
CFW	Commission for Women
CGF	The RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc.
CHM	Council for Hispanic Ministries
CJB	Commission on Judicial Business
COH	Commission on History
CON	Commission on Nominations
CORE	Commission on Race and Ethnicity
COT	Commission on Theology
CPAAM	Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Church in North America
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
GSC	General Synod Council
MFCA	Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
MGS	<i>Minutes of General Synod</i>
NBTS	New Brunswick Theological Seminary
NCCC	National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
PFOB	Pastoral Formation Oversight Board
RCSC	Reformed Candidates' Supervision and Care
RS	Regional Synod
RSA	Regional Synod of Albany
RSC	Regional Synod of Canada
RSFW	Regional Synod of the Far West
RSGL	Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

RSH	Regional Synod of the Heartland
RSMAm	Regional Synod of Mid-America
RSMAt	Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics
RSNY	Regional Synod of New York
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRC	World Communion of Reformed Churches
WTS	Western Theological Seminary

Report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life, and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ's mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2019 edition, p. 71]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2019 edition, p. 108]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, refer to the bylaws of the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2019 edition, pp. 108-109]).

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to the General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod's 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod's program agency.

Review of Regional Synod Minutes

The General Synod Office has received and read the 2019 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantics, and New York. It also received and read the 2020 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, and Mid-America. The regional synods of the Mid-Atlantics and New York reported that they did not meet, and thus there are no 2020 minutes from those assemblies.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

EC 21-1

To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

The Seating of Delegates

The bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2019 edition, p. 105]). The general secretary will report on classes' payments of General Synod assessments and will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the *Book of Church Order*

The General Synod of 2019 adopted and referred to the classes for approval 11 amendments to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*. The amendments are recorded in the *2019 Minutes of General Synod* as noted. Forty-six classes were eligible to vote on these amendments (per *BCO*, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2b [2019 edition, p. 75]). As of August 15, 2021, two classes had not reported votes to the Office of the General Synod on the questions of whether to approve the amendments. The votes of the other 44 classes, as reported in writing by the classes' stated clerks, were as follows:

<i>Book of Church Order</i> Amendments	Disapproved	Approved
1. Procedure for Amending the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and Directory for Worship (<i>MGS 2019</i> , EC 19-15, pp. 115-116)	21	23

BCO, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Sec. 2 (2019 edition, p. 75)

2. Affiliation of a Local Church with More Than One Denomination (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-1, pp. 226-237) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part I (new article)	12	32
3. “Transferring” Ministers to Other Denominations (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-3, pp. 247-248) <i>BCO</i> Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 13 (2019 edition, p. 56)	7	37
4. General Synod Responsibilities Regarding Regional Synods (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-4, p. 248) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 (2019 edition, p. 67)	18	26
5. Formulary No. 3, Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-5, p. 249) <i>BCO</i> , Formulary 3 (2019 edition, pp. 132-133)	1	43
6. Permanent Record for Declarations (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-6, pp. 249-250) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12 (2019 edition, p. 56) <i>BCO</i> , Formulary 1 (2019 edition, p. 131) <i>BCO</i> , Formulary 7 (2019 edition, pp. 136-137) <i>BCO</i> , Formulary 16 (2019 edition, p. 143)	1	43
7. Formulary No. 9, Certificate for Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-7, pp. 250-251) <i>BCO</i> , Formulary 9 (2019 edition, p. 138)	2	42
8. Textual Reference to Formulary No. 9 (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-8, p. 251) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 9 (2019 edition, p. 55)	1	43
9. Formulary No. 15, Provision for Articles of Incorporation for Congregations (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-9, pp. 251-252) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 (2019 edition, p.11)	2	42
10. Transfers of Licensed Candidates from One Classis to Another (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-10, pp. 252-253) <i>BCO</i> , Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 6 (2019 edition, p. 50)	1	43
11. Formulary No. 17 (New), Certificate of Transfer for a Licensed Candidate (<i>MGS 2019</i> , CO 19-11, pp. 253-254)	2	42

EC 21-2
To declare Amendment 2 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-3
To declare Amendment 3 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-4
To declare Amendment 5 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-5
To declare Amendment 6 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-6
To declare Amendment 7 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-7
To declare Amendment 8 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-8
To declare Amendment 9 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-9
To declare Amendment 10 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

EC 21-10
To declare Amendment 11 to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 *Book of Church Order*.

Amendments 1 and 4 did not receive the requisite approval of two-thirds of the classes and thus are not presented here for a final vote by the General Synod.

The 2019 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the next stated session of the General Synod the following amendment to the bylaws of the General Synod:

Makeup of the Commission for Women—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Sec. 10 (2019 edition, pp. 117-118) (MGS 2019, W 19-1, pp. 294-295)

EC 21-11
To declare the Amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod specified in W 19-1 adopted in first reading by the 2019 General

Synod to be approved for incorporation into the 2021 Bylaws of the General Synod.

Proposed Delay in Final Implementation of Covenant Shares

General Synod 2019 approved changes to the General Synod bylaws that would allow a change in the manner in which assessments are calculated to a percentage of income method from the per member method (EC 19-11, *MGS 2019*, p. 53). Changes to the General Synod bylaws require approval by two General Synods in order to become effective. The amendment process for the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 [2019 edition, p. 124]) says that both votes by the General Synod must occur at stated sessions. Because General Synod 2020 was postponed, the final vote of General Synod to make this bylaws change effective has not yet happened.

Because it is likely that a larger than normal number of congregations will be leaving the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in this next year, it seems wise to delay the implementation of covenant shares for at least another year in order to avoid increasing the complexity of an already complex situation. Staff has discussed this with the Commission on Church Order as well as with the General Synod officers.

A large number of congregations have indicated that they plan to leave the RCA or are considering leaving the RCA in the near future, and that it seems likely that many of these congregations will initiate their departure shortly after General Synod, meaning that if the covenant shares bylaws amendment were to receive its second vote at General Synod in October, it would be implemented in January 2022, in the same general time frame that many of the expected requests to withdraw from the RCA are likely to be processed by classes. In addition, the Vision 2020 Team plans to include in its proposal to General Synod an adjustment to the assessment payment timeline for departing churches both to account for the pandemic delay in consideration of the team's recommendations as well as to make the payments more even regardless of when in the calendar year a congregation departs. The assessment billing for departing churches may be more complicated than the current process, and there are many unknowns regarding how many congregations will choose to withdraw from the denomination and when that will take place. Therefore, both staff and the officers believe it would be better to not add an additional complication by changing the methodology of calculating assessments from a per-member basis to a percentage of income-basis in this upcoming year, and we are proposing that the final approval of covenant shares be delayed. This would allow for a reassessment before the next session of General Synod as we see how things unfold to determine whether it would be advisable to continue to wait to implement the covenant shares model or whether it makes sense to proceed with that second vote.

While traditionally amendments to the General Synod bylaws are presented to two immediately successive General Synods, the wording in the *BCO* does not require that the two votes happen at immediately successive General Synods. Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 says that "the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod may be amended at any stated meeting of the synod by vote of the majority of all the members present, provided that due notice of the proposed amendment has been submitted in writing at a *previous session* and has received the approval of a majority at that session" (2019 edition, p. 124, italics added). Because the wording is "a" previous session and not "the" previous session, the Commission on Church Order has agreed that it is permissible to delay the second vote.

Because it is a departure from how votes on bylaws changes typically proceed, the commission recommended that the full General Synod assembly should agree to delay the second vote rather than having GSC or anyone else make the decision to do so. In addition, at the suggestion of the Commission on Church Order, this motion to delay will be placed toward the end of the General Synod's agenda, so that, though the General Synod may decide it does not wish to delay the second vote on the bylaws change, the per-member assessment amount for 2022 would already be set, so the first year of covenant shares would begin in 2023.

The GSC recommends the following to the 2021 General Synod:

EC 21-12

To delay until the next stated session of General Synod the second vote on the change to the General Synod bylaws in *Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c (2019 edition, p. 108) to make covenant shares effective.

Ratification of 2021 Assessment Amount

Because General Synod was unable to meet in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was unable to approve the 2021 assessment amount proposed by the GSC. The General Synod Council and staff sought the opinion of the Commission on Church Order on whether the GSC could approve the assessment amount in the absence of another option. While the General Synod bylaws give the GSC the responsibility of proposing an assessment amount to the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c [2019 edition, p. 108]), they do not provide the authority for the GSC to approve the assessment amount. The *BCO* makes no provision for how to approve assessments in the event that the General Synod is unable to meet. The Commission on Church Order agreed that having GSC approve the assessment amount in the event the General Synod was unable to meet was "less than ideal, but likely the only option." The commission encouraged GSC to limit its action to a continuation of the assessment amounts approved in previous years, with no increases over the amounts approved by the 2019 General Synod, and also indicated that the GSC should seek ratification of this action by the next meeting of the General Synod.

In the absence of a 2020 General Synod meeting, the GSC approved the following motion at its June 2020 Zoom meeting:

GSC 20-33

To adopt a General Synod assessment amount for 2021 of \$52.01 per confessing member (including \$46.10 for the General Synod Council assessment, \$2.00 for the BOBS assistance fund, and \$3.91 for theological education), which reflects no increase over the 2020 numbers, given that there is no alternative for approving an assessment for 2021 since the General Synod will not meet again before its stated session in June 2021; and further;

To seek ratification of this action by General Synod 2021.

Consequently, the GSC now seeks ratification by the General Synod of this action.

EC 21-13

To ratify the action of the General Synod Council in approving the General Synod assessment amount of \$52.01 per confessing member, given that there was no alternative for approving an assessment for 2021 in the absence of a meeting of the General Synod in 2020.

Ratification of *Ad-Interim* Appointments of Hope College Trustees

While the *BCO* gives the GSC the responsibility to fill vacancies on General Synod agencies and commissions in an *ad-interim* capacity, subject to the approval of the General Synod at its next regular session (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 110]), it does not give the GSC the responsibility or authority to make *ad-interim* appointments to the boards of trustees of the RCA colleges. Thus, in the absence of a General Synod meeting in 2020, open General Synod positions on the RCA colleges' boards of trustees were unable to be filled.

The president of Hope College sent a communication to the GSC in September 2020, asking for GSC to provide and affirm three *ad-interim* General Synod candidates for their board of trustees whose terms were to begin in July 2020, since, in the absence of a 2020 General Synod meeting, there was no way for the General Synod to do so.

GSC took the following action at its October 2020 meeting:

GSC 20-38

To appoint *ad interim* Mike Pitsenberger, Eddy Alemán, and Eugene Sutton to the Hope College Board of Trustees, Class of 2023, given that the postponement of General Synod 2020 meant that the General Synod was unable to approve these appointments, and further;

To seek ratification of this action by the next regular session of General Synod.

Consequently, the GSC now seeks ratification by the General Synod of this action.

EC 21-14

To ratify the action of the GSC in approving *ad-interim* appointments to the Hope College Board of Trustees for 2020, given that General Synod 2020 was unable to meet to elect new trustees.

Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

EC 21-15

To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

General Synod Meeting Location

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2022 is Central College in Pella, Iowa. The 2022 meeting of the General Synod is planned to take place on June 10–15. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The General Synod Council (GSC) operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, *Transformed & Transforming*. Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through policies concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.

RCA Salary Structure for Fiscal Year 2020 (October 2020–September 2021)

The GSC policy (EL-8) pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market.”

The GSC compensation program allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the supervisor, employee, and Human Resources. As responsibilities change or when there is an open position, the job description is reviewed, updated as needed, and reevaluated to ensure that it is still classified in the correct range. The program incorporates geographic differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions. This has become more important as we have more and more employees working remotely. Positions are benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors.

There are 13 salary ranges that span between 11 and 23. Grade 11 represents the most entry-level positions, and Grade 23 represents the highest level, held by the general secretary. The majority of positions fall within the middle ranges (14 to 17).

Staff are evaluated annually by their supervisors. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff who are accountable to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following table represents the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2020. The ranges are utilized to establish beginning wages and annual salaries and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee. Most employees' salaries fall in the mid-range of the table. The following table represents Grand Rapids–based staff; this table is adjusted for cost-of-living differences for staff who live and work in other areas.

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN					
2020–2021					
ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE					
GRADE	LOW	25%	MID	75%	HIGH
11	\$24,960	\$27,620	\$30,280	\$32,940	\$35,600
12	\$32,240	\$35,880	\$39,520	\$43,160	\$46,800
13	\$35,200	\$38,975	\$42,750	\$46,525	\$50,300
14	\$41,800	\$46,950	\$52,100	\$57,250	\$62,400
15	\$47,000	\$52,800	\$58,600	\$64,400	\$70,200
16	\$56,000	\$62,900	\$69,800	\$76,700	\$83,600
17	\$61,000	\$68,510	\$76,020	\$83,530	\$91,040
18	\$66,500	\$74,688	\$82,875	\$91,063	\$99,250
19	\$79,000	\$89,625	\$100,250	\$110,875	\$121,500
20	\$89,500	\$101,550	\$113,600	\$125,650	\$137,700
21	\$101,376	\$118,257	\$135,138	\$152,019	\$168,900
22	\$115,983	\$135,237	\$154,492	\$173,746	\$193,000
23	\$144,662	\$168,697	\$192,731	\$216,766	\$240,800

Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years. As BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2019 edition, p. 109) says, one of the GSC's responsibilities is

To review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that the necessity of continuation shall not be assumed.

The proposed commission review process was presented to the GSC at its March 2017 meeting. After discussion and some adjustments to improve clarity, the GSC voted to adopt the process. GSC appointed a small group of GSC members to work on the surveys mentioned in points two and three and to bring a proposal back to GSC. In October 2017, GSC received and

adopted proposed survey questions for both surveys. The first year cycle of the process was begun in spring 2018.

The GSC's review and recommendations regarding the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Theology follow.

Given that General Synod did not meet in 2020 to consider the following two reviews, and that it was uncertain what meetings would look like over the following year, GSC decided to wait to begin the next set of commission reviews.

The Process

The following is the process adopted by GSC in March 2017.

1. In order to encourage open channels of communication between the commissions and the GSC and to help the GSC support the commissions in their work, the GSC will send a representative to each commission's winter meeting when there is a GSC member available and in close geographical proximity to the meeting place.
2. Each commission will be asked to fill out a two- or three-question survey each year for report to the GSC. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. The survey will be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod. Responses will be reviewed by the GSC at its fall meeting.
3. Every five years (on a rotating basis, two commissions per year), each member of a commission will be asked to complete a longer survey. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. This survey will also be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and the two commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod.

The rotating schedule for commission review will begin as follows:

- Year one: Christian Discipleship and Education, Church Order
 - Year two: Theology, Nominations
 - Year three: Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity
 - Year four: Christian Action, Christian Unity
 - Year five: History, Women
4. At one of its meetings at General Synod, the GSC will assign three GSC members to each of the two commissions, and they will be given the compiled survey responses from that commission. Whenever possible, one of those assigned to the review team should be the GSC member who attended the commission's last winter meeting. GSC members will also be asked to comment on that particular commission based on the work that the GSC knows the commission has done (based on General Synod reports, etc.) and reports from GSC members who have attended meetings of that commission. The three GSC members assigned to the commission will fill out the same survey that the commission members fill out.

5. The three GSC members will then meet with the commission being reviewed during the fall joint meeting of the GSC and the commissions.
6. The GSC members who meet with the commission will report back to the GSC either later in the fall meeting or at the spring meeting.
7. The GSC will decide whether to recommend to the General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of the commission (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g [2019 edition, p. 109]).

2019–2020 Review Cycle

The members of the Commission on Nominations (CoN) and the Commission on Theology (CoT) received a link to the longer survey mentioned in point three of the process via SurveyMonkey and were asked to complete the survey by June 1, 2019.

In June 2019, the GSC appointed three of its members to serve as a review committee for CoN, and three for CoT. These GSC members received commission members' responses to the five-year review survey in late summer and early fall 2019. The review teams met with the commissions at the joint GSC and commissions meeting in October 2019.

Each review team reported back to GSC at its March 2020 meeting with a recommendation regarding its assigned commission.

Commission on Nominations

Two of the review committee members joined the commission for part of its winter meeting in January 2020. The committee reported back to GSC:

We observed a commission that is tasked with the enormous job of coordinating and placement of multiple profiles into slots that require very specific requirements. We observed the members discussing profiles in depth. It was obvious they had done their homework and even though they didn't know many of the people behind the profiles they had worked to get to know them through their profiles and really cared about getting them plugged into the right fit.

It was like a huge jigsaw puzzle with some pieces fitting into two positions and the group deciding which would work best. The process was bathed in prayer.

We also felt the commission is supporting the Transformed & Transforming initiative by choosing wisely who would be asked to serve.

A way that we, as GSC, can show our support for the Commission on Nominations team is by doing our best to encourage leaders in our areas to submit profiles.

We enjoyed our time with the commission and submit this report with the highest regard for their work.

GSC voted to recommend the following to the 2021 General Synod, upon the recommendation of its review committee:

**EC 21-16
To approve the continuation of the Commission on Nominations.**

Commission on Theology

In October 2019, two members of the General Synod Council reviewed the work of the Commission on Theology and visited with them. The committee reported back to GSC:

This commission is absolutely essential for the denomination in pressing forward toward God's will for the Reformed Church in America. While they do not establish the denomination's theological stances, they have the time and expertise to take a good look at theological issues facing our denomination so we can be better informed in our decision-making. The GSC appreciates the good spirit of working together found on this commission. Because this commission is comprised of a good cross-section of the diversity in our denomination, there is not always full agreement amongst themselves about some matters. But rather than issuing reports with attached minority reports, they prefer to work toward documents that all could sign off on. They believe that the whole church could benefit from watching their commission at work in dealing with diversity.

GSC voted to recommend the following to the 2021 General Synod, upon the recommendation of its review committee:

**EC 21-17
To approve the continuation of the Commission on Theology (CoT);
and further,**

**To commend the CoT for its very important work in giving
theological guidance to the Reformed Church in America.**

Addisville Reformed Church Transfer Request

The consistory of Addisville Reformed Church is requesting a transfer from the Classis of Delaware-Raritan to the Classis of Central California. Because this transfer is across regional synod lines, according to the *Book of Church Order*, it must be effected by the General Synod.

The consistory sent a request to the General Synod Council to bring a recommendation to the General Synod on its behalf. The consistory's communication to the GSC indicated that it is seeking this transfer because it feels that there are several areas in which Addisville Reformed Church (ARC) and the Classis of Delaware-Raritan are "not aligned and gradually have grown apart as we have evolved over many years. ARC remains fully committed to the Reformed Church in America, and we pray God's blessings of peace and grace to be with our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ and to the ministries of other churches in the D-R Classis."

GSC received communication from the Classis of Delaware-Raritan, the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, and the Regional Synod of the Far West that they consent to this transfer. Specific confirmation of consent was not received from the Classis of Central California, but the Far West communication indicated that the Classis of Central California is also in favor of the transfer.

In response to this request, the General Synod Council voted to bring the following motion to the 2021 General Synod:

EC 21-18

To transfer Addisville Reformed Church in Richboro, Pennsylvania, with all of its assets and liabilities, from the Classis of Delaware-Raritan in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics to the Classis of Central California in the Regional Synod of the Far West.

Recommendations on Behalf of the African American Black Council

At its March 2021 meeting, at the request of the African American Black Council (AABC), the General Synod Council voted to bring the following recommendations from the African American Black Council to the General Synod (more information can be found in the report of the AABC):

EC 21-19

To urge RCA assemblies to provide an annual one-day event dedicated to antiracism.

EC 21-20

To urge RCA assemblies and institutions to provide regular antiracism training for students, faculty, and staff, to integrate racially and culturally diverse voices in the curriculum, and to revisit hiring policies to ensure that faculty and staff are racially diverse.

EC 21-21

To urge General Synod delegates to consider African Americans and people of color for General Synod officer positions.

EC 21-22

To commend the African American Black Council for its historical and ongoing commitment to holding up antiracism to the church and holding the RCA accountable for deficiencies.

Review of Investment Restrictions

At the GSC meeting in March 2021, the GSC passed this motion:

To appoint a small group of GSC members to study the GSC's investment policies to determine whether armaments (and potentially other ESG [environmental, social, and governance] items) should be added to the investment policy statements and bring a report and recommendation to GSC in June. (GSC 21-14)

The moderator of the GSC asked Jillisa Teitsma, the RCA's chief financial officer, to work with GSC members Margaret Ritchie and Kent McHeard to bring a recommendation to the GSC. This group met and discussed additional restrictions to add to the GSC investment policy statements.

Currently Restricted Investments

The investment alternatives chosen in the Endowment Fund must seek to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves the production or distribution of **tobacco** or **alcohol**, the business of **gambling**, or the business of **for-profit prisons**. The socially responsible investment guidelines are not intended to be a “zero tolerance” policy and the determination, implementation, and ongoing monitoring of these guidelines shall be the sole responsibility of the Investment Manager hired to oversee these investments.

The preceding excerpt is from the GSC Endowment Fund Investment Policy Statement (IPS). Each GSC, CGF, and BOBS IPS for reserves and endowments contains the same or similar language. The BOBS retirement plan is managed differently. Because the institution is not the beneficiary of the funds, we do not screen all funds offered by Fidelity. Instead there are ESG funds offered in the fund lineup.

Proposed Additions to Restricted Investments

The small group recommended to GSC that these items to be added to the list of restricted investments:

Adult entertainment and pornography

Reasons for restriction:

1. Psalm 101:3a: “I will not set before my eyes anything that is base...” Pornography and adult entertainment places base or wicked (another way this word is translated; in Hebrew, it is the word *Bel-e-yah-a*) images and words that demean and pervert the natural use of human sexual relations.
2. Profits from adult entertainment and pornography come from the selling and display of offensive images.
3. Pornography and adult entertainment defy the ways in which Scripture portrays godly living.
4. Both small crime and organized crime organizations are often behind procuring, producing, and distributing these materials.
5. Vulnerable persons are victimized.

Firearms and military weapons

Reasons for restriction:

1. In 1977, the General Synod spoke out in favor of gun control. It adopted three resolutions, including:
 - To request the Congress of the U.S. to ban the manufacture and sale of handguns for civilian ownership.
 - To urge the members of the Reformed Church in America to render the handguns in their homes inoperable and/or enact stringent safety precautions for all weapons.

- To urge the constituency of the Reformed Church in America to seek refinement and strict enforcement of present laws regulating gun ownership and use (*MGS 1977*, pp. 200-201).
2. When Jesus was being arrested in Gethsemane and Peter struck the slave of the high priest with his sword (military weapon), Jesus said to him “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).
 3. We have seen in recent current events the destructive results of assault weapons in the many mass shootings in the U.S.
 4. With the recent war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Canadian citizens became painfully aware that Canada had supplied drone technology to Turkey, which was then used so devastatingly on Artsakh. Israel supplied a great deal of military hardware directly to Azerbaijan. The U.S. supplies military technology to Saudi Arabia, which is being used against Yemen. At least the Christian church should not profit from war.
 5. Second Corinthians 10:3. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. Paul was most likely using this example metaphorically to make a point about how he was dealing with the Corinthians; this doesn’t mean it cannot be used literally.
 6. The prophet also warns Jerusalem and Judah in Isaiah 31:1 (NIV): “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord.”
 7. Arms deals, even when “legal,” are probably the most corrupt activities our governments involve themselves in. Bribery is endemic.

Other Items Discussed

The small group discussed other areas, including fossil fuels and nuclear energy, which could be restricted but chose not to add them to the list of restricted investments at this time. These two categories in broad terms are not entirely bad. If it was determined that a more specific category related to these areas was harmful to the environment, could cause climate change, or went against our biblical beliefs, those could be added to the list of restricted investments at a later time.

The small group also discussed how an ESG rating system could be utilized to avoid worst-in-class investments using quantitative ESG measurements. It decided to seek advice from the Investment Advisory Committee regarding this type of system, as that committee may have more specific expertise in this arena.

The small group also clarified that these restrictions are not meant to be “zero-tolerance.” It is nearly impossible to invest in only what is purely good. The current policy is written in such a way that seeks to avoid direct investment in the restricted categories. The small group clarified how it is interpreted that the restrictions apply to direct holdings, index funds, and mutual funds.

Direct holdings: Seek to avoid any investments in which the principal investment involves the types of restricted investment types. If the type of restricted investments is not the primary purpose of the organization, it may often be unknown to the investor. Direct holdings in corporations whose business may include these restricted areas but is not the primary purpose may be allowable. Example: A restaurant or hotel’s primary

purpose is to provide food services and lodging; however, as part of its business, it may sell alcohol. A company such as this would not be screened out due to this activity.

Index and mutual funds: We recognize that, practically speaking, it would be very difficult to divest ourselves entirely of a small percentage of our monies remaining in restricted areas as part of an index or mutual fund. Annually, staff will review the percentage of assets within each index and/or mutual fund holdings that include companies in which the primary business is in one of the restricted categories. The current investment managers can provide this information to us.

In response to the small group's report, the GSC voted:

GSC 21-21

To direct the Investment Advisory Committee to add screening language to the RCA's investment policies which would restrict investment in companies whose primary business relates to adult entertainment and pornography and firearms and military weapons; and further, to divest of any investments in such companies.

Next Steps

The Investment Advisory Committee will evaluate applicability of screenings and how this might affect the effectiveness of GSC investments and the returns. The Investment Advisory Committee will also update the investment policy statements and make a recommendation to GSC for related changes to the IPS.

Commission on History Communications with GSC Regarding the Archives

The Commission on History (CoH) sent a communication to the GSC in late October 2020 expressing concerns that documents were not being submitted to the RCA archives that the commission feels should be submitted to the archives. The commission is especially concerned with specific types of documents generated by staff. This letter was received after GSC's fall meeting had taken place, and so the GSC did not respond immediately.

In March 2021, the commission sent a request for a meeting of the CoH and the GSC, with no staff, including the general secretary, present in order to present their concerns. In this request, the commission alleged that staff were out of compliance with records management policies that the commission said had been mandated by the General Synod. The GSC moderator responded, asking that the CoH dialogue with staff to try to work through some of these concerns, but that a meeting between the entire GSC and CoH with no staff present did not seem appropriate. At the GSC moderator's behest, a request was made to set up a smaller meeting with the CoH and GSC moderators and a few staff members from the Office of the General Synod to begin to discuss some of the concerns, but this meeting request was not accepted by the CoH moderator, citing that he could not speak for the entire commission, and instead reiterated the request for a meeting of the entire GSC and CoH, with no staff present.

Past General Synod and GSC actions regarding the archives as well as BCO language around the role and responsibilities of the CoH and the GSC were researched to seek clarification regarding various statements about responsibilities and mandates that the commission had made in its communications to GSC. Past minutes of both the General Synod and the General Synod Council showed no indication that the records management policies in question were

ever voted on (and thus mandated) by the General Synod, though a portion of the archives policy manual cited by the commission was approved by the predecessor body to the GSC in 1980, and that approval was reported to the 1980 General Synod. The GSC shared this research with the CoH.

The GSC continues to believe that a meeting between the entire CoH and the GSC, especially such a meeting that specifically excludes any GSC staff, is not a helpful or fruitful way to move forward for two reasons. First, the entire CoH and GSC is a relatively large group of people; it seems much more efficient to attempt to work through issues and disagreements in a smaller, more focused group. Second, the request to meet without any staff present does not seem right or healthy, given that a) the general secretary is a member of the GSC and, as such, is included in a GSC meeting, and b) the commission is alleging that the staff has acted improperly; it seems only fair that staff would be allowed to be present to speak to these allegations.

In June 2021, the GSC voted to ask the General Synod to form a working group composed of members of each group involved in the disagreement to better work through these concerns and seek a resolution that is acceptable to all parties. The GSC moderator also communicated this decision, and the rationale for it, to the CoH.

EC 21-23

To instruct the General Synod Council (GSC) to form a working group of 12 members, plus a facilitator, to seek clarity and resolution around the concerns that have been expressed to the GSC by the Commission on History, particularly with relation to oversight of the archives as well as what constitutes archival records, and related costs. This group would include three members of the Commission on History, three members of the General Synod Council, three members of the Commission on Church Order, and three GSC staff members, and would plan to meet via electronic means. The first meeting of this working group should take place before December 31, 2021.

Note: The reason for including Commission on Church Order members is that questions of supervision of and authority over the archives are closely tied to current *BCO* mandates, and it would be helpful to have experienced polity voices in the discussion, especially if changes to responsibilities around supervision of the archives, which the CoH seemed to suggest in some of its communications, are to be considered and/or proposed.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod, the General Synod Council (GSC), the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), and the Church Growth Fund (CGF). The Office of Finance strives to ensure financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods as together we carefully manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

2020 Annual Audits

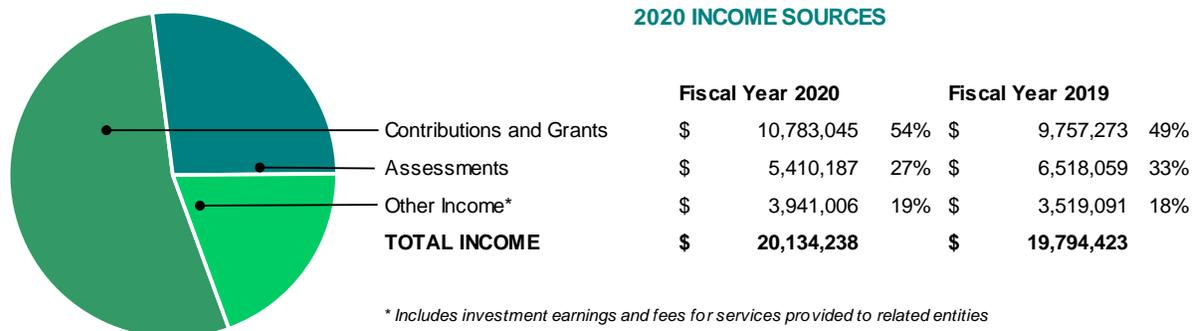
The 2020 financial statements of the GSC, BOBS Retirement Program and General Fund, and CGF were audited by CapinCrouse, LLP, certified public accountants. All corporations received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The audited statements are available at www.rca.org/finance. The GSC’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity and the management comment letters from the auditors and reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. Financial highlights of each organization are presented below.

Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2020

General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC’s total income was \$20.1 million, and expenses totaled \$17.2 million, resulting in a net income of \$2.9 million. This surplus was not earned on operational areas; rather, \$1.6 million was earned on endowed funds and a \$1 million Lilly Foundation grant was received for a specific purpose, to be used over the next three fiscal years. Total net assets were \$41.2 million, of which \$17.6 is without donor restrictions and \$23.6 million is with donor restrictions.

The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—provided 54 percent of the funding to carry out the work of the General Synod. Assessments provided 27 percent of income and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated and restricted funds, is presented in the following chart:

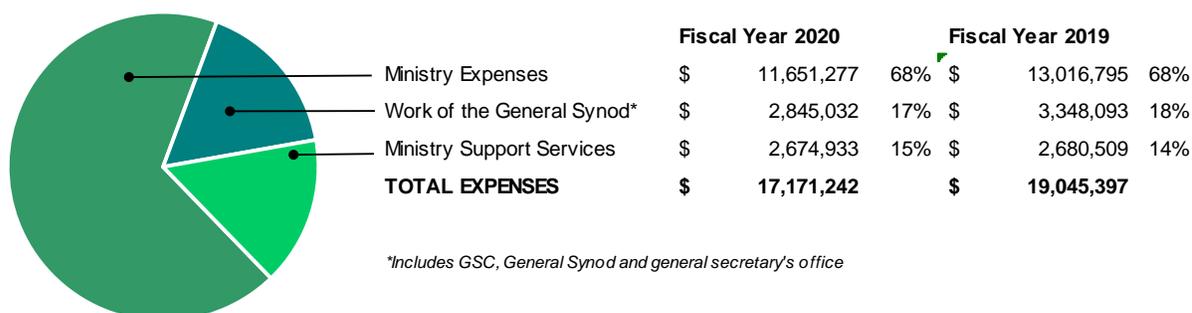


Contributions and grants received were approximately \$1 million more in 2020 compared to 2019. The GSC received a PPP loan in the amount of \$1.3 million, which was recorded as grant income. The GSC was also awarded a \$1 million grant from the Lilly Foundation for the Renovations Project (formerly the Flourishing Churches Innovation Lab). More than 540 churches, 2,600 individuals, and 95 organizations financially supported the GSC and RCA missionaries in fiscal year 2020.

Assessments received were approximately \$1.1 million less in 2020 than in 2019 due to assessment relief that was offered to classes during the year. One quarterly assessment invoice was discounted by 30 percent in order to provide COVID-19 pandemic relief to classes and churches. A second quarterly assessment was discounted by 30 percent in order to pass along the savings of not holding a General Synod meeting in June 2020.

Other income decreased in 2020 compared to 2019 by approximately \$225,000. This was due to the GSC recognizing the Historical Series activity and net assets in 2019.

2020 EXPENSES



Ministry expenses (68 percent) include the costs related to carrying out the GSC’s three strategic areas of ministry: Global Mission (42 percent), Transformed and Transforming (19 percent), and Church Multiplication (7 percent). Ministry expenses decreased by \$1.4 million from 2019 to 2020. There are several reasons for this decrease:

- Global Mission spent \$300,000 less in hurricane and natural disaster relief grants.
- Several meetings and events were canceled due to the pandemic, resulting in savings of approximately \$350,000.
- Reduced travel due to the pandemic led to approximately \$425,000 in travel savings.
- Transformed & Transforming paid approximately \$150,000 in Ministerial Excellence grants funded by a Lilly Foundation grant in 2019. This program was transferred to BOBS in January 2020.

Work of the General Synod (17 percent) includes costs related to the annual General Synod meeting, commissions, task forces, the Office of the General Secretary, the General Synod Council, and Communication and Production Services, including *RCA Today* magazine. The Work of the General Synod expenses decreased by \$500,000 from 2019 to 2020. Not holding a General Synod in 2020 resulted in savings of approximately \$400,000.

Ministry support services (15 percent) includes costs relating to the general and administrative support needed to carry out the three strategic areas of ministry and the work of

the General Synod. This includes human resources, data management, information technology, financial services, legal counsel, and fundraising. Expenses remained relatively flat between 2019 and 2020.

The source data for these charts are the audited financial statements, which can be viewed in full at www.rca.org/finance.

Board of Benefits Services—Retirement Program

As of September 30, 2020, the date of BOBS's most recent audit, \$496 million is held in participant accounts in the RCA Retirement Plan and the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program and in annuities outside of the funds purchased on behalf of participants. In fiscal year 2020, participant and employer contributions to the plan were \$11 million, and distributions to participants totaled \$25 million for the same time period.

Together as a denomination, we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute 11 percent of the eligible salaries of RCA ministers of Word and sacrament to their retirement accounts each year. An estimated \$1.1 million has not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2020. BOBS's staff continues to work with pastors, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with *Book of Church Order* Formulary No. 5 requirements. RCA ministers of Word and sacrament should review their quarterly statements to verify that 11 percent of their eligible salary is being contributed. Elder delegates to synod should ask questions in their local congregation to ensure that their congregation is providing this important benefit for their pastor(s).

For additional information about the retirement plan, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.

Board of Benefits Services—General Fund

The Board of Benefits Services General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, and assistance and retiree chaplains programs for active and retired RCA ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially healthy, with \$25 million in net assets as of September 30, 2020. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2020 with a net surplus of \$3 million. BOBS received an \$800,000 grant from the Lilly Endowment for partial support to address the economic challenges facing pastoral leaders and earned \$1.8 million from the increase in market value of investments and \$1.6 million from other revenue. Administration costs for the retirement plans are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the 403(b) and retirement plan accounts and totaled \$901,000 in 2020.

Effective January 1, 2021, BOBS implemented a fee reduction for participants from 21 basis points to 19 basis points. This represents a cumulative decrease of over 50 percent in the past eight years. BOBS has reduced operational expenses, which is a significant factor that has allowed for the reduction in fees charged to participant accounts. We have eliminated the need to use the administrative fees charged to the retirement plan to support the assistance fund. This decrease in administrative fees for assistance is part of an intentional effort to lower fees charged to the retirement accounts of each participant. The funding for the assistance program

previously provided by the administrative fee has been replaced by distributions from the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund.

Support for the assistance and retiree chaplains programs came from a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance program expenses, including the assistance grants and the retiree chaplains programs, were \$523,000 in 2020. For additional information about the BOBS General Fund, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.

Church Growth Fund

The Church Growth Fund (CGF) makes affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return. In fiscal year 2020, the CGF continued its plan to grow and service more RCA congregations, reaching \$83 million in total assets.

As of September 30, 2020, the CGF had \$25 million in cash and short-term investments and \$59 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by \$34 million in savings certificates and \$48 million in net assets (capital). Net income totaled \$1.4 million after contributing \$791,000 to the GSC to be used for grants to church plants, scholarships to fund youth mission experiences, and grants for church revitalization. Since 2018, the CGF has operated under a board policy of being able to contribute up to 50 percent of net operating income annually back to the denomination.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association. For additional information about the CGF, see the report of the Church Growth Fund and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.

Investments

The investments of the General Synod Council (GSC), Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), and the Church Growth Fund (CGF) are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise.

Excess Operating Reserves

Since December 2017, the operating reserves of the GSC, BOBS, and the CGF are being managed by Telemus Capital, LLC, an investment firm based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. Telemus Capital, LLC, allows for the segregation of funds for each RCA corporation. The investments for each RCA entity may then be further segregated and managed under two separate investment policies. The first policy, invested only in fixed income, is the secondary liquidity source after cash and savings for the RCA corporations and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays 1–5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The second policy, allocating assets to longer duration fixed income and equities, is the third source of liquidity for the RCA corporations and uses the

benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays Intermediate Government Corporate Bond Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Telemus Capital, LLC, was \$30.4 million as of September 30, 2020. The total amount invested in index equities funds was \$1.9 million as of September 30, 2020.

Endowment Funds

The GSC manages \$20.5 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the GSC date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1–10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index.

In addition to the GSC and the CGF, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2020, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed \$534,000 to the GSC, \$14,000 to the CGF, and \$200,000 to RCA-affiliated organizations. Due to economic uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the GSC, CGF, and BOBS elected to not take a full distribution from the endowment as allowed by the investment policy statement. The full allowed amount was distributed to the other RCA-affiliated organizations. If you are interested in setting up an endowment for the benefit of the GSC or your local congregation, please contact the RCA Office of Advancement at advancement@rca.org.

BOBS also manages an endowment fund valued at \$14.6 million. Most of the BOBS endowment fund consists of the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund, a board-designated endowment funded by reserves from the BOBS Insurance Fund. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1–10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. In 2020, approximately \$270,000 was distributed from the endowment fund to the BOBS General Fund.

RCA Retirement Plans

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for the Board of Benefits Services retirement programs. In collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC), in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement programs. BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants from Lockton Investment Advisors.

Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant's retirement age as well as 19 diversified mutual funds, including 4 socially responsible options. As of December 31, 2020, 77 percent of RCA participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds. The total market value of the mutual funds held in the 403(b) Retirement Program and Retirement Plan was \$491 million as of September 30, 2020.

Five million dollars are held in insurance contracts purchased on behalf of participants but not held at Fidelity.

BOBS, with the assistance of Lockton Investment Advisors, participated in a Request for Information (RFI) for the recordkeeping fees of the two retirement plans. This exercise resulted in a decrease in fees (from five to four basis points) from Fidelity. This decrease was effective January 1, 2020, and provided a three-year rate guarantee.

For additional information about the retirement plan investments, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services.

Planned Giving Programs

The GSC manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling \$1.2 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and record-keeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts. This fund is in a wind-down phase. Those wishing to establish a charitable gift annuity benefiting the RCA or a local RCA church may contact the Barnabas Foundation to do so.

Church Growth Fund Investments

The CGF invests a portion of excess operating cash in three fixed-income accounts and one equity account. As of September 30, 2020, Telemus Capital, LLC, the Barnabas Foundation, and LVM Capital Management, Ltd., manage these funds. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

Socially Responsible Investments

All investment policy statements for each pool of investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, or the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol.

Retirement funds may be invested, at the discretion of the participant, in socially responsible funds screened for the above restrictions.

The GSC also invests a portion of excess operating cash with Oikocredit, one of the world's largest sources of private funding to the microfinance sector.

2021 Budget Process and Assessment Proposal for GSC, BOBS Assistance Grants, and Theological Education

Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication

The general secretary has identified three ministry priorities: Transformed & Transforming initiatives, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication. GSC staff focuses on equipping churches and church leaders in these three areas so that they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. To make sure that we are using resources wisely, priority leaders developed 2021 budgets based on goals for measurable outcomes. Primarily, they're achieving

these goals by equipping churches and leaders through collaborative covenant communities in various forms: cohorts, coaching huddles, webinars, the online learning platform, and learning communities and collaboratives.

The assessments and contributions provided by RCA churches and members enabled the GSC staff to come alongside RCA congregations in many ways, start new churches, and reach people with the love of Christ through RCA mission efforts. For more on how the RCA's financial resources were used in ministry during the past year, please see the reports in the General Synod workbook on Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, Global Mission, and Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism.

General Synod Council Operating Budget Process

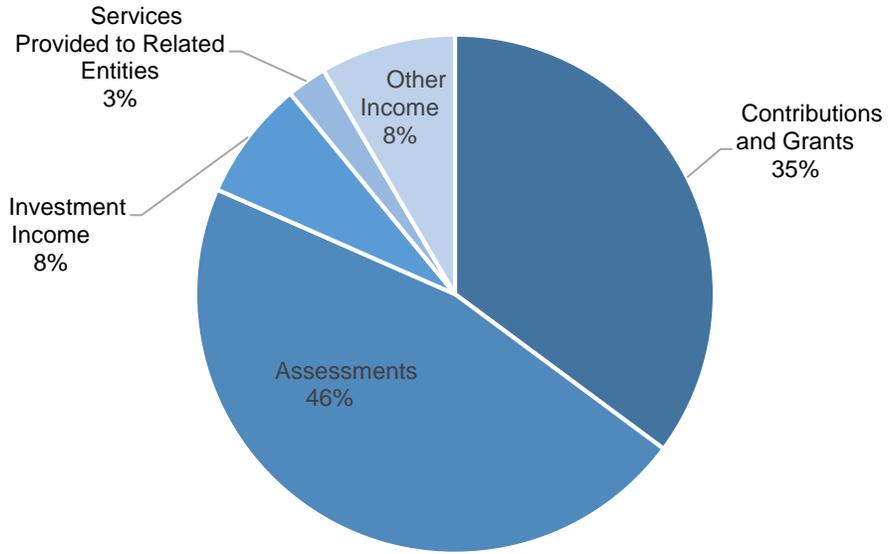
The GSC operating budget is primarily funded by assessment income and contributions. The 2021 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from assessments, contributions, investments, and other income. In 2020, the GSC approved a per-member assessment for GSC, BOBS, and theological education of \$52.01 for the 2021 calendar year. This was a reduction of \$2.29 per confessing member. The 2021 budgeted GSC assessment revenue of \$5.5 million is a decrease of \$461,000 from the 2020 budget. For 2021, contributions to support the three ministry priorities are budgeted at \$165,000 less than 2020. Global Mission expects to see an overall decrease in contributions of about \$223,000.

Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 69 percent of the total budget. The remaining 31 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.

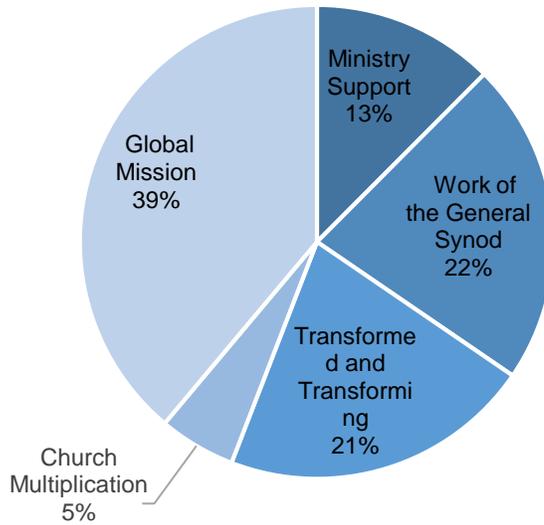
The 2021 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about \$297,000 for costs related to move forward the initiatives of Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication. This includes a planned draw on reserves of \$207,000 for the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA).

The following charts show the sources of budgeted operating revenue and budgeted operating expenses, shown by ministry and support areas.

**2021 GSC Budgeted Income
Total of \$12 Million**



**2021 GSC Operating Budget
Total of \$12.3 Million**



In addition to the operating budget, gifts and grants designated for specific purposes typically provide about \$4–5 million annually. These specific purposes include funds for disaster relief, Global Mission projects, grants from foundations, and other projects beyond the scope of operational work. These designated gifts are classified as “with donor restrictions” on the audited financial statements.

Formulating the 2022 budget began in midsummer 2021 and will be based on the approved assessment rate and estimated revenue for 2022. As the RCA continues to serve, equip, and support leaders and congregations, the 2022 budget will focus on aligning RCA staff with these four priorities: making disciples, multiplying leaders, ministry multiplication, and missional engagement.

2022 Assessment

General Synod Assessment Amount

Note: General Synod 2019 approved changes to the General Synod bylaws that would allow a change in the manner in which assessments are calculated by a percentage of income method (Covenant Shares) rather than the per-member method. The amendment process for the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 [2019 edition, p. 124]) says that both votes by the General Synod in order to make a bylaws change effective must occur at stated sessions. Therefore, the final vote of General Synod to make this bylaws change effective could not happen in 2020 without a stated session, and thus it was necessary for the RCA to proceed with another year of per-member assessments for 2021.

Given the possible change in the assessment payment timeline for departing churches that will be proposed to the General Synod by the Vision 2020 Team, the GSC is proposing that the final approval of Covenant Shares be delayed and that we continue with another year of per-member assessments for 2022. The assessment billing for departing churches may be more complicated than the current process. Therefore, we believe it is best to not add an additional complication by changing the methodology of calculating assessments from a per member basis to a percentage of income basis.

The GSC has recommended to this General Synod that the second vote on the change to the General Synod bylaws in *Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c (2019 edition, p. 108) to make Covenant Shares effective be delayed until the next stated session of General Synod. (See motion EC 21-12 in the report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of General Synod.)

In light of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the GSC is recommending that the GSC per-member rate remain at \$46.10 for the third year in a row. The GSC is requesting no increase in assessments over the previous year. In doing so, we know that we will have less revenue from assessments due to declining membership. We will also have higher expenses due to cost of living increases for staff and rising health care costs. We plan to make up for the deficit by cutting costs and utilizing other sources of income.

Confessing membership is the driving factor in revenue received under the per-member assessment method. Confessing membership reported on the Consistorial Report Forms for the year ending December 31, 2020, is the basis upon which assessments will be calculated. The 2020 confessing membership declined 2.9 percent over the previous year. Thus, we anticipate a

\$165,000 decline in assessment revenue for the year 2021 due to membership decline. Staff leadership anticipated this decline in revenue and has already begun to implement changes to the budget for fiscal year 2022. We also anticipate future reductions in revenue due to departing churches. Changes to address this anticipated reduction in income may include staff reductions, narrowing our ministry focus, reducing several other costs, and seeking other revenue sources.

The general secretary and the GSC staff realize the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations. We commit to careful stewardship of the funds that God has blessed us with.

Board of Benefits Services Assistance Grant Assessment Request

The Board of Benefits Services' assistance program provides grants to retired ministers and to their surviving spouses who are experiencing financial distress. Financial assistance is primarily awarded for needs related to housing and daily living expenses, ongoing medical insurance premiums, funeral grants to surviving spouses of an RCA minister of Word and sacrament, retirement contributions for disabled ministers, and payments for one-time emergency needs. In 2016, General Synod approved an increase from \$1.50 to \$2.00 per member for assistance grants. Prior to 2016, the per-member assessment had not changed in more than 25 years. The remainder of the funds required to sustain this program are provided through donations to the Board of Benefits Services and endowment income. The Board of Benefits Services requests that the assessment remain at \$2.00 per member for 2022.

Theological Education Assessment Request

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board's (PFOB) recommendations to GSC regarding the theological education assessment for 2022 are based on the understanding that Western Theological Seminary (WTS) is proposing bylaws changes to this General Synod that, if approved, would mean that WTS would no longer get a share of the RCA theological education assessment. (For more information, see the report of WTS.)

Two versions of the theological education assessment have been prepared for General Synod, but only the applicable one will be voted upon; the vote on WTS's bylaws changes will take place first, and then the outcome of that vote will determine which version of the theological education assessment is placed before the synod.

In addition, in 2020, the GSC approved a recommendation (GSC 20-15) to dissolve the MFCA for budgetary purposes and asked the PFOB to work on recommendations to this effect. The decision was also made to have MFCA operate from reserves and not receive assessment funding in 2021, so the 2021 assessment amount did not take into account any funds for MFCA.

PFOB has determined that the best way forward is to repurpose the MFCA rather than dissolving it (see the report of the PFOB for more information on PFOB's planned proposal). The PFOB is still working with the Commission on Church Order on necessary BCO changes to reconstitute the MFCA and anticipates bringing those changes to the General Synod in June 2022; for the time being, the MFCA needs to continue to receive assessment funding, as it does not have enough reserves to continue to operate out of them indefinitely. Since MFCA is continuing to operate (in a reduced capacity), it will need to continue to receive funding, so funding for the MFCA needs to be added back in to the theological education assessment this

year. This may be offset by the removal of assessment funding for WTS, should those bylaws changes pass.

Scenario 1 (WTS bylaw changes are approved and thus a portion of the theological education assessment is no longer allocated to WTS):

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$4.00 per member, allocated in the following manner:

- \$20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split as follows:
 - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the two agents for theological education (MFCA and NBTS).
 - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (MFCA and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Scenario 2 (WTS bylaw changes are NOT approved, and thus WTS continues to receive a portion of the theological education assessment):

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$6.12 per-member, allocated in the following manner:

- \$20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split as follows:
 - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, MFCA, and NBTS).
 - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (WTS, MFCA and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

2022 Assessment Request

The chart below summarizes the General Synod assessment amounts for 2021 and the General Synod Council proposed amount for 2022, in the events of both Scenario 1 (WTS bylaws are approved) and Scenario 2 (WTS bylaws changes are not approved).

Name of Assessment	Scenario 1		Scenario 2	
	2021	2022	2022	2022
General Synod Council	\$ 46.10	\$ 46.10	\$ 46.10	\$ 46.10
BOBS	\$ 2.00	\$ 2.00	\$ 2.00	\$ 2.00
Theological education	\$ 3.91	\$ 4.00	\$ 6.12	\$ 6.12
	\$ 52.01	\$ 52.10	\$ 54.22	\$ 54.22

**F 21-1
To approve the General Synod Council 2022 assessment of \$46.10 per confessing member.**

F 21-2

To approve the 2022 assessment of \$2.00 per confessing member for the Board of Benefits Services to provide assistance funding for retired pastors who have a demonstrated need.

Note: only ONE of the following two motions, F 21-3a OR F 21-3b, will be placed before the General Synod for a vote, depending upon whether the General Synod approves WTS's proposed bylaws changes or not. F 21-3a will be placed before the synod if TE 21-4, found in the Report of Western Theological Seminary, is approved. F 21-3b will be placed before the synod if TE 21-4 is not approved.

F 21-3a

To approve the 2022 assessment of \$4.00 per confessing member for theological education.

F 21-3b

To approve the 2022 assessment of \$6.12 per confessing member for theological education.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF ADVANCEMENT

The Advancement team's responsibility is to encourage churches and individuals to generously give of the financial resources God has entrusted to them to support the mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The team coordinates all General Synod Council fundraising efforts including, but not limited to, financial support for RCA Global Mission, Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and the Church Growth Fund. The team strives to develop and strengthen relationships with donors, potential donors, church leaders, business allies, and others to inspire financial partnerships and also strives to promote the mission and vision of the RCA.

Team members raise financial support through outright gifts, will bequests, life income plans, and grants. Any gift received by the RCA may be designated for a specific area of ministry or may be left undesignated. All undesignated general gifts are typically assigned to the RCA On Mission Fund (formerly known as the RCA Ministry Fund), a fund that supports the operational aspects of Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication. All Global Mission undesignated gifts are typically assigned to the RCA Global Mission Endowment. The Advancement team also assists with raising resources for and awareness of the RCA Church Growth Fund through savings certificates, estate planning, special project funding, or capital campaigns.

Every gift given to the Reformed Church in America enables and empowers ministry through the church, transforming lives both locally and globally. Thanks be to God!

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God's people. In fiscal year 2020, 54 percent of the RCA's total income was received via voluntary support (contributions and PIM shares), whereas 27 percent was received via assessment income, and the remaining 19 percent was received via other sources of income (investment earnings and fee-for-services).

The ongoing funding structure of the denomination relies heavily on the generosity of individual donors, foundations, corporations, and churches who give above and beyond assessments. We remain truly grateful for all those who have chosen to invest in the mission and ministry of the RCA. For a brief synopsis of the 2020 budget, please refer to the 2020 Ministry Impact Report that is available by calling 708-778-3780 or by emailing advancement@rca.org.

It is no secret that this is a season of transition for the Reformed Church in America. As we approach a pivotal time in our history, a time when churches will make a difficult decision to leave the denomination or remain in the denomination, our donors are impacted and influenced by those church decisions. As the RCA leadership is coming to terms with "who is staying and who is leaving," we also need to come to terms with "which donors are staying and which donors are leaving." However, this season of transition is also giving us absolute cause for rejoicing and praise in the fact that so many new church plants are expressing the desire to be part of our rich history, heritage, and theology. There continues to be incredible excitement and momentum around areas other than Church Multiplication as well, such as mission and ministry with Global Mission, Next Generation Engagement, Discipleship, Local Missional Engagement, Disability Concerns, equity-based hospitality, and racial reconciliation, to name a few. God is good, and we are thankful!

The RCA continues to partner with Barnabas Foundation for resources around estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift management. The easiest gift, and oftentimes the gift with the most impact, is the gift that is made through an estate plan. For information about how you can include the RCA in your final estate plan, or how you can receive income for the remainder of your lifetime from a planned gift that will benefit the RCA at the time of your passing, please contact Larryl Humme at lhumme@rca.org.

The mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America only happens because of the generosity of people like you throughout the denomination. Please consider including a gift to the RCA in your regular giving or in your estate plan. For more information on how to do this, please visit www.rca.org/give or contact one of the Advancement team members:

- Larryl Humme, director of Advancement, lhumme@rca.org or 708-778-3780
- Natalie Lopez, executive assistant, nlopez@rca.org or 616-541-0881

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

Introduction

The bylaws of the General Synod state that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b [2019 edition, p. 107]).

This is a task and assignment that we as a council take very seriously. Being an advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion is indeed a difficult task, but it is one that the African American Black Council (AABC) has been committed to historically within the church. In the past several years, the AABC has received many disheartening and egregious stories from Reformed Church in America (RCA) ministers of color, seminarians, students under care, and several white colleagues about racial injustices within the RCA and its structures. These acts of injustice have come from our white colleagues, some overt, and others less so.

After hearing countless stories, some of which have even been published throughout the denomination, the AABC developed a subcommittee to look at ways to combat the perpetual instances of racism that are still pervasive within our denomination. During Our Call, we pledged as a denomination to live into a “future freed from racism.” While there were some efforts toward this goal, it was not nearly enough. After Our Call ended for us as a denomination, the AABC took the opportunity to reflect on what was and was not effective in Our Call regarding being a denomination with a future freed from racism. Consequently, the AABC concluded that in order to really be a denomination freed from racism, it was necessary to propose to the General Synod a constitutional RCA antiracism policy to be implemented in our polity in the *Book of Church Order* and, most importantly, lived out in the church so that the RCA would truly move toward being a denomination with a future freed from racism.

After a long and intense study, the AABC began its work on a proposed RCA antiracism policy. While there are many issues within our denomination that we must address, the AABC realizes that we need to be audacious on this issue of antiracism at this time. The RCA has long held strong convictions regarding the sinfulness of racism and the need to defeat it. Furthermore, and most importantly, we are required as the church of Jesus to proclaim the gospel. Finally, the AABC is proposing policy recommendations. The RCA has undergone many changes in the past decade, including a new general secretary. New strategies are needed to be faithful to our antiracism commitments now. Therefore, the AABC will set forth a number of recommendations to put our theological convictions into practice in the denomination as a whole.

Vision Statement

The Bible insistently reveals that God loves diversity and justice. This is seen in the wide variety of creation in which God delights. It is heard in the words of the prophets, who reject oppression and commend justice as true worship. It is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who resists the power of empire and values all persons, regardless of race, as children of God. Jesus gathered a community of people around him that crossed over every racial, social, and cultural boundary.

Racism is the antithesis of what God intends for us. It is the rejection of the other, which is contrary to the Word of God. Racism is the continuing lie that says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation.

Because of our role defined in the bylaws of the General Synod, the AABC must stand against, speak against, and work against racism. Antiracism efforts are not optional for us as Christians. It is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, without which we fail to proclaim the gospel. While recognizing that racism victimizes many different racial and ethnic groups, we acknowledge its unique impact on the African American community. Too many have denied this basic truth for too long. Our choice to align ourselves with love and not hate requires both a rejection of racism and a positive proclamation that Black lives matter.

Reformed theology offers a nuanced understanding of sin. John Calvin did not understand sin to be simply an individual belief, action, or moral failing. Rather, he viewed sin as the corporate state of all humanity. It is an infection that taints each of us and all of us. No part of us—not our perception, intelligence, nor conscience—is unclouded by sin. This does not mean that human beings are awful. Rather, it means that we must have humility about our own righteousness and that we must cling to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The second valuable resource we have in our tradition is the importance of confession and repentance. Acknowledging our sinfulness ought not to produce self-hatred or paralyzing guilt. Rather, the appropriate response is to confess our sin before God and one another, confident in the grace and love of God. The grace that enables us to confess also empowers us to repent toward the eschatological vision of God's new creation. By grace we are forgiven, and we respond to this grace with gratitude, humility, and renewed zeal for the gospel.

Finally, as a council, we are urging the church to commit ourselves to *doing the work* of countering racism in the church as our witness to the gospel. In our affirmation that God loves difference, we will honor diversity as that in which God delights. In our conviction that God desires justice, we will learn from others to broaden our understanding of equality. In our humility as sinners saved by grace, we will listen openly to diverse voices regarding how racism still exists in our church and our need to finally eradicate that evil. In our gratitude for God's grace, we will work toward the kingdom of God evident in the Bible. In our joyous response to God's love, we will love one another.

Biblical and Theological Foundation

Note: The content of the following sections is adapted from "Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community," a paper published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1999, and used with permission. The original paper can be downloaded at www.pcusa.org/resource/facing-racism-vision-community.

The Christian response to racism must have a clear biblical and theological understanding of humanity. The Reformed perspective on the meaning of humanness is informed by John Calvin's assertion that proper knowledge of ourselves as humans is achievable only through a knowledge of God and God's will for humans. Calvin used the notion of the image of God to capture the essence of the biblical understanding of what it means to be human: human beings were made by God, in the image of God. Therefore, Scripture portrays God as the being who recognizes the value and worth of human life and affirms the inherent dignity of human beings.

Understanding the image of God is crucial. We must appreciate the sacredness and sanctity of all human life; establish relationships based on the rule of love, respect, and dignity; assume moral responsibility for nurturing the bonds of mutual affection; render supportive aid to those in need; avoid hurtful attitudes and harmful actions; and make justice the basis of our treatment of others. Thus, Calvin and other reformers established a critical linkage between the image of God in humans and the divine mandate to make justice, love, and peace the fundamental basis of human relationships.

The Bible calls us to show love, justice, and peace, especially to one another. In the Old Testament, God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt is a paradigm of justice. The New Testament embraces and expands the perspective of God's commitment to love through Scripture, which mandates us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Furthermore, that love of God and love of neighbor are not mutually exclusive.

Challenge to the Church: What Is God Calling Us to Be and Do?

What is the moral-ethical imperative for the RCA? Are there grounds for hope that can inform us about what can and ought to be done despite the serious levels of brokenness we have experienced and continue to experience in the area of racism? While we are made in God's image, we recognize that all have fallen short of the glory of God. But we are reminded that as a covenantal church, we live into a covenant offered by God, sealed in Jesus Christ, and mediated through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our call to a covenantal relationship with God is both descriptive and prescriptive. The call is descriptive in that it defines who we are and whose we are. It is prescriptive in that it informs what we must do. Our call to stand against racism once and for all emerges out of our identity as disciples of Christ. Our identity compels us to oppose at every level and in every way the injustice of racism. Antiracism, therefore, is prescriptive for what a faithful community must do in the quest to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). The church must actively oppose the forces of racism in concrete and strategic ways. This cannot be determined or achieved in the abstract. If racism is to be eliminated in our church, it must be defined contextually and concretely so that its personal, institutional expressions and structures can be seen, understood, and countered. An antiracism church is one whose institutional behavior and commitment are informed by God's covenant to establish justice, love, and peace in relationships, and whose identity is visibly expressed in the context of active antiracism engagement.

The RCA is operating today in a culture of brokenness for many reasons but particularly on this historic sin of racism. We must speak clearly about what it means to embrace antiracism as a major part of our corporate identity. The Belhar Confession, one of the confessional standards of the church, is a clear and unequivocal mandate for the church to live out its call to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

The possibility now exists for the RCA, in light of our call, tradition, heritage, theology, ethics, and spiritual commitment, to truly become a denomination with a future freed from racism. The African American Black Council is tasked in part to challenge policies, actions, and structures that promote and perpetuate racism within the church. We can honor the divine will of God for each other by demonstrating a serious commitment to our confession for unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Understanding Racism

A starting point for understanding racism is clarifying the distinction between racism and prejudice, a common and costly point of misunderstanding two distinct phenomena. This will help us better understand how to eliminate racism. Prejudice is understood to be judgments made in the absence of due examination and consideration of facts; these judgments are held even when contradicted by facts. In the absence of a factual basis, prejudices are driven primarily by emotional responses such as fear. When prejudice is based on racial consideration, it is race prejudice. However, race prejudice alone is not racism.

When prejudice is combined with power, it becomes racism. Power is the capacity to command, control, and dominate social reality for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome. Those who control power have the capacity to transform prejudice into racism by establishing and maintaining institutions and structures that embody group biases. Thus, it is the combination of power and prejudice that is so destructive. Racism is, therefore, the marriage of power and prejudice. Simply stated, racial prejudice plus power equals racism. Power transforms prejudice into racism. Racism gives direction to the use of power.

An understanding of racism must include these facts: no one is born a racist; no one is born oppressed. Racism is a consequence of learned values and behaviors. It is possible, therefore, to learn values and behaviors that do not result in racism. Some people benefit from racism while others are victimized by it. As we learn different values, we must unlearn and undo existing racist values and structures. That process is two-fold and involves dismantling institutional racism as well as rooting racism out of our personal lives and communities. It is a long-term struggle that is achievable through prayer, commitment, and persistence.

Systemic Racism

Racism is nurtured and sustained by systemic power. Power must be understood in institutional terms and not just individual terms. An institution is an organized way of meeting basic needs. Our classes are a primary institution within our church. Institutions, especially the church, do not function as isolated entities, although sometimes it feels that way in our church. They are integrally related and interconnected. A group of related institutions constitutes a system, such as the church. Power resides in the institutions and systems we create.

Societies establish and structure their common lives by exercising power to create and perpetuate institutions that reflect common values to meet their basic needs as well as determine their goals and aspirations. The power to access and participate in the institutional life of a community is essential to affirming our humanity. Those who control power have the capacity to limit the rights of others to participate fully. To deny others such rights is to deny their humanity.

Historically, institutions—especially the church—have tended to be preferential to some group or groups in comparison to others. Racist institutions are not accidents of history. They are created and maintained intentionally. For the most part, they serve the needs of those who control power and access. In most contexts, racist institutions preserve power and privilege for certain groups of people. Rewards are based on group membership, not personal attitude. Consequently, some groups of people benefit from racism whether or not they have ever committed a racist act, uttered a racist word, or had a racist thought.

Our Strategy

The proposed antiracism policy has to be accepted and lived into within the General Synod, regional synods, classes, consistories, congregations, RCA colleges and seminaries, mission partners, ecumenical partners, and every other area in our church. The task of dismantling racism must be a partnership effort that involves all levels of the church. Since context is essential within an institution, we contend that the approach to dismantling racism may be carried out differently in different situations. Nevertheless, the objective and goal must still be to become an antiracism church so that the church will live out its call and mission.

The proposed antiracism policy must not only have a permanent place in our polity but must be woven into our culture. It must begin in the context in which we find ourselves, in all of our brokenness. Therefore, ongoing dialogue must be designed for use in places where people ordinarily gather for work and worship. There must be ground rules that preserve the integrity of people engaging in dialogue. The dialogue is a starting point but must move beyond the dynamics of interaction to grapple with and clarify the foundations of racism and its structural manifestations that have polarized our church. Merely talking about racist incidents without addressing root causes is to miss the point of this proposed RCA antiracism policy. We must move to where the discussion itself does not result in further polarization. Thus, we must first be honest with ourselves and then with each other. We must name the problem so we can claim it and then change it. Our journey begins with confession, forgiveness, redemption, and then transformation. This kind of engagement will help prevent extraneous conversation that masquerades as dialogue.

While dialogue is a necessary starting point, we must move beyond that to a common assessment of the problem. We must articulate a common vision of what can and ought to be. The shared vision will engender strategies for engagement that result in the transformation of personal lives, institutions, structures, and practices. Dialogue must lead to the identification of measurable and attainable goals that can be benchmarks of progress. Once benchmarks are established, the more challenging task of identifying obstacles that stand in the way of realizing the vision can begin. Only then can specific strategies be designed that will help us overcome racism. Finally, the process of dialogue involves returning to the vision and assessing our progress on a regular basis, perhaps annually.

The RCA has long recognized that eradicating the sin of racism from our church is a high priority. But it cannot be done without sacrifice. Experience has taught us that people cannot leap from centuries of racism into a new vision. It is a long journey that will require discernment, prayer, and worship-based action. Therefore, we are proposing the following RCA antiracism policy that will govern our lives and hold us all accountable.

WHEREAS, racism is rooted in a belief of the superiority of whiteness and bestows benefits, unearned rights, rewards, opportunities, advantages, access, and privilege on Europeans and European descendants; and

WHEREAS, the reactions of people of color to racism are internalized through destructive patterns of feelings and behaviors impacting their physical, emotional, and mental health and their spiritual and familial relationships; and

WHEREAS, through institutionalized racism, laws, customs, traditions, and practices systemically foster inequalities; and

WHEREAS, although the denomination has shown leadership among some Reformed Church in America synods, classes, local congregations, and theological institutions by initiating innovative antiracism programs, by developing antiracism facilitators, and in general making dismantling racism a priority, there is still much to be done. As we continue in this effort, the work we do must reflect the historical and present experiences and stories of all peoples impacted by racism. We must work from a paradigm reflective of the historical relationships of racial and ethnic groups and racial oppression within the Reformed Church in America and society; and

WHEREAS, continued institutional racism within the church emphasizes the need for an antiracism policy as we seek to do justice; and

WHEREAS, previous General Synods of the RCA have voted for resolutions, statements, and goals denouncing racism, and it is time to honor mandates and expectations of the church;

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED that the African American Black Council, within its role as defined in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b of the *Book of Church Order* (2019 edition, p. 107), is proposing the following antiracism policy to the Reformed Church in America, to be adopted and implemented into the *Book of Church Order* and lived out at every level of the church.

PROPOSED RCA ANTIRACISM POLICY

It is against the RCA antiracism policy to engage in verbal or physical conduct that denigrates or shows hostility or aversion toward an individual because of his or her race, color, gender, age, ministerial status (student under care, licensed candidate), national origin, disability, or other category that: (1) has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile, humiliating, or offensive church and/or assembly or institutional environment; (2) has the purpose or effect of interfering with, slowing down, or terminating a person's church membership, matriculation toward ordination, or ability to serve within the church; or (3) otherwise adversely affects a person's ability to gain employment opportunities within the RCA.

Depending on the circumstances, the following conduct may constitute racial discrimination: (1) epithets, slurs, negative stereotyping, jokes, or threatening, intimidating, or hostile acts that relate to race, color, gender, religion, age, national origin, or disability; and (2) written or graphic material that denigrates or shows hostility toward an individual or group because of race, color, gender, religion, age, national origin, or disability and that is circulated anywhere within the RCA, its assemblies, churches, institutions, or ecumenical settings. Other conduct may also constitute racial harassment and discrimination if it falls within the definition of racial discrimination or harassment.

Reporting Under the Proposed RCA Antiracism Policy

If a student under care of a classis believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way, the student shall report it immediately to his or her classis without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the classis will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely address these concerns, as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*.

If a minister of classis believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way within his or her church or classis, the minister shall report it immediately to his or her classis without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the classis will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely investigate these concerns according to the judicial procedures of classis outlined in the *Book of Church Order*.

If a member of an RCA church believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way within his or her own church, the member shall report it to the board of elders without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the board of elders will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely address these concerns, as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*.

If anyone of the regional synod believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role in the regional synod, the person shall report it to the officers of the regional synod without fear of retribution or retaliation. The regional synod representatives will determine the best way to go forward in addressing these concerns.

If anyone of the General Synod (staff, delegate, guest, etc.) believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role for the General Synod, the person shall report it to the general secretary and/or officers of the General Synod without fear of retribution or retaliation. The Committee of Reference during General Synod shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

If any student within an RCA academic institution believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role at the institution, the person shall report it to the appropriate board or committee of that institution without fear of retribution or retaliation. The institution shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

If anyone within any area of the RCA at any time believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role in the church, the person shall report it to the appropriate person and/or committee without fear of retribution or retaliation. The committee shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED that this proposed RCA antiracism policy shall never lead to retaliation or retribution if someone experiences, witnesses, or reports this proposed policy being violated in any way.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED that this proposed RCA antiracism policy is not intended in any way to be used as a weapon, fear tactic, or personal attack, or to be misused or overused by anyone at any time.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED that the Reformed Church in America must work in concert with each other at every level of the church to dismantle racism.

LET IT BE FINALLY RESOLVED that the Reformed Church in America, through adopting this antiracism policy, implementing it into our polity, and living it out within the whole church, declare that the RCA is finally a denomination with a future freed from racism.

Recommendations

The AABC recommends the following to the General Synod Council:

1. To authorize the African American Black Council to work with the Commission on Church Order over the next year to determine how and where the proposed RCA antiracism policy could be incorporated into the *Book of Church Order*, and to bring specific proposed changes to the *BCO* to the General Synod Council at its March 2022 meeting, which General Synod Council may then bring to the 2022 General Synod.
2. To direct the general secretary to challenge RCA congregations, assemblies, institutions, and agencies, through a direct communication, to eradicate all structures and/or systems that support and maintain racism.
3. To direct the general secretary, in consultation with the African American Black Council, to collect and distribute stories of congregations and assemblies dismantling racism throughout the church.
4. To direct the general secretary, in consultation with the African American Black Council, to jointly formulate a communication plan to share antiracism resources, and to create an electronic campaign to send information on antiracism resources and trainings to RCA assemblies and seminaries.
5. To encourage the general secretary to include antiracism training in the existing leadership development initiatives of Transformed & Transforming.

The AABC also recommends to the General Synod Council that it make the following recommendations to the 2021 General Synod on behalf of the African American Black Council:

6. To urge RCA assemblies to provide an annual one-day event dedicated to antiracism.
7. To urge RCA assemblies and institutions to provide regular antiracism training for students, faculty, and staff, to integrate racially and culturally diverse voices in the curriculum, and to revisit hiring policies to ensure that faculty and staff are racially diverse.
8. To urge General Synod delegates to consider African Americans and people of color for General Synod officer positions.
9. To commend the African American Black Council for its historical and ongoing commitment to holding up antiracism to the church and holding the RCA accountable for deficiencies.

Respectfully submitted,
Initially by James Steward, chairperson (2017)
Resubmitted by Sharon Atkins, chairperson (2021)

Note: At its March 23–24, 2021, meeting, the General Synod Council voted (GSC 21-12) to approve the AABC's first five recommendations and to bring its final four recommendations to

the General Synod, as requested. These four recommendations will be acted upon by this General Synod; see EC 21-19 to EC 21-22 on page 50.

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

The *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2019 edition, p. 107), states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.”

Annual Consultation and the Coronavirus

Due to restrictions imposed by COVID-19 in 2020, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) could not hold its annual consultation, and all executive committee meetings were held virtually via Zoom. Since we were not able to convene the annual CPAAM consultation, all currently serving executive committee members agreed to continue serving their terms in 2020 with the hopes that there will be a consultation in 2021 where new representatives could be elected and appointed for the different language and ministry groups.

CPAAM ministers and churches were able to transition to online services. Some churches have begun to reopen following the Center for Disease Control’s guidelines to protect the health and safety of church members, pastors, and staff. We thank and praise God for the flexibility and creativity of ministers and the congregants’ capacity to pivot quickly to new styles of worshiping. However, this is an exhausting process to maintain for over a year. Many lament the losses and stresses due to the inability to meet in person. There are questions of how to balance self-care for ministry leaders who must also juggle family, financial, and other emotional burdens in addition to caring for the needs of their church members, plus maintaining regular Sunday worship and consistory meetings. Many are seeking to serve their community in meaningful ways and exploring how to share the gospel message in a time of social distancing.

Cooperation and Collaboration

The proliferation of online virtual meetings has made it easier for CPAAM to work closely with other agencies and staff in the RCA. CPAAM actively participated in meetings with the general secretary, Eddy Alemán, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), and the other racial/ethnic councils. Together, plans are being made for a joint virtual meeting of the African American Black Council, the Hispanic Council, CPAAM, CORE, and the Native American Indigenous Ministries in August 2021. We are focusing on speaking with one voice to dismantle racism and speaking toward the concrete realization of a truly multiracial future freed from racism in the RCA.

Anna Radcliffe, the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement, spoke to the executive committee of how the RCA is equipping and empowering the next generation of young Christians in our churches and how CPAAM can partner in this process. We are also working with Eliza Cortés Bast, the coordinator for Local Missional Engagement, to recommend Asian American college students for the Robben Island Project and other programs to develop future Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) leaders.

Different members of the CPAAM community participated in various programs on dismantling racism offered by the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Women’s Transformation and Leadership examined a number of issues and their impact on

racial/ethnic communities, such as domestic violence, mental health issues, Black Lives Matter, and dismantling racism in the RCA and in our communities.

CPAAM was greatly encouraged by the call to stand with Asians against racism put out by the Commission on Christian Action and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity in response to the increased hate crimes against Asians due to the coronavirus. This is increasing the visibility and voice of Asian Americans in the RCA. JJ TenClay, RCA Global Mission's coordinator for refugee ministries, is inviting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to share their stories, culture, and heritage so that all brothers and sisters in the RCA can welcome and embrace one another.

Vision 2020

Imos Wu, the General Synod Council representative and a member of the Vision 2020 team, gave regular updates to the executive committee. He and En Young Kim, the CPAAM coordinator, explained the basic scenarios, and the possible impact was discussed by the executive committee members. To date, no CPAAM church has expressed a desire to leave the denomination. Most members expressed a deep loyalty to the RCA and to their respective classes. Even though most first-generation immigrant churches hold firm to traditional views of marriage and human sexuality, they are waiting, praying, and discerning to see what are the final decisions and outcomes from General Synod in October.

Asian Women in Ministry

Lynn Min, the women's representative, has been holding meetings to provide a sacred space for CPAAM women to share their spiritual journey and struggles to find their identity and contributions in the Asian churches. The pandemic has increased the responsibilities of women in their roles as mothers, wives, homeschool teachers, ministry leaders, and pastors as well as working outside the home or working from home. Soul self care and supporting each other has increased in importance this year.

Youth Ministry Concerns

Those involved with youth, like Kelvin Kong, the youth minister at Grace Christian Church in Queens, New York, were challenged on how to connect to high school and college students while social distancing. Many young people were forced to spend hours online for schooling and were using social media to stay in touch with friends. Another church Zoom meeting lacked appeal when teenagers and youth in their 20s crave in-person contact for energy and outreach. Some parents were reluctant to allow their child to attend in-person gatherings that might risk infecting an older relative living in the home. The increased time at home has heightened tensions between generations, especially in the area of race. The first-and-a-half, second, and third generations may be responsive to movements like Black Lives Matter, while their parents and grandparents have trouble understanding their views on race and politics. There is a need to bridge the generation gap by breaking through communication barriers.

Chinese and Taiwanese Ministries

Grace Rohrer reported that some churches are combining services and fellowship, but they struggle to meet the spiritual and emotional needs, especially of older members who are isolated at home. These churches are successfully helping members get the COVID-19 vaccine. The main concern now is developing strategies for reopening.

Korean Churches

Kyunghoon Suh reported that besides online services, many Korean churches have been holding early morning services and weekday services and seeing an increased interest in Bible studies. An online gathering of Korean ministers provided much needed support and encouragement.

Disability Advocate

The Japanese American United Church (JAUC) in New York City invited Terry DeYoung, the coordinator for RCA Disability Concerns; Mark Stephenson, the director of CRC Disability Concerns; and Doug McClintic, RCA missionary in Hungary, as guest preachers to speak on various disability issues and to join a bilingual fellowship time after Sunday worship. Mana Hashimoto, the JAUC disability advocate, worked with visually impaired RCA and CRC advocates to develop guidelines for churches to be more aware and welcoming to people with visual disabilities.

Celebration

Some ministers, like Stephen Kim, who is planting a multiracial church in New Jersey, have been able to adapt to using social media to reach a wider audience. Others, like David Theonugraha, have been teaching online Bible classes locally in California and globally in Asia. We congratulate Francisca Rumokoy, who is now senior pastor at the Reformed Church in Metuchen after the retirement of the former minister. Besides leading a growing congregation of Indonesians, she is also caring for the Anglo members. We thank and praise God for Tiffany Fan's ministry at Grace Christian Church in the Bronx, New York, which is revitalizing a church that closed a few years ago. There is a thriving Chinese congregation there as well as outreach to the surrounding multiethnic neighborhood. John Chang is the senior minister and supervisor of this church plant. Shi Yang Lin will be retiring in August 2021 at the Taiwanese Church in Long Island.

Conclusion

For 41 years, CPAAM has been the voice to include Pacific and Asian American ministers and congregations within the life of the RCA. CPAAM churches and leaders lament the grief and loss of many members due to COVID, while rejoicing in the excitement of trying new things. The pandemic pause has been a time to assess what is truly important to the life of the individual and the church. We are absorbing the financial impact that some churches are able to stay open but are unable to pay the pastor's salary. CPAAM will continue to serve the Lord in our neighborhoods, do mission work in our home countries of Asia, and reach out to the younger generations with the life-giving message of the gospel.

To God alone be all praise and glory for sustaining CPAAM for 41 years.
Thanks be to the Lord!

Respectfully submitted by members of the CPAAM executive committee:
Kyunghoon Suh (chairperson), Gerri Yoshida (vice chairperson),
Lynn Min, Kelvin Kong, Shi Yang Lin, Stephen Kim, Grace Rohrer, Francisca Rumokoy, David Theonugraha (ex-officio), Imos Wu (GSC representative)

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

To the General Synod Council (GSC) of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), peace and greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Council for Hispanic Ministries submits the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2020.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries (CHM) has continued to work toward the collective vision and voice expression of our constituents as well as to advocate for the rights of our people. Amid the divisive social and political climate, we continue to work to ensure that we speak up and work together on positive strategies to resolve issues that separate us all as God's people. The pandemic that we all have lived through in 2020 has interrupted and changed so many aspects of life and ministry. Like every group in our society, the pandemic affected people in Hispanic communities and congregations, from church members to ministers. The loss and pain has touched many lives. Facing these realities and the continued growth of the Hispanic population in America, we adapted and focused on the care and growth of our current churches, our church planting work, and the connection of all our Hispanic pastors as part of our efforts and work this past year.

Fifth Annual Hispanic Summit

In collaboration with Church Multiplication, the RCA Hispanic Church Planting Summit took place in Orlando, Florida, on March 5–6, 2020. The meeting was a great success. This year, the summit helped to gather more than 90 leaders, which included church planters, parent church leaders, next generation Hispanic leaders, and classis and regional synod leaders. The focus was providing helpful tools for church planters in the process of building up their ministries. We also focused on future planters and their supporting churches and/or entities, ensuring they have the best foundations for their future plants. Immediate feedback shared with us included new callings for some current seminary students to plant and for some existing churches to reach out to the Hispanic communities around them. This summit would be the last in-person event in 2020 for the Hispanic Council.

Support and Training

CHM continued support to help pastors and church plants in Florida with training and preparation for classis examination as well as support in translation during the exams. There were also training programs for commissioned pastors in Texas. Examinations in both Florida and Texas resulted in receiving commissioned pastors and the transfer of ordained ministers that continue the growth of the RCA. In June, 16 new congregations and their planters were approved and supported by three classes: Central Plains Classis, Clasis de las Naciones (Classis of the Nations), and Central California Classis, all being spearheaded by the training and work of Andres Serrano, coordinator for Hispanic Ministries, and Fabio Sosa, who prepared and continues to prepare Hispanic pastors and leaders for ministry. The kingdom of God continues expanding, and the gospel is being shared with many as we respond to the need for Hispanic leaders and churches in the RCA.

Latin America

The cooperative work between the Council for Hispanic Ministries, the RCA, and Iglesia Reformada Dominicana (Dominican Reformed Church, IRD) continued to work toward achieving objectives that include the provision of assessments for pastors and leaders within the IRD. The

travel restrictions due to the pandemic affected some of the work, but, when the opportunity in December to travel opened up, Andres Serrano and Bruce Bugbee provided training to pastors of the IRD. The examinations that took place allowed for the ordinations of three ministers of Word and sacrament and four commissioned pastors. The general secretary, Eddy Alemán, and the current president of the Hispanic Council were present for this. Their presence was of great support and motivation for the IRD and the leaders within it who are being trained for ministry work and for the preparation of more leaders that can teach Reformed theology to the future congregations that will be part of the IRD. There is a great need for the gospel in Latin America, as well as many other parts of the world, and we will continue to look for the doors the Holy Spirit may open for the opportunity to share the gospel!

Zoom Prayers, Training, and Connections

The reality of a global pandemic that we all had to face as of March 2020 changed things as we knew them. Congregations could not gather to worship, weekly meetings were canceled, and technology took the forefront of how we all connected to each other more than ever. Within the Hispanic community, the lack of communal gatherings was not something that was easy for our churches to adapt to, as gatherings are a foundation for Hispanic church communities and families. Many Hispanic congregations struggled with the access and/or use of technology to continue weekly services as well as being able to receive offerings and tithes electronically for continued support of their ministries. The Hispanic Council, along with support of the general secretary, began weekly prayer Zoom meetings with the RCA Hispanic pastors and leaders, which allowed the communal sharing of ideas and best practices around church electronic services for both financial and social media connections to their congregation and communities. In the process, training for the use of Zoom and other streaming platforms were set in order to help our congregations continue doing ministry during the pandemic lockdown in their respective cities. The weekly gatherings have continued to share up-to-date information and training with all our Hispanic churches as we continue to live through the current pandemic.

Partnership with Western and New Brunswick Theological Seminaries

The Hispanic Council has supported the work of both Western (WTS) and New Brunswick (NBTS) Theological Seminaries and their efforts to be more accessible to Hispanic students with new courses and programs in Spanish. Summer 2020 saw the completion of the first WTS Hispanic cohort in the certificate program; the program prepares its participants in the BCO's ten competencies for commissioned pastors (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2b [2019 ed., p. 59]) and also serves as credits for those who continue in their scholastic path toward their MDiv and ordination.

This past year, NBTS partnered with the Hispanic Council to create the WELL Program with a heart for urban ministry, spiritual outreach, and community transformation, that will assist Hispanic pastors in launching new churches and leading congregations in urban areas. The WELL Program specifics were developed through the partnership with the Hispanic Council and other affiliates and are based on feedback from listening sessions, which, in the end, prompted the name. The primary aim for the project is to help participating pastors to thrive toward WELL-ness in self-care, leadership, authentic relationships, and vitality. The council will continue to work and endorse the continued education of our Hispanic leaders and pastors through our seminaries and their programs.

Joint Councils and 46th Annual Hispanic Assembly (Postponed)

The Council for Hispanic Ministries had its 46th annual meeting scheduled for October 2020. A big part of the planning was a joint meeting with all the other RCA councils to look toward the future of the RCA and the ministries of our minority congregations. Both were postponed because of the pandemic lockdown, but the CHM still met through Zoom to follow the directives of its bylaws in appointing a new executive committee. The Zoom gathering was a success, and we were able to appoint the team that currently serves the CHM. We look forward to when we can once again meet in person and finally connect, not just as the CHM but with the other councils as well.

In Conclusion

We are thankful for the work and support of the general secretary, the office of Global Mission, the office of Church Multiplication, the coordinator for Hispanic Ministries, and the General Synod Council for the work done for the Hispanic people of the Reformed Church in America and beyond through this difficult and unprecedented year. We pray for the RCA and work toward its future in the expanding of the gospel. As the Hispanic community continues to grow in America, the CHM will work to reflect that same growth within the RCA. Though the pandemic slowed things down, we look forward toward a blessed future and seeing the fruits that will come from the education, work, and training that continues to take place, as well as what new things our Hispanic Assembly will bring with the coming together of the other councils of the RCA. With much love, many prayers, and our faith in God for the future, we submit this report to you and pray for the Lord's blessings and for the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be with all of us as we continue this journey of transformation to live and love like Jesus.

Respectfully submitted,
The Executive Committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

Since its origin in 1628, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Now, in the midst of Transformed & Transforming, we continue to share stories of how God is at work among us. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, utilizing long-standing communication channels alongside new ones.

Supporting Transformed & Transforming

Over the last year, General Synod Council (GSC) staff have worked to raise awareness of Transformed & Transforming, the denomination's vision to engage with discipleship, leadership, mission, and the next generation. Stories of transformation have taken the form of magazine and website features. They've also been tweets, Facebook posts, and video testimonies.

Transformed & Transforming initiatives were designed in response to needs expressed by churches and leaders. As those initiatives took shape, congregations and leaders were invited to take their next step in order to better fulfill God's call for them. A plethora of learning and equipping opportunities are available. The RCA communication team has supported each initiative in sharing these opportunities and in developing related resources where needed.

Supporting Global Mission

RCA Global Mission is growing the global church and sharing the love of Jesus around the world. Over the past two years, communication staff have assisted in this work by rolling out new branding for RCA Global Mission that better captures the excitement and credibility of RCA mission work, including an updated website, new prayer cards, and countless missionary letters with stories and prayer requests from the field amid a global pandemic. When many churches were still worshipping virtually, communication staff also helped to produce a denomination-wide recorded worship service for Epiphany, including voices from mission partners around the world.

Supporting Church Planting

RCA Church Multiplication is starting 1,000 churches over 20 years, not just to start churches, but to introduce 100,000 people to Jesus and raise them up as disciples. Over the past two years, communication staff have assisted in this work by introducing new branding, sharing stories, updating resources, and spreading the word about training opportunities.

Responding to Racism

In response to worldwide conversations about racial justice over the past two years, communication staff have collaborated with Transformed & Transforming staff, racial/ethnic councils, and commissions to craft resources especially for ministry leaders for dismantling racism. These resources reflect the RCA's commitment to a future freed from racism and are in keeping with many General Synod statements over the last 70 years that have spoken out against racism and the harm that it causes. Dismantling racism resources are collected at www.rca.org/about/dismantling-racism.

Increasing Focus on Digital Communication

In 2019, the RCA unfolded a new digital strategy with the launch of Faithward.org. The site, focused on moving faith forward, includes ideas for living out your faith, reflections on Scripture, and resources for your church. Faithward.org includes many stories and resources from *RCA Today* and added content from a regular rotation of contributors from throughout the church. In its first year, Faithward helped church leaders connect with resources and spend time in thoughtful reflection about faith. It also engaged people asking big questions like “Who is God?” and “How do I know God’s listening when I pray?” and “How do I know what God wants for me?” As Faithward’s reach grew, it began to shift from a blog site to a resourcing hub for the wider church. Last year, an online learning platform was added, Faithward Learn (www.faithward.org/learn), to facilitate skill-building for ministry leaders amid the shifts of a digital world and pandemic shut-downs. Though the world is opening back up after the pandemic, digital and hybrid equipping opportunities will continue to be provided; they make learning accessible to more people in the RCA and beyond, and they make it more affordable with lower travel costs.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, church leaders were faced with urgently rethinking everything about ministry. To support these leaders, communication and ministry staff quickly provided resourcing to help with livestreaming, digital worship, pandemic decisions, and adaptive change. The world changed overnight, then continued to change rapidly over the next year as the pandemic ebbed and flowed. In response, the monthly News & Resources email newsletter to church leaders increased frequency from monthly to weekly, then settling into a biweekly schedule, to provide dynamic, responsive resourcing.

In 2020, www.rca.org was rebuilt from the ground up to better represent the RCA online and to better support churches, leaders, and ministries. This site overhaul addressed long-standing difficulties with site organization and searchability. The new rca.org is streamlined for a better user experience. It’s more visual, has updated and accurate content, and is easier to navigate. This site, along with RCA emails and social media accounts, is optimized for use on smartphones. To provide feedback on the new site, email webservant@rca.org.

During the pandemic, video was used more to share stories and connect with each other across the RCA. The first-ever denomination-wide recorded worship service was released in September, when many churches were worshiping virtually due to the pandemic and many pastors were in need of a week off. A second recorded worship service, focusing on mission, was released for Epiphany. All RCA-produced videos have been closed captioned for greater accessibility.

The RCA communication team manages an array of websites and social media interactions online. Thousands of people have interacted with the RCA on rca.org, Faithward.org, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Vimeo in the last year.

After 14 years, denominational magazine *RCA Today* ceased print publication with the spring 2021 issue. The magazine had been produced three times a year for each RCA household, communicating stories of church and individual discipleship, leadership development, mission, and next generation engagement. Discontinuing print publication was primarily a financial decision, as part of wider budget cuts to keep the RCA in a financially stable position during a time of uncertainty, though it also reflects a shift to digital communication, which offers new opportunities and allows the RCA to reach even more people. Discontinuing the print magazine

allows for a significant reduction in cost, while also shifting additional resources to Faithward.org, the RCA's resource website that has hosted *RCA Today* stories since the website's launch two years ago, along with practical tools for growing in faith and leading in ministry.

A printed bulletin insert, also called *RCA Today*, was discontinued during the early months of the pandemic, when many churches were gathering virtually. Instead, a quarterly print newsletter has been introduced to highlight RCA Global Mission efforts to share God's love around the world; subscribe at www.rca.org/subscribe.

Translation Efforts Continue

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2019 *Book of Church Order* in Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin, a number of Transformed & Transforming resources and Church Multiplication resources have been translated.

Over the past two years, the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America completed updated Spanish translations of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. (The Belhar Confession is also available in Spanish, but its translation was more recent and did not require a refresh.)

Other recent translation projects include an oversight handbook for churches sponsoring a church plant, curriculum for the Renovations program, and the She Is Called Women of the Bible study series, volume 1. A She Is Called edition of the Purposeful Living curriculum is the first project to be initiated in Spanish and translated into English.

Report on the Faith Alive Christian Resources Partnership and the RCA Store

Beginning in 2021, resources specific to the RCA are available in an online RCA Store rather than being housed and distributed through Faith Alive Christian Resources. This move significantly reduced both production and fulfillment costs for the denomination.

The RCA Store (store.rca.org) was launched in summer 2020, offering synodical resources as a pilot project. Select additional resources have been added, with more expected over time. The store is a print-on-demand platform, which requires no inventory. When an order comes in, each item is printed at that time and shipped to the purchaser.

Revenue from the RCA Store supports the ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF HISTORICAL SERVICES

The Office of Historical Services maintains the Reformed Church in America (RCA) Archives, which gathers, preserves, and makes available the stories of past generations. Its primary goal is the stewardship of the RCA's shared heritage and offering stability and relevance to the long-term mission of the church.

The RCA has left a significant historical footprint in its almost 400 years of life and ministry. That footprint is found in items like missionary correspondence representing many stories of transformation. The archives preserves records from congregations, classes, regional synods, the General Synod, our mission fields, and staff offices.

The digital archivist is able to assist denominational staff and RCA commissions that need background on a variety of programs and projects carried out in the RCA as well as researchers who are interested in RCA history.

The past year has been a tumultuous year for the Archives for a number of reasons: rapid shifts in General Synod Council (GSC) staffing and staff structure have resulted in three different staff supervisors for the Office of Historical Services in a seven-month span; the COVID-19 pandemic forced new plans to be put into place for the operation of the office in the event of a lockdown; and the early retirement of the longtime archivist meant he transitioned into retirement a year sooner than originally planned.

In January 2020, the archives staff recognized the likelihood of a prolonged shutdown related to the COVID-19 outbreak. They quickly put together a plan to address the operation of the office in the event of a lockdown that could be put into action within 24 hours. In March, the staff enacted this COVID plan and began its offsite operations.

In February 2020, a massive data transfer of the archives electronic files took place. Up until that point, the archives had stored its electronic files and backups of those files on external hard drives in its offices in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The GSC's director of IT required that all of the files be backed up to the GSC server and stored there moving forward in order to comply with GSC data security policies. Since the requirement was rushed, there was not enough time to do the task properly, and the process of combining multiple backup drives and transferring the data to the server resulted in numerous duplicate files. Repairing these duplications will be time-consuming.

In April 2020, longtime archivist Russell Gasero accepted an early retirement offer from the GSC, one of a number of staff members who was offered this option as part of significant budget cuts made by the GSC in preparation for an anticipated decline in revenue due to a number of congregations indicating that they plan to leave the RCA. Prior to that offer, the Office of Historical Services had developed an 18-month plan of transition that would culminate with Russell's retirement in June 2021, but the acceptance of the early retirement offer meant that he had to extricate himself from the office in two months, a year earlier than he had originally planned, and transition it to the digital archivist. In this intervening time while GSC staffing is in flux, the digital archivist has been asked to cover a number of responsibilities that were part of the archivist's role.

For the last several years, the Archives has been working with the Commission on History (CoH) to address what both Archives staff and the commission feel is a lack of access to and

preservation of staff records. There is a disagreement between GSC and executive GSC staff, and Archives staff and the Commission on History regarding which staff records should be considered archival material and sent to the archives.

The Society of American Archivists defines a record as:

1. data or information stored on a medium and used as an extension of human memory or to support accountability
2. information or data created or received by an organization in the course of its activities; organizational record
3. Audiovisual Records—phonodisc
4. Computing—a collection of related data elements treated as a unit, such as the fields in a row in a database table; a data record
5. an entry describing a work in a catalog; a catalog record

The Archives Policy Manual defines a record as “all documentary materials (e.g., correspondence, publications, photographs, videotapes, etc.) received or originated by the RCA and its staff in the normal course of its activities, which serve as evidence of the organization, function, policies, decisions, procedures, and operations. Such records are the property of the RCA and all rights, interests, and use of those records belong to the RCA.” Portions of the Archives Policy Manual, including the preceding definition, were approved by the General Synod Executive Committee (a predecessor of the GSC) in 1980 and reported to the 1980 General Synod, and updated and approved by the Commission on History in 2004.

The reduction in total staff hours in the Office of Historical Services has resulted in a much leaner appearance for the necrology report. In past years, the composition of the necrology report required many hours of research, which was not possible this year.

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2019

Response to *MGS 2019, DE 19-3, p. 217*

DE 19-3

That the RCA staff reconsider its decision regarding ending Children and Worship support and report its decision to the 2020 General Synod with reasons.

When this motion was proposed and adopted from the floor of General Synod in 2019, two reasons were given: “1. A thorough study of this ministry was not conducted prior to the decision” and “2. The end of support of the [Children and Worship] ministry is impacting thousands of lives worldwide. To do so without a thorough review seems unjustifiable” (*MGS 2019*, pp. 216-217). Based on the given reasons, the assumption behind this motion seemed to be that “end of support” meant that the decision would effectively end the Children and Worship program and congregations’ ability to use it and that it would affect both the domestic and global programs.

The staff decision referred to in DE 19-3 was actually a decision to stop providing General Synod Council (GSC) staff administration of collection of registration fees for domestic (U.S. and Canada) training events with Reformed Church in America (RCA) trainers and subsequent use of those fees to pay trainers. Trainers for workshops and trainings are paid out of an account that is funded by registration fees paid by workshop and training participants (a pass-through account); GSC staff involvement is limited to the administration of the fund (collecting registration fees and using those funds to pay the trainers). It was this administration that would have ceased.

The number of training events coordinated through the denomination had been decreasing over the past few years. In 2013, fifteen Children and Worship training events coordinated through the denomination took place; by 2018, this number had dropped to three events, and in 2019, just one event took place. Because the demand for training events was decreasing significantly, RCA staff had decided to stop providing the administration of this fund in summer 2019. Remaining funds in the GSC account would have been redirected to other children’s discipleship work. None of the funds remaining in that account are donor-designated; although in the past, donations had been made to the account, the last donation received was in 2011, and all donation funds received have already been spent on Children and Worship according to the donor’s designation.

Children and Worship is a wonderful program with a long and rich history in the RCA. The staff decision referred to in this motion from the floor simply reflected the fact that the number of requested Children and Worship trainings and workshops had been dropping off in recent years, and thus staff administration time would be redirected, not that the Children and Worship program could no longer be used by RCA congregations.

The global Children and Worship program is supported through RCA Global Mission, and through financial support for the mission personnel whose ministry it is to teach the Children and Worship program in their global context. None of this would have been affected in any way by the intended end of GSC staff administration of the domestic Children and Worship trainings fund.

Following the adoption of DE 19-3 by General Synod 2019, arrangements were left as they were prior to summer 2019: GSC staff will continue to handle collection of event registration fees and subsequent payment of contracted RCA trainers, and no funds were redirected.

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2018

Response to *MGS 2018, OV 18-23, pp. 152-153, Vision 2020 Team*

To appoint a 2020 Vision Group to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

- Staying together
- Radical reconstituting and reorganization
- Grace-filled separation

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are “for” rather than what they are “against” and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.

As the vision group engages these options, its work should include, but not be limited to:

- A commitment, as much as is possible, to the unity of the church in its being, spirit, covenantal relationship, mission, and kingdom witness in the world.
- An understanding regarding the foundational role that biblical hermeneutics and Reformed exegesis play in the life and witness of the church, and a commitment to articulate how those methods are operative in the church’s way forward.
- An analysis of the role that the RCA’s theology, Standards of Unity, and liturgies play in the present and future life of the church.

The vision group will consist of 10–12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary will serve as an *ex officio* member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed \$250,000.

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020.

REPORT OF THE VISION 2020 TEAM

Prologue – July 2021

To the 2021 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When our denomination began the Vision 2020 journey in June 2018, none of us could have foreseen where that journey would take us. There have been great joys and great sorrows along the way. Some of our joy has been in seeing people with very different perspectives come together in various meetings to listen to one another, listen to God, and talk frankly about the future of the denomination. We have seen curiosity, grace, courage, ingenuity, determination, and love.

Not the least of our challenges was (and still is) a global pandemic, which caused not only personal stress to each one of us in the RCA, but also the devastating loss of several dear saints, and the postponement of the General Synod meeting where our decisions were to have been made for the future of the denomination. We are also all navigating, to different degrees and in different ways, the grief that comes with that unknown future of our denomination. Sometimes that has caused us to act out in ways that are less than ideal. It's not surprising, since so much of our faith, our history, our theology, and our belonging have been connected to this denomination for so long. There is much at stake.

Since the Vision 2020 journey began, we have all experienced a combination of feelings like love, hope, creativity, determination, sadness, anger, frustration, and fatigue. In the initial version of the Vision 2020 Team's final written report to General Synod, published in the summer of 2020, we also mentioned the opportunity that this time of waiting affords us. We hoped that this unanticipated delay would provide us with a time of reflection, a time to turn toward God in prayer and to turn toward one another in a posture of listening.

Of course, God has also been with us each step of the way. We have felt the grace of Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in this difficult work. We have also felt your prayers, received your feedback and heard your encouragement. Thank you for journeying with us. We believe the end of the Vision 2020 road is in sight. And we pray that at the end of the road, a new horizon will open up before us.

As we contemplate that horizon, several new considerations have emerged. One is the "Rules and Regulations" approach that is now included in this report as our third recommendation; this is the final form of the proposal regarding gracious separation. We had sketched out what we planned for this proposal to include in our original report last year, with the acknowledgment that the specific recommendation text still needed to be developed. Our plan when we published our original written report in summer 2020 was that that third recommendation would consist of the proposed *BCO* changes that would be necessary to facilitate the things we had suggested regarding gracious separation. However, our work with the Commission on Church Order quickly made clear that another route would be more effective in facilitating the spirit of graciousness with which we hope to treat one another, one that does not require constitutional changes. This route works by creating more specific regulations within the existing framework for congregations separating from the RCA that is already established by the *Book of Church*

Order. You will read the reasons for and further explanation of this “Rules and Regulations” approach in the third section of this report.

At this point you might be asking, “*Why is the Vision 2020 Team publishing another report? Wasn’t the report published in June 2020 the team’s final report?*”

We want to make clear that this is not an entirely new report, but rather an updated and more complete version of the report published in June 2020. When we published our report in June 2020, we made clear within the report that further work still needed to be done around our third recommendation in the time until the next meeting of the General Synod, since recommendation text was not included – it was simply an outline of what we planned to propose, but the specifics of what General Synod would be asked to vote on still needed to be developed in consultation with the Commission on Church Order (CCO). This updated version of our report replaces the original sketch of our third recommendation with the final product of our work with CCO, complete with an actionable motion. Our first and second recommendations, with their accompanying explanatory text, remain unchanged. Aside from the updated portion regarding the third recommendation and this new prologue, the only things in this report that have changed are dates and similar references to ensure clarity now that more than a year has passed (for example, a sentence that read “In the first half of this year” in the June 2020 report would now read, “In the first half of 2020”). If you wish to see our June 2020 report, you can find that at www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Vision-2020-Team-final-report-June-2020.pdf.

While it’s not a common thing for written reports to General Synod to change from the time when they are first published to the time when they are presented to the General Synod, it is permissible. Typically, there is only a month of time between publication of a report and its presentation to the General Synod during the meeting. In this case, there was more than a year. Our team’s work was not finished in June 2020, as there was no General Synod in 2020 to which to present a report. To reiterate, the Vision 2020 Team will not have completed its work until our report (and particularly the motions contained therein) have been officially presented to and acted upon by the General Synod.

In addition to the updates to our report, other bodies have had the opportunity to submit overtures to the General Synod, some of which could have the potential to affect or be affected by the Vision 2020 Team’s recommendations. While the Vision 2020 Team is not in a position to either affirm or discourage any of these overtures, we do urge discernment of everything properly submitted to the synod, and careful consideration of the way some of these proposals might intersect with one another.

Finally, in our report first published in the summer of 2020 we suggested that General Synod consider the three recommendations in our report to be parts of one cohesive proposal, where the parts all work together, and to adopt all three of them. That said, our recommendations are crafted in such a way that they can stand alone, and delegates may choose to approve one or two but not all three of our team’s recommendations if that is what General Synod discerns.

In the end, we pray that your discernment would be guided by the Holy Spirit and seasoned with wisdom, clarity, and grace. We pray that you would be blessed in the work that you do at this synod, and that Christ would be glorified. We pray that God, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, would receive glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Introduction

Since June 2018, the Vision 2020 Team has been researching possible scenarios for the future of the RCA. We give you thanks for helping us, for praying with us, for offering support, giving feedback, and sharing your hopes, dreams, and best thinking. The following report is a synthesis of what we have seen and heard and what we propose as next steps for our beloved denomination.

In crafting this report, we want to acknowledge that there are challenges and opportunities that face us in the midst of the current global health crisis. Our main challenge: the June 2020 meeting at which this report would have been delivered was postponed until June 2021, and then further delayed until October 2021. Just as it is difficult for our team to wait for our work to be completed, we recognize that many others are waiting to see what the ultimate impact of that work will be: candidates for ministry, current and hopeful seminarians, pastors, missionaries, staff, and in some cases, entire congregations, classes, and regional synods. We remember you, and we acknowledge this tension.

Here in the waiting, we also see opportunities. Where General Synod delegates typically have a month to digest reports like this prior to meeting as a full body, the pandemic afforded us 16 extra months. Where much of delegates' reflection and discernment about recommendations often takes place in isolation leading up to General Synod, we had time to do that important work in community through regional events. As a team, we suggested that RCA leadership take advantage of the extra time given us by creating opportunities for dialogue on the report at every level of the denomination. We also encouraged you, the delegates, to create these opportunities with each other. You talked to your local bodies, to your neighbors within your classes, and to those beyond classis boundaries. You prayed earnestly, and you listened to the ways our recommendations may impact those who agree with you and those who see things differently. In the end, we hope that you are carrying all of those reflections and conversations with you now, to General Synod 2021.

What to expect

In the paragraphs and pages that follow, there are several things we hope to accomplish. First, we want to share a bit about what this process was like for us and how we approached it. Knowing the potential impact of this work, it has been a strong value for our team to be as transparent as possible in communicating our process and progress with you along the way. We have attempted to do this faithfully, using RCA communication channels to offer news updates after each meeting, share feedback surveys, and provide discussion tools. We hope this has allowed you to feel invited into the work rather than playing the role of an observer. We will make every effort to continue in this spirit in what follows.

Secondly, we hope to make connections for you between the study, prayer, and dialogue we engaged in and the recommendations we're making for the denomination. We did our best to go broad as well as deep in our research and conversations, wrestling with our understanding of what it means to be the church, Christ's body, and seeking to be faithful to our common values and theology in all things. While there isn't space to include the fullness of our work in detail, we will summarize it for you and help you see where the recommendations we make have been informed by it. Further, where the details of the work we have done and resources we have gathered would be helpful to future work groups, we will be happy to make them available.

Finally, we hope to clearly communicate our very best thinking about the current reality of our denomination and the possible ways forward that we have explored.

Historical context

Before diving into our recent work and the ways it may impact our denomination, we feel it important to briefly note the historical context in which this work was done.

In 1974 the Christian Action Commission, citing the “need for expression of pastoral care towards those who are rejected because of their homosexual identity,” called for the simultaneous affirmation of “the Bible’s teaching against the practice of homosexuality” and the “study of homosexuality as it relates to the life and work of the church” (*MGS 1974*, p. 222). This recommendation held in tension a need to be defined (to affirm the RCA’s theological position on human sexuality) and a desire to extend care to a group seen to be living on the margins. We might view it as the first in a long line of efforts by the RCA to answer the questions of “What does God say about God’s children who identify this way?” and “What is the right way for us to be in relationship together?” Or said another way, “Can we be in fellowship with each other if we see this differently?”

These questions have continued to resurface over the last 46 years, with various overtures, papers, study teams, and dialogues attempting to answer them. In all this time and through all these actions, the people of God at all levels of the denomination have done their best to faithfully interpret God’s will for the church where those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or ally are concerned. There have been many moments where we have truly been the church, drawing closer to God through prayer and worship, and drawing closer to one another by listening and seeking to understand. Other moments have been a cause for grief, admonition, confession, and repentance, when we have forgotten who God calls us to be as the church and in relation to one another.

Two years ago at General Synod 2018, then–interim general secretary Don Poest shared a necessary and critical observation; namely, that these questions have never been answered to the full denomination’s satisfaction, and our ongoing attempts to answer them are ultimately “keeping us from the mission on which we should be focusing” (*MGS 2018*, p.18).

With the support of then–general secretary candidate Eddy Alemán and the General Synod Council and informed by consultation with the Council of Synod Executives (COSE), Don proposed a team be formed to examine possible ways forward for the denomination. In the proposal, the team was directed to thoroughly examine and discern (at a minimum) the following three scenarios:

1. Staying together
2. Radical reconstituting and reorganizing
3. Grace-filled separation

The work of the Vision 2020 Team

Members of the team were named by Poest and general secretary Eddy Alemán in consultation with the General Synod Council (GSC), and were chosen to reflect the wide diversity of the RCA, including all regional synods and racial/ethnic councils. The members are as follows:

- Charlie Contreras: Faith Church Munster Campus pastor, Indiana; served on the GSC until his term ended on June 30, 2021.
- Barbara Felker: pastor of leadership development at Highbridge Community Church (RCA) in the Bronx, New York; member of the board of trustees at New Brunswick Theological Seminary; vice president of strategic community partnerships at Northwell Health (Brooklyn region).
- Thomas Goodhart: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Ridgewood, New York; served at Plattekill Reformed Church in Mount Marion, New York; past GSC vice-moderator.
- Brian Keepers: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa; served congregations in Holland, Michigan, and Sheldon, Iowa.
- Kristen Livingston: pastor of congregational care at Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan; serves as a specialized minister for Great Lakes City Classis. Previously served Abbe Reformed Church in Clymer, New York.
- John Messer: regional executive of the Synod of the Great Lakes; served as pastor of Good News Community Church (RCA) in Okoboji, Iowa.
- Christa Mooi: RCA minister of Word and sacrament currently living in Iowa; past GSC moderator.
- Rudy Rubio: pastor of Reformed Church of Los Angeles, an RCA church plant in Lynwood, California.
- Diane Smith Faubion: elder at First Reformed Church of Scotia, New York; serves on the board of the Church Growth Fund; executive vice president of First National Bank of Scotia.
- Marijke Strong: executive secretary of the Regional Synod of Canada; served Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.
- Scott Treadway: pastor of Rancho Community Reformed Church in Temecula, California; president of the California Classis.
- Imos Wu: co-pastor of Bogart Memorial Reformed Church in Bogota, New Jersey; serves on the GSC.

Alemán and Poest served as *ex officio* members without vote.

NOTE: At the beginning of this process in 2018, members of the Vision 2020 Team committed to two years of service that was intended to culminate at General Synod 2020. In the intervening time from June 2020 until now, four members of the team have needed to step away because their life circumstances prevented them from extending that commitment. The team has missed them deeply and values their faithfulness and the hundreds of hours of service they dedicated to the ministry of the church.

From the beginning, the Vision 2020 Team knew that trust was essential for such a diverse team to function at a high level. So we spent a considerable amount of time building relationships, learning about differing work styles and points of view on various topics that we would consider, and practicing the skill of dialogue. Coached and supported by consultants Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and Ryan Donovan from The Leader's Journey, trust grew, and authentic, vulnerable dialogue became the way we committed to engaging with each other in our meetings.

Parallel to working on building strong relationships, during our first year together, we focused on learning all we could about the impact that the three proposed scenarios would have on the denomination, its people, and the witness of Christ to the world. Not surprisingly, it quickly

became clear that none of these options would be easy, simple, or ideal. We requested and were granted significant time at General Synod 2019 for delegates to work in facilitated small groups in order to engage in dialogue and feedback on our first year's work on the three scenarios. This revealed important themes to carry us into the next year. We heard from delegates their longing for unity in our denomination and reiteration of the hard truth we have been learning for many years—that it would be unlikely for us to find that unity around the topic of human sexuality. The RCA is both deeply convicted and deeply divided on this topic, and none of the many efforts to date have produced a clear path forward without loss.

Our goal for the second year of our work was to gather more feedback from the denomination via an online survey, to interview various leaders, experts, and teams who could speak to the impact of our work, and to craft a final report that would inform recommendations to General Synod 2020. As we met in September and October, we reflected that our denomination has existed for many years as, what we would call, “defined and connected.” By this, we mean that we are unified in our core theological convictions, shared history, and practices (RCA standards and polity) and yet diverse (as allowed by our polity) in some of our interpretations and practices where we lack full agreement (such as sexuality, women in leadership, gun control, immigration, global warming, etc.). We combined feedback from the delegates at General Synod 2019 with insights gleaned from the survey conducted by Mullins Consulting, Inc. This combined feedback revealed that much of the tension we have been experiencing may stem from this reality: some people are comfortable to continue in a denomination that is diversely defined on such topics, while others see this as an untenable dilution of their theological position.

This understanding moved us to view the three scenarios—staying together, radically restructuring, and moving apart—less as mutually exclusive and more as pieces that would all be required in our final recommendation. Some churches will separate, and we want to provide a way for them to do that well. Some will stay, and we want what remains to be a healthy organization for them. Lastly, the landscape on which we all live out our faith is rapidly shifting, and new strategies may be needed for the RCA to not only survive but actually thrive in this rapidly changing context. Our meetings throughout the first half of 2020 allowed us to lean into both the loss we recognize as inevitable and the hope that comes with envisioning something new.

Recommendations and rationale

We were originally asked to imagine what it would mean for the denomination to embark on one of three possible paths: staying together, radically reorganizing the denomination, or grace-filled separation. Throughout our time together, we've come to believe that the most fruitful future for the RCA would involve all three of these things. Already we're aware that some churches plan to leave the denomination regardless of what decisions are made, and these congregations deserve a thoughtful and generous separation. Others are committed to staying and helping to shape what remains into an organization equipped to live in theological tension and thrive in a changing context. We want to give them our best thinking on what that may look like. Some are waiting to see what comes of this report before choosing their paths. We have held all three of these groups in mind in crafting what follows.

Based on our time together, our study of relevant data, and the many generous ways RCA members have responded to our work to date, we present the following recommendations to General Synod 2021. While we hope and recommend that all three are adopted, we have structured them in such a way that each can exist independent of the others.

Together, Yet Changed (Recommendation 1—Restructuring)

Prior to the 2018 General Synod, the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) submitted a report to the General Synod Council (GSC) summarizing their understanding of the “current reality” of the Reformed Church in America. In that report, COSE outlined their general sense of the denomination’s present state and future and shared anecdotal reports from their specific regions regarding beliefs and practices around the topic of human sexuality. The report painted a picture of a diverse denomination in belief, practice, and even priorities. While it was difficult for the group to reach consensus around how the current reality should be defined, they were united in their assertion that deep change was needed to address both the present divisiveness around controversial topics and various areas of organizational dysfunction.

Following the COSE report, Don Poest called for the formation of our Vision 2020 Team (as referenced earlier in this report). One of the ways the team spent time in our first year together was reflecting on our past, present, and potential future as a denomination. We looked to works like Lynn Japinga’s *Loyalty and Loss*¹ to learn about our past, to the COSE report and to survey data collected from our membership to understand the present, and to the expertise of George Bullard² to help us think about where many denominations, and ours in particular, seem to be headed.

As we reflected on what we learned, some key themes emerged that will give context to the recommendation that follows:

1. The tension and conflict we’re facing today are not new realities. There have been numerous points, especially in the last 70 years, where the RCA has been at an impasse. Points of disagreement and tension have included differences of views on things like ecumenical partnerships, social justice/political involvement, merging with another denomination, communism, internal restructuring, the *Church Herald*, church planting models, women in ministry, and human sexuality.³ **This means we currently face something we have previously weathered, but it also means that we are likely to be here again if we do not find a way to handle conflict differently.**
2. Since the mid 1990’s, about two-thirds of denominations in North America have shifted away from a “product delivery” model in which the headquarters (General Synod) designs a specific “product” and dispatches it to the branch offices (regions and classes) for distribution to the people. Instead, they have shifted to a model where the corporate assembly empowers a staff to equip the regional and local groups with the tools they need, but encourages them to use the tools in the way that best fits with what the Spirit is doing locally. This is what denominations that thrive are doing (Bullard). **The RCA has not quite made this shift, but we are moving in this direction with some of our initiatives.**

¹ *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994* by Lynn Japinga, Eerdmans Publishing, 2013.

² George Bullard serves as president and strategic coordinator with The Columbia Partnership [TCP]. TCP is a community of Christian leaders seeking to transform the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain vital Christ-centered ministry. Bullard has years of consultative experience within the RCA and has written extensively on the history and future of denominations in North America.

³ Drawn from *Loyalty and Loss*, Japinga

3. George Bullard views the RCA as being made up of three to four groups with unique understandings and priorities—the West, the East, and Iowa/Canada/the Midwest (with Michigan being similar to both the East and the Midwest, depending on which classis or congregation one considers). The COSE report and the second of the surveys we commissioned reveal similar regional identities at work. **These reports seem to indicate that we have already organically shifted away from a larger corporate identity to more regional identities.**
4. According to Bullard, it takes 2,000 churches to be a full-service denomination. We have fewer than 1,000 today, and our numbers are declining. We may not be large enough to support binational, regional, and local assemblies unless they are very well-defined and discrete from one another in function. Local congregations do not want to fund a structure that isn't delivering value and helping them move their mission forward. **We need to strongly consider the roles of our binational, regional, and local assemblies and look to the experiences of other small denominations for the most efficient and effective way to structure ourselves. This will likely mean dissolving our regional synods and restructuring our classes on an affinity model.**
5. The results of the second survey suggest that we desire unity but that we aren't sure what unites us. We want to be mission-focused, but there is a diverse understanding of what that mission looks like. We share a strong desire to be faithful to the Word of God, but we don't know how to function when we differ on our interpretation of it. **Centering us at the highest levels of our organization around the things we can all agree on and giving authority to decide the things we can't agree on to the local levels may be the best way to grow our effectiveness and reclaim some of the unity we feel we've lost through this conflict.**

We know that we will face more loss in the coming years, and we can't yet know the full impact of that loss. Some churches will leave the denomination, and we will feel the impact of that in our relationships and our operations. We do, however, know that there will be those who stay. While we did research several possible options for the future structure of the denomination, we believe a restructure should ultimately be detailed and implemented by those who remain within the RCA. It would make little sense for members intending to leave to vote on what will happen to the denomination after their exit. For that reason, we are not recommending specific *RCA Book of Church Order* changes for restructuring to be voted on at this General Synod. To reiterate, we believe those detailed changes should be decided by those who remain in the denomination. However, recognizing that some will feel undecided about their future with the denomination until they have more clarity on what that future will hold, we do want to urge serious consideration of some of the changes we think will give the RCA the best chance at a healthy way forward.

We believe a team should be tasked with the specific work of restructuring the denomination in a way that is deeply informed by our ecclesiology (our theology of what it means to be the church) and seeks to optimize our sustained spiritual and organizational health for the 21st century. This team should include several members of current executive RCA staff as well as representation from those regional or local assemblies who have expressed an intention to remain with the denomination. Based on the research referenced above, our belief is that the best chance for success will include a structure in which:

1. **Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based**, with the ability of any church to choose the classis to which it belongs. We are already seeing

these kinds of affinity relationships being sought by congregations both within and outside the RCA. It makes sense that our churches should have the ability to align themselves around shared values, understanding, and practices.

2. **Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.** This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model for classes.
3. **Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level.**
4. **The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod are examined** in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains. Our research shows that the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward. One scenario would be for affinity classes and General Synod to assume the responsibilities of the regions. Options like this need to be evaluated and decided upon by those who remain in the denomination.

RF 21-1

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should use the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2023; and further,

To approve the \$0.29 per member assessment to fund the work of this team.

Note: The Committee of Reference has determined that several in-person meetings of this team would be needed for it to complete its mandate, and the above assessment amount has been determined on the basis of travel, lodging, meals, and meeting space for the number of members specified in the recommendation.

Preserving Our Shared History (Recommendation 2—A New Mission Agency)

We have had multiple opportunities during our two years together as a team to celebrate God's faithfulness in the good efforts of our denomination to see the gospel spread to every part of the globe. At the same time, we have had to face some hard truths about the RCA's declining membership. For many years the overall number of confessing members of RCA congregations has been declining.

Since 1992, we have lost an average of 1 percent per year, and we have informally learned of entire classes' intention to exit the denomination in the near future. These losses have made it

and will continue to make it increasingly challenging to fund the work of a full-service denomination, which calls into question whether many of the good works the RCA has begun will ultimately be able to continue.

Much of what the Vision 2020 Team has heard from the RCA over the course of our work reflects a corporate commitment to and desire to preserve this part of the RCA's legacy—that of expanding and strengthening God's kingdom through global missions. When we think through the reality of declining numbers and what separation or a restructure may mean for the organization, this is one of the things no one wants to lose. Additionally, there are sometimes aspects of a denomination (often unrelated to missions) that make it difficult for external organizations to enter into a missions partnership with it. As a team, we wondered if there might be a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed our denomination in global mission and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy. We believe the following recommendation is the best way to accomplish this.

We recommend that a new non-profit mission agency be formed independent of the RCA (but in partnership with the RCA) to house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions. We can find inspiration for this idea from thriving para-denominational mission agencies like Wycliffe, New Tribes Mission (Ethnos360), Operation Mobilization, China Inland Mission (OMF International), Pioneers, SEND International, and Africa Inland Mission. This specific organization would carry on the legacy of Reformed missions, while the support of churches in disciple-making, leadership development, next-generation spiritual formation, and local missional engagement would remain in the RCA through initiatives like Transformed & Transforming.

The RCA has a rich history of forming agencies that serve the church well, including the Church Growth Fund and Board of Benefits Services. These agencies are structured to serve the broader church if local congregations choose to use them. Similarly, all RCA churches, as well as churches outside the denomination, would be invited to participate in and be equipped by the work of this new para-denominational mission agency. This could include general financial support of the agency, specific financial support of missionaries, prayer support, short-term trips, and project partnerships. We see this as a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed us and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy.

While the leadership of this new missions agency would need to be determined by those tasked with forming the agency, we recognize that the skills and experience needed may be readily available in current RCA staff, so decisions about agency staffing would need to be made in consultation with executive RCA staff. Funding, too, would ultimately be the responsibility of the new agency's board, but the Vision 2020 Team imagines that the RCA might choose to seed this work with funds from the current RCA Global Mission budget. Future funding would likely be found through donations (primarily for missions and similar initiatives) as well as fees charged for services.

Faced with the hard truth that our denomination is shrinking and that global missions is not the only part of our work worth preserving long-term, we also see this agency as being a potential home for other RCA functions and initiatives, *should that be required in the future*. For that

reason, we recommend that the agency's mission (as stated in the founding documents) be defined in broad enough terms so that absorption of other RCA efforts and services in the future would be possible. We imagine that if both this recommendation and the restructuring recommendation are approved, the restructuring team would factor these things into their work.

RF 21-2

To form a new nonprofit mission agency independent of the RCA that will house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions; and further,

To direct the GSC to form an implementation team that will be tasked with incorporating the new agency as a 501(c)(3), drafting bylaws, and recruiting a board of directors, who would then be responsible for appointing an executive director for the new agency in the manner specified in the bylaws. The implementation team should work closely with the RCA Global Mission team to ensure diligent care for current RCA missionaries during the transition to the new agency. And further,

To instruct the general secretary to transfer a portion of the current RCA missions budget to the new agency as seed money (to be determined by the general secretary in consultation with GSC); and further,

To urge RCA churches and individuals that currently support RCA missionaries and mission projects through Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares to continue that support through the new agency.

Note: the Committee of Reference has determined that while there would likely be a cost to the work of the implementation team described in this recommendation, that cost should be part of the seed money transferred to the new agency as described by this recommendation.

A minority report on Recommendation 2 follows at the end of this report.

Forward with Grace (Recommendation 3—Mutually Generous Separation)

Our hope is that both of the preceding proposals, once formally presented to General Synod, will be adopted by the denomination and that they will meet many of the needs that we have heard expressed. Some who had considered leaving the denomination may choose to stay and see the restructuring as an opportunity to breathe new life into an organization they love. Others may still leave but find ongoing connection with their former denomination through the new mission agency. Still others may decide to forge an entirely new path, to seek God's call on their lives through other relationships and partnerships.

Recognizing that some separation is inevitable, we believe the RCA has an opportunity to act in an exemplary way by providing a generous exit path for those churches which decide to leave and by inviting those churches to also act generously. While the process currently outlined in the *RCA Book of Church Order (BCO)* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]) allows a classis to be generous with a church petitioning for withdrawal from the denomination, it also allows a classis to deny a church's petition for withdrawal or to be less

than generous in granting the withdrawal. Given that we are entering a period when there will likely be more petitions being put forth than has been typical, we believe it is the right time to provide more guidance for this process so that generosity is prescribed rather than simply permitted.

In our conversation with the Commission on Church Order, our team has come to the conclusion that such guidance could be provided by proposing that the General Synod adopt rules and regulations for the current process on considering an application for leave to withdraw from the RCA instead of proposing changes to the *BCO* itself. The adoption of rules and regulations is specifically authorized in Section 1 of “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures” of the *BCO* (2019 edition, p. 75):

Sec. 1. The General Synod shall have power to make all rules and regulations necessary to put into effect any and all articles of the Government, the Disciplinary Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America.

Although this approach is somewhat unconventional and has not been used recently, it has a number of advantages over adopting amendments to the *BCO* that would restrict the ability of the classes to deny a petition. (For helpful commentary and historical precedents, read Allan J. Janssen, *Constitutional Theology, 2nd Edition*, pages 245-248.)

Proposing amendments to the *BCO* has the disadvantage of requiring a two-thirds vote of the classes and a one-year waiting period for the final vote of the General Synod, assuming the amendments are adopted by the General Synod in the first place.

Recommending regulations for the implementation of the current *BCO* processes is advantageous in that they would establish protocols for the consideration of all petitions to either withdraw from the denomination or to transfer to another classis within the RCA. These regulations would be enforceable through the complaint process already provided to address a violation of or failure to comply with “other laws and regulations of the church” (*BCO* Chap. 2, Part II, Art. I, Sec. 1 [2019, p. 89]). If the regional synods agree to follow the regulations adopted by the General Synod, any complaints could be resolved in a timely manner.

Since the adoption of regulations requires only a majority vote by the General Synod, the protocols for approving such petitions could be implemented immediately, eliminating the need for “letters of intent” and rules for retroactive generosity. If the regulations are adopted by a super majority of the General Synod, they could receive wide support as a “common sense” solution to the goals expressed in Recommendation 3. However, since regulations can be adopted by a majority, they could also be amended or rescinded by a simple majority at a future General Synod. We are confident in the careful writing of these regulations, and while some “tweaks” to the regulations may be helpful in the following years based on actual experience, if these regulations are adopted, we highly recommend that they remain in effect until the sunset provision in 2026.

Proposed Regulations for Considering the Transfer of Churches

The following proposed regulations relate to RCA *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]).

RF 21-3

To adopt the following proposed regulations regarding RCA *Book of Church Order* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 3-6 (2019 ed., pp. 40-44):

1. Introduction.

The regulations proposed below are provided to classes considering applications from member churches of the classis for leave to withdraw from the denomination. The Commission on Church Order remains available to provide advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the provisions of the *BCO* as well as these regulations. Requests for transfers are only considered when a consistory files an application following the process outlined in the *BCO*. There is no provision in the *BCO* for churches to transfer other than one church at a time or for a church to become “independent,” that is, to transfer out of the denomination without joining another denomination. The *Dictionary of Christianity in America* defines denomination as “an association or fellowship of congregations within a religion that have the same beliefs or creed, engage in similar practices, and cooperate with each other to develop and maintain shared enterprises.”⁴ A separate process for transfer is provided for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and a minister must complete this process separately from the process of transferring a church.

Most of the regulations below are related to a church’s financial relationship with and commitments to the agencies and assemblies of the RCA with the goal of allowing a local church to retain its property and other assets while being solely responsible for any liabilities.

A. Unchanged Provisions.

The following provisions of Article 10 remain applicable and are unchanged by the regulations proscribed:

1. A written petition of the consistory must be filed with the stated clerk of classis.
2. The consistory must provide written evidence that the church would be received without reservation by another denomination.
3. The classis committee must meet with the congregation, with the consistory of the church, and

⁴ Reid, Daniel. *Dictionary of Christianity in America: A Comprehensive Resource on the Religious Impulse that Shaped a Continent*. (Intervarsity Press, 1990).

with representatives of the denomination with which the church desires to affiliate.

4. The classis committee shall endeavor to ascertain the will of the congregation at a meeting held pursuant to the formalities in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4c of the *BCO*.
5. The classis committee shall file its report with the stated clerk of the classis within six months after its appointment, setting forth its findings and recommendations.
6. The report shall be considered by the classis at a regular or a special meeting held within sixty days after receipt of the report by the stated clerk.
7. The interest of the denomination in the property of a church withdrawing from the denomination shall not be completely divested therefrom until the church shall have met the requirements in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 of the *BCO* (with the possible exception of the repayment of loans from the Church Growth Fund).
8. The consistory shall fulfill any and all outstanding obligations they have as adopting employers to properly fund all accounts maintained for their employees in retirement plans (i.e., the Board of Benefits Services or the Regional Synod of Canada plan), as promised in the provisions of the call form (*BCO*, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134–135]) and outlined in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 of the *BCO* (2019 edition, p. 15).
9. In the event of dissolution of such a church within a period of five years after the classis shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the denomination, such property, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the classis from which the right of withdrawal was received.

B. Regulations.

These regulations shall be applied uniformly across the denomination during this period of response to the Vision 2020 report. The regulations recognize that Christ's kingdom is broader than any specific church, classis, or

even denomination. Therefore, determining what is in the best interests of Christ's kingdom requires balancing different factors.

1. **Petition to Withdraw from the RCA and Affiliate with Another Denomination.** When considering a petition to withdraw from the denomination for the purpose of affiliating with another denomination, the provisions of Article 10 must be applied by each classis as interpreted by the following regulations:
 - a. The classis shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation regarding the question of how Christ's Kingdom may best be served in the matter. The classis will accept that the church can no longer function effectively in its present relationship and that the effectiveness of such congregation as a local church could be enhanced if it were to affiliate with another denomination on the basis of the petition.
 - b. The classis must allow a church to leave the denomination with its property and other assets if that church has filed a petition as provided in Article 10 and is in compliance with the requirements of the *BCO*, subject to the following conditions:
 - i. The consistory has adopted a recommendation to withdraw by a three-fourths vote of the members of consistory.
 - ii. The congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation by a three-fourths vote at a congregational meeting called for the purpose of considering the transfer.
 - c. If the congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation, but with less than a three-fourths majority, the classis must consider the percentage of the congregational vote, a recent transfer of property to the church, forgiveness of or adjustment to assessments or indebtedness, and the recent investment of classis funds in the ministry of the church when considering the division of the assets of the church.
 - d. A church that is withdrawing is encouraged to continue support of RCA missionary personnel and

Global Mission partnerships (mission persons and initiatives to which they have already committed financially) and is encouraged to give sufficient notice before severing these supportive relationships.

e. In all cases where a church withdraws from the denomination before the sunset of these regulations, the church must pay all assessments to the classis (including assessments for the work of the General Synod and regional synod), as follows:

i. The General Synod and regional synod will assess the classis for the withdrawing church for a period of one year (four consecutive quarters beginning with the quarter in which the petition is filed with the stated clerk of the classis). All four quarters will be calculated based on the consistorial report form (“CRF”) data and assessment rate in effect at the time the petition is filed even though one or more quarters will likely fall into the next assessment year.

1) The convention used for calculation are standard calendar quarters: first quarter, January 1–March 31; second quarter, April 1–June 30; third quarter, July 1–September 30; and fourth quarter, October 1–December 31.

2) This method shall be in effect immediately upon adoption by the General Synod for all petitions filed after its adoption.

Example A:

First Reformed Church files a petition on February 3, 2022. The stated clerk notifies the General Synod using a provided form that is also copied to the regional synod. The church is officially released from the denomination in August 2022. Because the petition was filed in the first quarter of 2022, the classis is assessed for FRC’s membership for all four quarters of 2022, at the 2022 assessment rate, using the church’s statistical data in effect for 2022 (i.e., from the 2020 CRF). After 2022, the

classis's assessment billing no longer includes First Reformed Church.

Example B:

First Reformed Church files a petition on August 3, 2022. The stated clerk notifies the General Synod using a provided form that is also copied to the regional synod. The church is officially released from the denomination in January 2023. Because the petition was filed in the third quarter of 2022, the classis is assessed for FRC's membership for the third and fourth quarters of 2022 as well as the first two quarters of 2023, at the 2022 assessment rate, using the church's statistical data currently in effect (i.e., from the 2020 CRF). After the second quarter of 2023, the classis's assessment billing no longer includes First Reformed Church.

- 3) For all petitions filed before the adoption of these regulations, the General Synod and regional synod will continue to assess the classis for the withdrawing church for the remainder of the calendar year in which the church is officially released from the RCA (i.e., not from the date of filing) and the subsequent calendar year, based on the consistorial report form data ("CRF") and assessment rate(s) in effect for each year. *Note: this is the method that is currently in effect.**

Example C:

First Reformed Church files a petition on July 1, 2021. The church is officially released from the denomination on November 15, 2021, and since the church is no longer an organized congregation of the RCA on December 31, 2021, it does not submit a 2021 CRF. The classis is assessed for FRC's membership for the remainder of 2021 (at the 2021 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2019 CRF) as well as 2022 (at the 2022 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2020 CRF). Because the congregation is not on the 2021

CRF, the classis is not assessed for its membership in 2023.

Example D:

First Reformed Church files a petition on October 1, 2021. The church is still an organized congregation of the RCA as of December 31, 2021, so it files a 2021 CRF. The church is officially released from the denomination on February 15, 2022. The classis is assessed for FRC's membership for the remainder of 2022 (at the 2022 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2020 CRF) as well as 2023 (at the 2023 assessment rate, based on statistical data from the 2021 CRF). The congregation does not file a CRF in 2022 (as it has ceased being an organized congregation of the RCA before December 31, 2022), and so the classis is not assessed for its membership in 2024.

- ii. **Classes are encouraged to adopt the same method as the General Synod and regional synods (detailed above) when calculating the remaining assessments for a withdrawing congregation as part of the approval of the petition for leave to withdraw.**
- f. **Where applicable, a church must pay off loans and other obligations to classes and regional synods, as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those organizations, unless specific written permission is given to continue the regular payment of those loans.**
- g. **If the church provides written consent from the Church Growth Fund to maintain an existing note without immediate repayment, such consent constitutes a specific compromise by agreement of the parties as provided in Article 10, Section 5a, and shall not be a basis for denying the petition, retaining any of the church's property, or otherwise deviating from these regulations.**
- h. **If a church dissolves within the period specified in Article 10, Section 6 and the classis from which it withdrew is no longer in existence, references in**

Article 10, Section 6 to “classis” shall be read to include the classis’s successor in interest, which may include a regional synod or the General Synod.

- i. Prior to approving the withdrawal, a church and classis shall cause statements similar to the following to be:**
 - i. recorded in the public record indicating the right of the classis or its successor to the property upon dissolution:**

This affidavit concerns the following described real estate situated in the [insert Municipality], [insert County], [insert State, Province, or Territory]:

The [insert name of classis] has granted [insert name of church] leave to withdraw from the denomination of the Reformed Church in America (“RCA”) and transfer to the denomination of [insert name of denomination]. As consideration for approval of the [church name]’s leave to withdraw, the [church name] agrees that in the event of dissolution of [church name, or its successor organization] within a period of five years after the [classis name] shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the RCA, such property of [church name] or its successor organization, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the [classis name], or its successor organization.

- ii. added to the church’s Articles of Incorporation:**

The [insert name of classis] has granted [insert name of church] leave to withdraw from the denomination of the Reformed Church in America (“RCA”) and transfer to the denomination of [insert name of denomination]. As consideration for approval of the [church name]’s leave to withdraw, the [church name] agrees that in the event of dissolution of [church name, or its successor organization] within a period of five years after

the [classis name] shall have approved a petition for withdrawal from the RCA, such property of [church name] or its successor organization, both real and personal, or the proceeds of sale of such property, shall be conveyed, transferred or delivered to the [classis name], or its successor organization.

2. **Petition to Transfer to another Classis.** During the five-year period of response to the Vision 2020 report, a church may likewise petition its regional synod to withdraw from its classis and transfer to another classis, within or outside the regional synod's bounds.
 - a. The regional synod shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation regarding the question of the furtherance of the work of the gospel. The regional synod will accept that the church can no longer function effectively in its present relationship and that the effectiveness of such congregation as a local church could be enhanced if it were a member of another classis on the basis of the petition.
 - b. Such petitions shall be processed as follows:
 - i. A written petition of the consistory must be filed with the stated clerk of the regional synod, and a copy given to the stated clerk of the current classis.
 - ii. The consistory must provide written evidence that the church would be received without reservation by another classis, as well as its regional synod, if in another regional synod.
 - iii. The regional synod will consult with the consistory, classes, and other regional synod, if applicable, in accordance with Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 4 of the *BCO* (2019, p. 63). After consultation, the regional synod:
 - 1) may transfer a church from one classis to another classis within its bounds.
 - 2) must submit the petition and record of consultations to the General Synod for final approval to transfer a church to a classis within the bounds of another regional synod.

- c. Regional synods must allow a church to leave the classis with its property and other assets if that church has filed a petition in compliance with the requirements of the *BCO*, subject to the following conditions:
 - i. The consistory has adopted a recommendation to transfer by a three-fourths vote of the members of consistory.**
 - ii. The congregation has approved the consistory's recommendation by a three-fourths vote at a congregational meeting called for the purpose of considering the transfer.****
- d. If there is a majority vote but less than three-fourths, the regional synod must engage in a period of discernment with the church and the classes to determine how best to further the work of the gospel.**
- e. The church must continue to pay assessments for the work of the General Synod and regional synod to the classis being billed by the General Synod and regional synod. The General Synod and regional synod will continue to assess the classis from which the church is transferring for the remainder of the calendar year in which the church is officially transferred and the subsequent calendar year, based on the consistorial report form ("CRF") data and assessment rates in effect for each year.**
- f. The church will begin paying assessments for the work of the classis to the receiving classis at the beginning of the second quarter following the date of approval of the transfer. When the church begins payment of the assessment for the work of the classis to the new classis, payment of assessments to the previous classis for the work of the classis shall cease, although payments for the General Synod and regional synod assessments may continue.**
- g. Where applicable, a church must pay off loans and other obligations to classes and regional synods, as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those**

organizations, unless specific written permission is given to continue the regular payment of those loans.

3. Complaints and Appeals.

- a. If the classis denies a consistory's petition to withdraw, the consistory may file a complaint against the decision of the classis with the regional synod following Chapter 2, Part II of the *BCO*.
- b. If the regional synod denies a consistory's petition to transfer to another classis, the consistory may file a complaint against the decision of the regional synod with the General Synod.
- c. All appeals to the General Synod regarding the transfer or withdrawal of a church will be heard by a panel designated by the General Synod. The panel shall adopt its own rules for consideration of appeals consistent with the provisions of the *BCO*, and shall give deference to the decision of the consistory and congregation within the framework of these regulations.
- d. The decision of the General Synod panel, and any decision of a lower judicatory for which a complaint or appeal is not filed within the times specified by Chapter 2, Part II, Article 2 and Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, accordingly, shall be final and binding upon all interested parties.

4. General Provisions.

- a. Before a church is officially released from the denomination, the classis must ensure that the church has taken appropriate action to amend its Articles of Incorporation and bylaws, paid all assessments and required loan repayments (or entered into a legally binding note that provides for installment payments), and otherwise fulfilled the provisions of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 of the *BCO*.
- b. These regulations shall be of no force and effect for petitions filed to withdraw from the denomination or to transfer classes after June 1, 2026.

NOTE: Regarding the treatment of and provision for denominational, regional, classis, and local church employees, we encourage the General Synod Council, in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, in cooperation with the general secretary, GSC human resources team, and legal counsel, to continue to conduct a compassionate and orderly evaluation of staff structuring, including the continued provision of fair salaries and benefits packages when possible, and appropriately generous severance packages should budget constraints require downsizing. Further, we encourage the same consideration at the regional synod, classis, and church level for staff at those levels.

Final Thoughts

In closing this report, we wish to offer a few final reflections to you, our beloved colleagues and friends. Foremost, that it has truly been a privilege to serve together in this work. None of us emerges from this journey unchallenged or unchanged. While we confess to being weary from the road, we also find ourselves better for having walked it together. We have sharpened one another, iron against iron, and will carry the marks of our learning with us in gratitude, to God's glory.

As a denomination, the RCA is standing at a crossroads. Having sent our team as scouts to explore different paths, the task before you now is to decide which paths to take. Perhaps surprisingly, our advice in the end has been "take all of them." None is without challenge or loss, but all of them also hold opportunities. For those who decide to stay in the RCA, there is a path that holds the potential for the renewal and strengthening of a denomination they love. For those who choose to go a separate way there is an opportunity to provision them well for their journey, knowing that the work they go to do is for the kingdom we all call home. And before moving on from this crossroads, we have the chance to build something new together in the form of a mission agency, as a place for us to work together, and to preserve some of our best work as a celebration of our shared journey.

May the grace of God go with us all on the roads ahead.

Throughout the process of this work, the Vision 2020 team came to understand that they could have unity without necessarily achieving unanimity. In the case of the team's second recommendation, that of forming a new mission agency, two of our team voiced strong concerns for the impact of this recommendation on the denomination. Valuing transparency and believing that we are only at our best when everyone can be fully seen and heard, the team agreed that it would be fitting to include a minority report written by these members.

A Minority Report

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the 2020 Team has labored two years together as a diverse group of RCA leaders. As we close our work, two of us strongly oppose Recommendation 2, the formation of a new mission agency. At the request of our team, we now share these objections that prevent us from endorsing this recommendation.

We believe we are part of God's covenant community

When we are baptized into the church, we enter into covenant with God and one another to Christ's mission: "By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and

work.”⁵ We believe Recommendation 2 does not assume a covenantal foundation. Its structure is voluntary and pragmatic. By design, the agency would be extra-ecclesial, existing outside of the connection and accountability of a covenant community. We believe assigning RCA global missions *to function* within a separate para-church organization weakens our Reformed practice of keeping covenant promises to each other.

We believe that God’s mission has a church

As was stated and celebrated at the recent Mission 2020 event: “God’s church does not have a mission, but God’s mission has the Reformed Church in America.” The mission of God and the identity of the church are as inseparable as the person of Christ and the work of Christ—indeed, the church and its mission flow from Christ’s person and work. Further, our covenant identity and accompanying mission requires us not to separate global and local mission. Recommendation 2 enacts a formal separation of global and local mission, which implies that Christ’s presence can be divided. In fact, Christ moves among Christ’s body, within every geography.

We believe that the church is called to courageous dialogue

Because Christ is Lord, we need not fear difference. Being connected to one another is hard work, and it is exactly what belongs within God’s covenantal community. This community, nourished by the Word and the sacraments, is the location that makes us able to engage in very difficult conversations. It is precisely in deep relationship with those whom we might not agree that the church must wrestle with our understandings of the gospel’s call, our differing hermeneutics, and their implications for human sexuality. Recommendation 2 avoids confronting the very real divisions among us and pushes these hard conversations into other communities that do not have the support of covenant bonds.

Conclusion

The creation of a new mission agency is not the answer to what divides us. What is urgently needed is a robust theological rationale for how the church exists in difference. What holds us together? How do we remain connected to and in covenant with one another?

As the Preamble of the *BCO* states, “The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head” (2019 edition, p. 2). And one of our Standards of Unity, the Belhar Confession, confesses: “that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16); that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23)” Especially in light of our deep divisions, we must hold fast to our union with Christ by the power of the Spirit.

⁵ RCA Baptism / Profession of Faith Liturgy

In Christ, all things hold together and Christ is the reconciler of all things who makes peace through the blood of his cross.⁶ It is in this hope—that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and that Christ will come again—that we submit this report.

⁶ Colossians 1

Overtures

Note: Overtures to the 2020 General Synod, which did not meet, are also included if the sending body indicated that it would like them forwarded to the 2021 General Synod.

Preamble Clarification

Overture 1

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commissions on History and Theology, to thoroughly examine the use of the word “all” in this statement in the Preamble of the *Book of Church Order*: “The purpose of the Reformed Church in America is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works” (*BCO*, Preamble [2019 edition, p. 1), and to recommend, as clearly and specifically as possible, guidance for how RCA members are to interpret “all people,” for report to the General Synod of 2021.

Reasons:

1. The Preamble has been interpreted as “the most important section of the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*). It outlines clearly and constitutionally the foundation of a particular church, the Reformed Church in America. It reminds the church of the essence from which it lives and the principles by which it is ordered. What is claimed in the first few pages of the document shapes both the Government and the Discipline” (Allan J. Janssen, *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*, second edition [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church Press, 2019], pp. 7–8). Interpretation of this statement, and the word “all” as noted in it, is therefore very important.
2. The word “all” appears 157 times in the *Book of Church Order*, 81 times in the Belgic Confession, 78 times in the Canons of Dort, 71 times in the Heidelberg Catechism, and 3 times in the Belhar Confession. How a word is interpreted in one part of a constitution should have bearing on how it is interpreted in the other parts.
3. *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* defines the word “all” as an adjective that means “every one of the entire number of” and as a pronoun that means “everyone or every one.”
4. First Corinthians 14:33a says, “for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.” The *Book of Church Order* itself builds upon this passage, stating that, “Church order provides a way for us to live and work together as the body of Christ, following the admonition that ‘all things be done decently and in order’ (1 Corinthians 14:40). Order is a way to express our unity and achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as we seek to fulfill our mission. It is our theology lived out in the ways we live and work together” (“An Introduction to the *Book of Church Order*,” [2019 edition, p. iii). In order for us to achieve order, we need a very clear and widely-disseminated agreement on what we mean by “all” as it is used in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Commission on Theology to Review Paper

Overture 2

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct its Commission on Theology to review the paper “Affirmed and Celebrated,”

prepared by a committee of the classis and adopted by the classis, with an eye as to the paper's doctrinal soundness in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture and the possibility of commending the paper to all RCA assemblies, for report to the Synod of 2021.

**Note: the paper "Affirmed and Celebrated" can be found in an appendix to this workbook.*

Reasons:

1. The paper "Affirmed and Celebrated" was adopted by the New Brunswick Classis in October of 2019 upon presentation by its ad hoc Theology Committee. The classis then forwarded the paper to the Commission on Theology, which asked that the classis overture the General Synod for an instruction if the classis wanted the commission to study the paper.
2. The word "synod" comes from the Latin word *synodos*, meaning "together on the way." Synods are meant to be places where ideas—in the case of ecclesiastical synods, ideas about the life of the church—are shared. The Classis of New Brunswick, as one of the classes which constitutes this synod, seeks to share its own wrestling with Scripture with other classes with whom we are on the way.

Keeping Permanent Records

Overture 3

The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick respectfully overtures the 2020 General Synod to instruct its Commission on Church Order, in consultation with its Commission on History, to study what constitutes a preferred means for keeping permanent records, for report to the General Synod of 2021.

Reasons:

1. In the proposed amendments to the Constitution sent by the General Synod of 2019, the term "permanent record" appears several times. We acknowledge that not all permanent records are books, especially in this digital age.
2. There is, however, a wide disparity in means and quality of keeping permanent electronic records. These are going to need to be available to the church for decades and even centuries to come. A preferred means of keeping these records safe, carefully and professionally reviewed, would be helpful to classes and other assemblies.

International Pastoral Exchanges

Overture 4

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint a person, serving pro bono, to publicize and manage pastoral exchanges between U.S. and Canadian congregations and congregations in other countries.

Reasons:

1. Exchanges create and enhance person-to-person contacts among Reformed and other Christian congregations in other countries.

2. Exchanges provide a way for pastors in different countries to get to know each other personally, exchange views, and learn from each other.
3. Exchanges can be simply arranged, where a pastor and family switch places for a week or longer.
4. Exchanges would not involve RCA funds but the exchange programs could eventually attract donations that support such exchanges.

International Student Exchanges

Overture 5

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint a person, serving pro bono, to publicize and manage student exchanges between high school and college students in U.S. and Canadian congregations and those in other countries.

Reasons:

1. Exchanges create and enhance person-to-person contacts among students.
2. Exchanges provide a way for students in different countries to get to know each other personally, exchange views, and learn from each other.
3. Exchanges can be simply arranged.
4. Exchanges would not involve RCA funds but the exchange programs could eventually attract donations that support such exchanges.

RCA Representatives to International Organizations

Overture 6

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint people to serve as the RCA representative to international organizations.

Reasons:

1. The RCA will benefit through increased contact to organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank.
2. The representatives will create a presence for the RCA among international agencies.
3. The representatives will provide information to RCA congregations on what the agencies are doing.
4. The appointments will provide honor to RCA people through international work.

Establishment of Professional Academies

Overture 7

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on

Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to establish professional academies that collect members according to professional discipline.

Reasons:

1. The academies would provide a new structure for collaboration among RCA members in fields such as law, foreign service, scientific research, engineering, and medicine.
2. The academies will provide honorable and special recognition to those church members who join the academy.
3. The academies will provide a source of trusted advice for the RCA and RCA-related agencies and institutions across the U.S. and Canada.
4. The academies will provide contacts among the members of each academy, contacts that can help in career development and in learning new aspects of their own profession.
5. The academies will provide a resource for RCA bodies that wish to make statements or take positions on specific topics.

Collection of Profession and Education Data

Overture 8

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary to include profession and education, as well as email addresses and personal web and social media sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn pages, in the collection of church membership data.

Reasons:

1. The information will help in the establishment of professional academies.
2. The information will provide a go-to list when needs arise for professional services.
3. The information, submitted voluntarily, will increase the level of communication among RCA members.

Socially Responsible Retirement Funds

Overture 9

The Regional Synod of Albany overtures the General Synod to instruct the Board of Benefits Services and the Investment Advisory Committee to add additional socially responsible funds (funds that consider environmental, social, and governance [ESG] issues in investment analysis), including at least one fossil fuel free fund, as options in the RCA retirement plan and the 403(b) plan.

Reasons:

1. Last year, three of the five ESG fund options were dropped from the plans, leaving only two options for those who want to invest in socially screened funds.
2. The target date Fidelity Freedom Funds in which the majority of RCA Retirement Plan and 403(b) participants are invested are not socially screened and include holdings not only in fossil fuel companies (Exxon Mobil, Phillips 66, ConocoPhillips, Chevron, Lukoil, Total, Marathon, Hess Corporation, and several others), but tobacco (Phillip Morris, Altria, British American Tobacco, Scandinavian Tobacco Group, Juul Labs), weapons (Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics), and gambling (Gaming and Leisure Properties, Inc.).

At one point, Fidelity also had holdings in private prison companies (CoreCivic and Geo). “60% of incarcerated migrants are held in prisons run by corporations like CoreCivic. And Vanguard and Fidelity hold a combined 20% of CoreCivic’s shares”

(<https://actions.sumofus.org/a/tell-fidelity-and-vanguard-divest-our-pensions-from-private-prisons>). It appears that Fidelity Freedom Funds do not currently have holdings in either CoreCivic or Geo. Each of the Fidelity target date funds is a collection of other Fidelity mutual funds. The Fidelity Freedom 2020 Fund for example, is a collection of about 30 mutual funds. One of those funds, the Fidelity Series Large Cap Stock Fund, represents 4.189 percent of the Fidelity Freedom 2020 holdings (according to the Dec. 31, 2019, report). The Fidelity Series Large Cap Stock Fund, in turn, has holdings in a whole lot of companies. Among the top ten are Exxon Mobil Corp. (third highest holding at \$643,423,447 or 4.6 percent of the assets) and Altria Group, Inc., one of the world’s largest producers and marketers of tobacco, cigarettes, and related products (fifth highest holding at \$502,646,555 or 3.6 percent). Fidelity Series Large Cap also holds Philip Morris International, Inc., (\$42,791,761 or 0.306%). That is \$1,188,861,763 invested in fossil fuels and tobacco—and that’s in just one of the 30 or so funds. So while the percentage may seem small, the amounts are not. Fidelity is a major investor in companies that produce products that harm the planet and harm people. And Reformed Church investors are helping to fund that.

3. There is an urgent need to address the climate crisis. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has determined that we have until 2030 to dramatically change the way we live if we are to avoid a climate catastrophe. To avoid a climate catastrophe, 80 percent of all known fossil fuels must not be burned. Oil, gas, and coal companies already have five times that much in reserve.
4. The biblical command to love our neighbors as ourselves calls us to address the climate crisis. The Commission on Christian Action report to the General Synod of 1999 noted: “Since the effects of climate change will fall disproportionately on the poor and on future generations, the issue is a matter of justice. We cannot love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, and ignore the potentially disastrous consequences that human-induced climate change may have on future generations, on the poor, and on all of creation” (*MGS 1999*, p. 98). People who are poor will suffer the first and worst from the effects of climate change. Continued investment in the fossil fuel industry furthers this injustice.
5. Divestment can be an effective means of fostering social change. It helped end apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1980s. Divesting will put further pressure on the fossil fuel industry and will help accelerate the transition to a renewable energy economy.
6. Continued investment in fossil fuels is fiscally irresponsible. The energy sector was the worst performing sector of the S&P in 2018 and 2019. It is estimated that \$1 trillion in oil reserves and \$300 billion in natural gas reserves will become “stranded assets” and need to be written off resulting in enormous loss of value. Globally over 1,100 institutions, many of them churches or faith-based organizations, representing more than \$12 trillion in assets, have committed to divest (www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-pledges-push-global-fossil-fuel-divestments-over-11-trillion). Wall Street is taking notice. In December 2019, Goldman Sachs announced it would stop investing in much of the coal industry and Arctic extraction (<https://thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/climate-change/474773-goldman-sachs-says-it-wont-finance-new-coal>), and in January 2020, Black Rock, the world’s biggest investor in fossil fuels, announced coal divestment from funds controlling about \$2 trillion in assets (www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter). Continued investment in fossil fuels is not a good long-term strategy.
7. Divesting from the fossil fuel industry is an act of leadership. It will raise public consciousness about the severity of climate change, and it will encourage others to take

action. A National Academy of Sciences study identified divestment as a critical “social tipping intervention” that has the potential “to spark rapid yet constructive societal changes towards climate stabilization and overall sustainability.”

Excerpt from a recent article in *Grist* about a National Academy of Sciences study:

A recent study in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences outlined the positive “tipping elements” needed to address climate change—society-wide shifts that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions enough to avert disaster. Each tipping element, researchers say, can be triggered by one or more “social tipping interventions”—smaller changes that pave the way for societal transformation... [An] interdisciplinary team of researchers with backgrounds in earth systems analysis, geosustainability, philosophy, and other fields... surveyed more than 1,000 international experts in the fields of climate change and sustainability, and asked them to identify the tipping elements needed for rapid decarbonization... [They] identified seven interventions that have the potential “to spark rapid yet constructive societal changes towards climate stabilization and overall sustainability.” [One of] the two interventions that the researchers say can be achieved very rapidly, i.e. within a few years [is] divestment from fossil fuels. If national banks and insurance companies warn the public that fossil fuel reserves are “stranded assets”—that is, resources that no longer have value—companies and people could start withdrawing investments in industries that contribute to climate change en masse, and the flow of money to polluting companies could quickly dry up. We’re seeing the potential of the divestment movement already—BlackRock’s announcement that it’s shedding its investments in coal last week sent a tremor through the financial industry” (<https://grist.org/climate/stis-can-save-the-planet-no-not-those-stis/>).

The study from the National Academy of Sciences: www.pnas.org/content/117/5/2354/tab-figures-data.

Restructure Into Affinity Synods

Overture 10

The Great Lakes City Classis overtures the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to adopt and implement the following Affinity Synods restructuring plan:

To form two new regional synods as of December 31, 2021: The Central Synod, comprised of affinity-based churches who seek to be relationally aligned by adherence to existing General Synod statements regarding human sexuality; and the New Boundaries Synod, comprised of affinity-based churches who seek to be relationally aligned by their conviction that existing General Synod statements regarding human sexuality should not be adhered to with regard to marriage and ordination; and further,

To transfer the classes and churches from these existing regional synods into the two new regional synods as follows: Far West, Great Lakes, Heartland, and Mid-America into the Central Synod, and Albany, Mid-Atlantics, and New York into the New Boundaries Synod (Canada would be unaffected); and further,

To recommend an initial transfer window such that any consistory may petition the General Synod for transfer to the other new synod by February 28, 2022; and further,

To strongly encourage General Synod 2022 to give deference to the petitions of such local congregations to approve such transfer requests; and further,

To recommend to the new regional synods to adopt a substructure resembling their respective current regional synod groupings so as to sustain administrative continuity initially; and further,

To recommend to the new regional synods to develop statements describing their respective theological distinctives for the furtherance of the gospel within their bounds and to consider revising their synod name; and finally,

To instruct the general secretary, General Synod Council, and General Synod Council staff, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, to prepare further recommendations and propose necessary amendments to implement the ongoing restructuring of the denomination around these new affinity synods, including a revised General Synod agenda, assessment implications, and related bylaw updates (if any) for report back to General Synod 2022.

Reasons:

1. “The General Synod shall form regional synods. It may make changes in their boundaries, and may transfer classes and churches from one regional synod to another” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 67]).
2. The Vision 2020 Report, as part of Recommendation 1 (“Together, Yet Changed”), identified the guiding principle that classes should be “reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based.” Because classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage, the report asserted that “This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model.”
3. The affinity-based restructuring would redirect the time and energies consumed by decades of internal theological discord toward enhancing external kingdom outreach. Each affinity synod could more effectively align its ministry efforts with its theological convictions with a diminished distraction from ongoing doctrinal disagreements with others in the denomination.
4. The Vision 2020 Report, also as part of the guiding principles for Recommendation 1, identified as one result of their research that “the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward.” We believe this reorganization would either provide for the possible continuation of three regional synods or provide a reasonable transition step towards their eventual elimination—which would entail a careful process of *BCO* amendments.
5. The transfer request deadline of February 28, 2022, is intended to allow for any necessary consultations and preparations before General Synod 2022. Ministers may seek to transfer membership to a classis in the opposite affinity synod following the existing process in the *BCO*, with careful consideration given to the nature of their commissioned, approved, or installed ministries.
6. “The regional synod shall create whatever organization it desires for the furtherance of the work of the gospel within its bounds, provided such organization does not infringe upon the prerogatives of the several classes or churches” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 5 [2019 edition, p. 64]). Adopting a substructure that mirrors the current regional synods initially provides administrative continuity and facilitates the transition without immediate disruption to existing staff positions.

Create Grace and Truth Commission

Overture 11

The Classis of Rocky Mountains overtures General Synod of 2021 to create a Grace and Truth Commission that will actively work to align the leaders and ministries of our denomination with our stated beliefs regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. We propose that this commission work with a three-fold mandate toward integrity: a theological mandate, a ministry mandate, and a disciplinary mandate.

Based on the example of the early church in Acts 15, we propose a 12-member team, three leaders from four areas of ministry and spiritual authority within the RCA: three denominational officers, three ministers of Word and sacrament or commissioned pastors, three missionary leaders, and three professors of theology. These leaders would need to affirm the basic biblical and theological framework presented in the previous statements by the denomination. The selection of this team would be made in conjunction by the general secretary, president and vice president. These three leaders would not only select members of the council, but also choose a director (from within the 12 leaders), help form the schedule of meetings, and chart a course for fulfilling all three aspects of the commission mandate.

MANDATE 1 (Theology): To reaffirm and restate the RCA's theological and biblical views on homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, giving special attention to the challenges faced by the leaders and ministries of the RCA today. The commission must think through the implications of our Reformed theological lens (hermeneutic) regarding present day issues facing the church. These questions need to include but are not limited to: leadership, service, sacraments, membership, and jurisdiction. The commission shall then provide counsel, recommendations, and resources to leaders.

MANDATE 2 (Ministry): To identify and/or develop resources and ministries to people within the LGBTQ community that are consistent with the RCA's stated biblical understanding of these issues. The commission must seek to discover and/or develop ministries that reflect the grace and truth of Christ in the areas of outreach, discipleship, and support/encouragement specifically for the LGBTQ community.

MANDATE 3 (Discipline): To address leaders and churches that have been living and ministering in ways that are inconsistent with our stated biblical views surrounding these issues. Following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17, the commission would implement a process of discipline: first, one-on-one discussion with any individual promoting, teaching, or living in sin regarding homosexuality and related issues; second, engage in the discussion another commission member and one in spiritual authority over this individual ("one or two others"); finally, if there is no improvement, the commission can then choose to either begin the appropriate disciplinary processes within our polity or make the necessary recommendations or overtures to the next General Synod to make the needed changes. Of course, any of those in error may opt to leave the RCA, in which case we should be mindful of the words found in our liturgy for church discipline: "Nevertheless, we exhort you, beloved Christians, to count him not as an enemy, but to admonish him at all times as a brother" (RCA *Liturgy and Confessions*, The Order for Church Discipline).

Note: The liturgy referenced above is not found in the current edition of *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*. Historically, the Liturgy also included two orders for church discipline, namely the Order for Excommunication and the Order for Readmission of the Penitent. A board of elders wishing to use the Orders for Church Discipline is referred to the 1968 publication *Liturgy and Psalms*.

Reasons/Further Explanation:

The Classis of Rocky Mountains overtures General Synod of 2021 to create a Grace and Truth Commission that will actively work to align the leaders and ministries of our denomination with our stated beliefs regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. This commission will work with a three-fold mandate toward living in integrity with these stated beliefs: a theological mandate, a ministry mandate, and a disciplinary mandate. At the end of every 12 months, the RCA leadership will evaluate the ongoing need for it and, if such a need exists, establish new or adjusted mandates.

The RCA's stated positions related to homosexuality and the LGBTQ community have been consistent throughout its history. The most definitive statement by the RCA was the paper submitted by the Commission on Theology in 1978 (www.rca.org/synod/statements/#sexuality), which the General Synod voted to make available as a resource and guide to the congregations of the RCA. The following excerpts are from that accepted document:

- "Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality."
- "While avoiding simplistic and obnoxious social crusades, the church must affirm through its preaching and pastoral ministry that homosexuality is not an acceptable alternative lifestyle. God's gracious intent for human sexual fulfillment is the permanent bond of heterosexual love. This redemptive word must be spoken, with sensitivity, caring, and clarity to any person who would make a perverted sexual choice, and to society as a whole."
- "It is one matter to affirm that self-chosen homosexual acts are sinful. It is quite another to reject, defame, and excoriate the humanity of the person who performs them. This distinction has often been missed. It is possible and necessary on biblical grounds to identify homosexuality as a departure from God's intent. However...there are no theological grounds on which a homosexual may be singled out for a greater measure of judgement. All persons bear within them the marks of the fall."
- "The denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology."

Since this declarative statement, the RCA has re-affirmed this position in various ways. Since that 1978 paper, there have been several additional papers and/or statements related to these issues. (See the 1979 statement entitled, "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual," the 1990 General Synod statement related to homosexuality, the 1994 General Synod statement related to the lack of compassion toward the homosexual and reaffirming our theological position, and the 2012 General Synod statement reaffirming our theological position.) There have been affirmations of our liturgies and confessions regarding these issues. (It is worth noting that our marriage liturgies from *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the RCA in America* contain the following statement, "Christian marriage is a joyful covenanting between a man and a woman," see pg. 85; the 2017 General Synod approved the recommendation stating that the Heidelberg Catechism's text on "unchastity" includes a prohibition against homosexuality).

There have even been legal actions that have related to these issues. (In 2005, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield was convicted by the General Synod of violating his vows as a professor of theology and minister of Word and sacrament for officiating the marriage of his daughter to another woman.)

So, the present struggle is not a lack of clarity of the denomination's stated beliefs regarding these issues. The difficulties arise from practices and actions of leaders and churches within the RCA that are inconsistent with our stated beliefs. One might call it a lack of integrity between our stated beliefs and our teachings and actions. This proposed council would begin the necessary and vital work of leading the denomination to a place of living in integrity with these stated beliefs.

The Makeup of the Grace and Truth Commission

When the early church was facing a theological dilemma that threatened to split the church, they turned to their spiritual leaders to discuss and discern the way forward. In Acts 15:2b (NIV), we are told of the church in Antioch:

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Our denomination finds itself in an ongoing struggle that threatens to divide and/or dramatically diminish it as a body. We must now turn to our spiritual leaders. We propose a 12-member team with three leaders from four areas of ministry and spiritual authority within the RCA. These leaders would need to affirm the basic biblical and theological framework presented in the previous statements by the denomination.

- **3 denominational officers:** from our long history of past presidents.
- **3 ministers of Word and sacrament or commissioned pastors:** retired or currently serving.
- **3 missionary leaders:** retired or currently serving.
- **3 professors of theology:** retired or currently serving.

The selection of this team would be made by the general secretary, the General Synod president, and the General Synod vice president. We trust these leaders to be mindful of the racial, ethnic, gender, social-economic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA in the selection of this team. However, more importantly, we trust these leaders to be prayerful and Spirit-led in this selection process. These three leaders would not only select members of the council but also choose a director (from within the 12 leaders), help form the schedule of meetings, and chart a course for fulfilling all three aspects of the commission mandate.

The Commission's Three Mandates

Again, the overarching directive of the commission would be to lead the denomination to a place of living within the integrity of our stated positions regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community.

MANDATE 1 (Theology): To reaffirm and restate the RCA's theological and biblical views on homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, giving special attention to the challenges faced by the leaders and ministries of the RCA today.

Throughout its history, the RCA has sought to live in the tension of the grace and truth of Christ regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. We affirm in the Belgic Confession, “We receive all these books (of the Bible) and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them...” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 5: The Authority of Scripture). So while many claim that modern practices of homosexuality are unique to our era (and thus the Bible doesn’t speak directly to them), we believe these biblical statements remain true and relevant:

1. We believe wholeheartedly that the Lord deeply and passionately loves those who are same-sex-attracted and/or identify as LGBTQ (John 3:16).

- While we were yet sinners (heterosexual and homosexual), Christ gave himself for us and, in love, invites us to new life—kingdom life (Romans 5:6).
- The Lord invites—no he actually woos—LGBTQ people to seek him. He promises that all (homosexual or heterosexual) will find him if we seek him with all our hearts (Jeremiah 29:13).
- The Lord entreats his church to be a community of invitation and kindness (Colossians 3:12) to all peoples regardless of sex, color or orientation—not a place of condemnation (Romans 8:1). The statement “God hates gays” is a gross, unbiblical falsehood and contrary to the heart of God.

2. We believe that the Lord created us in his image (*imago Dei*) and in that image we were created male and female (Genesis 1:27). From this creation design, the Lord instituted Christian marriage between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5).

- This created order is affirmed throughout Scripture (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27; Ephesians 5:31-32).
- Deviation from his created order, i.e., sexual activity outside the context of heterosexual marriage, is considered sin (Matthew 15:19; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; Romans 1:26-27).
- In the story of God (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) homosexuality is located in the fall (Romans 1:18-32) and therefore is something to be redeemed.

The deep struggle that Christians and the church face today is how to hold these two biblical convictions together. We believe Jesus invites all of his church to walk in the tension of these two truths.

Our past statements regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community are seen by most as incomplete. It is not enough to simply state that “God does not bless same-sex sexuality in any circumstance and the churches should do their best to love.” The commission must do some rigorous study, prayer, and discussion about the many issues and nuances related to homosexuality and the church and seek to give guidance and direction to the leaders within it.

The commission must think through the implications of our Reformed theological lens (hermeneutic) regarding present day issues facing the church. These questions need to include but are not limited to:

- a. **Leadership:** If leadership within the church is called to a higher standard (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9) and homosexuality is clearly identified as sin (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Timothy 1:10), can we ordain any leaders in same-sex relationships into the identified roles of pastor, elder, or deacon? What of other leadership roles within the churches and

institutions, such as small group leaders, worship leaders, ministry leaders, teachers, etc.?

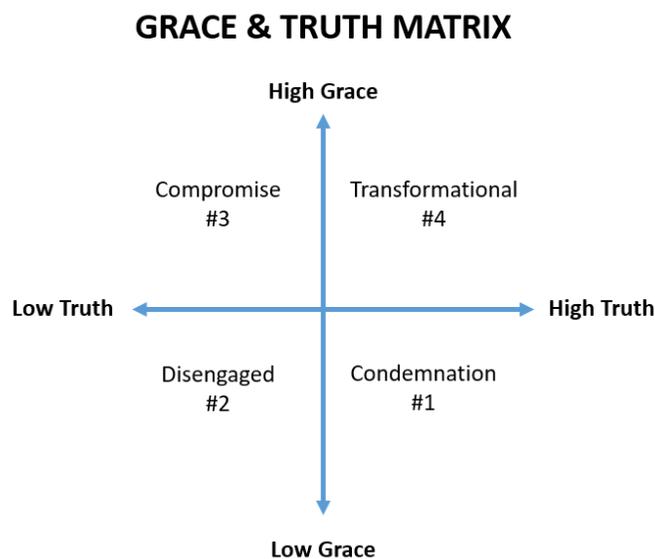
- b. **Service:** Can those in same-sex relationships serve the church in non-leadership roles?
- c. **Sacraments:** Do we open the “means of grace” (communion and baptism) to people in same-sex relationships?
- d. **Membership:** With no biblical category of “local church membership,” do we open membership to those in same-sex relationships?
- e. **Jurisdiction (congregation vs. classis vs. General Synod):** Of the above decisions, what is okay to leave at the local congregational level or classis level? What needs to be prescribed at the General Synod level?

Not only does the commission need to wrestle through these questions but also provide counsel, recommendations, and resources to the leaders that are facing these circumstances today. This counsel and direction would be for both the local leaders in our churches and ministries, and also to the General Synod for response and action.

MANDATE 2 (Ministry): To identify and/or develop resources and ministries to people within the LGBTQ community that are consistent with the RCA’s stated biblical understanding of these issues.

When Jesus came to this broken world, we are told, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV). He did not come filled with one or the other, but both, simultaneously. He modeled a life full and overflowing of the Father’s grace and truth. Jesus not only lived it but invited us to follow his example (John 13:34). He invites us not to resolve this tension, but in all things to carry this tension.

Regarding homosexuality and the LGBTQ community, we are called to live and minister in both high grace and high truth. To compromise on either is insufficient for us. We are to minister to and love all people in the context of his grace and truth. We recommend the commission use the following matrix and its four quadrants to help shape each ministry and resource of this mandate.



Understanding the Grace and Truth Matrix as it relates to the issues of homosexuality. The quadrants represent the following approaches by leaders and churches.

1. **Low Grace and High Truth, the Condemnation Quadrant:** These leaders and churches proclaim the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexuality, but fail to embrace this community with the love of Christ. This comes across as condemnation and judgment.
2. **Low Grace and Low Truth, the Disengaged Quadrant:** Churches and leaders that fail to love people with the compassion of Christ and also fail to speak the truth of God in love.
3. **High Grace and Low Truth, the Compromised Quadrant:** This quadrant represents leaders and churches that have sought to be open and affirming to the LGBTQ community, sharing the love of God for them. However, these same leaders and churches fail to speak the truth of Scripture in love, not sharing the prohibitions on sexual activity outside of the context of heterosexual marriage.
4. **High Grace and High Truth, the Transformational Quadrant:** These leaders and churches are loving people within the LGBTQ community well. They invite them into a community where they can wholeheartedly seek the Lord and grow in a personal relationship with him. And yet, at the same time, they thoughtfully and pastorally speak the truth in love regarding what the Lord teaches on homosexuality.

We can't allow these issues to remain only in the theological and/or polity arena. We must begin to seek becoming a denomination that is truly ministering the grace and truth of Jesus to the LGBTQ community. We need to think deeply and prayerfully about the ways we create a culture of grace and truth. What does it look like to be churches of grace and truth which allow all people to grow and thrive, to be transformed by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), and to be conformed to the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19)?

Creating cultures of GRACE and TRUTH

The commission must wrestle with these ministry questions, seeking to discover and/or develop ministries that reflect the grace and truth of Christ.

- a. **Outreach:** How is the gospel good news (Luke 2:10) specifically to the LGBTQ community? What does it look like to invite them to seek Jesus and His kingdom (Matthew 6:33) with us, as they wrestle with issues of sexual identity and same-sex relationships?
- b. **Discipleship:** What does sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3) and restoration look like to people within the LGBTQ community? What does it mean to be "hidden in Christ" (Colossians 3:3), to find your identity in Christ?
- c. **Support and Encouragement:** What does it look like to offer true community (Acts 2:42-49) and sacred friendship (John 13:34-35) to our brothers and sisters who wrestle with these issues?

The commission needs to do the prayerful work of seeking, evaluating, and possibly creating ministries to be resources for RCA leaders who are serving the LGBTQ community. Possible authors for the commission to review: Dr. Mark Yarhouse, author of many books, including *Homosexuality and the Christian*, and leader of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute; Dr. Preston Sprinkle, author of several books, including *People to be Loved*, and leader of The

Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender (centerforfaith.com); Rev. Dr. Wesley Hill, author of *Washed and Waiting* and *Spiritual Friendship*, www.spiritualfriendship.org.

MANDATE 3 (Discipline): To address leaders and churches that have been living and ministering in ways that are inconsistent with our stated biblical views surrounding these issues.

Scripture instructs us to lovingly address sin within our communities of faith. The most poignant example within Scripture is perhaps in the book of Revelation, when the risen Christ speaks to the churches. To the church in Pergamum, he blesses them but then reprimands them for not addressing those who are holding to the “teachings of Balaam” and those who hold to the teachings of “the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:12-17). He then also addresses the church in Thyatira, saying,

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling” (Revelation 2:20-21, NIV).

Jesus is reprimanding these churches for “tolerating” false teaching and sin within their communities of faith. He is directing the leadership of the churches to confront and address those among them who are in error. A major reason we find ourselves in such a difficult place as a denomination is that our leaders have failed to address sin as the Scriptures command.

The RCA has been clear and consistent in understanding homosexuality and same-sex activity and relationships from a Reformed perspective. Furthermore, each of our leaders declared their commitment and submission to the Scriptures, and the Reformed understanding of the Scriptures, through the Standards of Unity.

...[I]n becoming a licensed candidate for the ministry [minister of the Word of God] in the Reformed Church in America [I] sincerely and gladly declare before God and with you that I believe the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America. I accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life. I accept the Standards as historical and faithful witnesses to the Word of God (*Book of Church Order*, Declaration for Licensed Candidates [2019 edition, p. 131]).

So the teaching/affirming and living into any form of same-sex sexual activity amounts to the breaking of the covenantal commitments we have made as leaders in the RCA. Any leader doing so must be called to account for their teachings and actions.

The Belgic Confession articulates that discipline within the church is necessary and essential. “So we accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God” (*The Belgic Confession*, Article 32). Scripture states that there are times in which we must separate from those who are in error (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13). However, the purpose and desire of this confrontation is always restoration. Paul says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (Galatians 6:1, NIV).

Following the Principles of Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus gave these instructions regarding discipline within the church:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17, NIV).

- a. **One-on-one discussion:** The commission will appoint an individual from within their team to engage with a brother or sister that is promoting, teaching or living in sin regarding homosexuality and the related issues.
- b. **One or two others:** The next step would be to engage another commission member and a leader that is in a position of spiritual authority over the brother or sister. This could be a classis, regional, or institutional leader.
- c. **Denominational engagement:** If there is still no movement, then the commission can take two possible actions. First, they can begin the appropriate disciplinary processes within our polity. Second, they can make the necessary recommendations or overtures to the next General Synod to make the needed changes in our polity to bring the discipline appropriated by the Scriptures and our creeds and confessions.

If our brothers and sisters who are in error decline to repent and choose to leave the RCA, we should be mindful of the words found in our liturgy for church discipline. “Nevertheless, we exhort you, beloved Christians, to count him not as an enemy, but to admonish him at all times as a brother” (RCA *Liturgy and Confessions*, The Order for Church Discipline).

Note: *Liturgy and Confessions* is a previous version of the RCA’s liturgy, published in 1968. The Order for Church Discipline does not appear in the current version of the RCA’s liturgy, *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*.

Conclusion

We believe that the creation of this Grace and Truth Commission and the implementation of this three-fold mandate would go a long way in restoring the integrity of the RCA. Furthermore, it would go a long way in sharing the love of Christ with all people, particularly those within the LGBTQ community.

Report of the General Synod Council on Transformed & Transforming

Note: General Synod Council ministry reports contain updates and progress reported to the General Synod Council in March 2021 for the calendar year 2020. 2021 updates and progress will be reflected in next year's report.

POLICY WORDING

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities in the work of cultivating transformation that results in faithful and passionate disciples of Jesus.

The RCA will identify potential leaders and encourage and equip potential and existing leaders for missional, congregational, and pastoral leadership. These leaders will reflect the full diversity of the RCA, such as gender, age, race, ability, and cultural backgrounds, with a special emphasis on youth.

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities to participate in Christ's kingdom mission, both locally and globally.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S INTERPRETATION

Discipleship

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus's command to make disciples is the church's mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. Transformed disciples become more like Christ as they read and reflect on God's Word, pray and listen to God, spend time in community with other Christ-followers, and engage in Christ's mission. The RCA's commitment is to help in providing accessible environments, processes, resources, and relationships that can be used by local congregations to foster, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, more fully devoted followers who willingly and boldly live and love like Jesus.

The discipleship pathways uniquely created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations. Transformation will be manifest in our relationships with one another, our increasing love for each other, our sacrifice for the cause of Christ, our willingness to influence our world for the gospel, and how we advocate for justice with compassion in communities where we live and serve.

Leadership

"Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7).

Women and men who are open to being used by God help guide the church as they actively pursue God's purpose for congregations and ministries. Leaders willingly and passionately live

out their calling and giftedness to accomplish a missional vision that brings a gospel of grace and hope to a lost and broken world.

The RCA commitment is to help develop leaders, based on a foundation of discipleship, who:

- know how to lead themselves—their leadership is focused on their inward journey.
- know how to lead others—they are equipped to lead and influence in a God-ordained direction, increasing their leadership gift.
- know how to reproduce new leaders—they view leadership development as a key component of their call to be a leader.

This commitment to leadership development requires environments and accessible opportunities for growth and learning that will help lead RCA congregations forward in mission.

The RCA vision for leadership sees the leadership potential in all followers of Jesus Christ. It helps to raise up servant leaders who develop a courage and competence to lead in the church and the world in a multiplicity of environments and with an openness to equipping and empowering all people to be influencers for Christ's kingdom. This leadership vision has a special focus on empowering people who may not have leadership positions, privilege, power, or even access to them, but who have been called and gifted by God to serve boldly. It is a vision that especially is committed to the next generation and developing leaders for the church of the future.

Mission

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations” (Psalm 67:1-2).

Mission becomes a way of life when we reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in neighborhoods, cities, and throughout the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we boldly give witness to the hope within us and willingly serve others by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in every corner of the world. The RCA commitment is to respond with God's love to meet spiritual and individual needs around the globe. It is envisioning the people of the RCA as a movement of faithful followers who live and love like Jesus as they radically follow Christ in mission together.

Individuals and churches experience transformation as they open themselves to be used by God and reach out in giving and receiving, learning and sharing, and extending the kingdom of God through missional engagement. It means bringing the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the message, mobilizing RCA congregations to connect with global partners for greater kingdom impact, helping resource volunteers for expanding involvement in mission efforts, extending compassion, mercy, and justice in places of discrimination, poverty, famine, disaster, and injustice. In a world of brokenness and need, we offer help, hope, and tangible expressions of God's love.

OVERVIEW

Transformed & Transforming, the RCA's 15-year goal, is currently in year seven. Chief operating officer Jill Ver Steeg sets the vision for this goal, leads the team of initiative leaders

who execute the outputs, and holds the team accountable for the ends and outcomes reporting.

The eight initiatives within Transformed & Transforming are Discipleship, Local Missional Engagement, Short-Term Mission, Disability Concerns, Advocacy (which works in concert with and is reported along with Local Missional Engagement), Leadership Development, Women's Transformation and Leadership, and Next Generation Engagement. In this organizational structure, the Church Multiplication and Global Mission teams collaborate with the Transformed & Transforming team but have their own monitoring ends policy from the General Synod Council (GSC).

For many of the staff, the goals and projects for the 2020 calendar year were similar to years past. However, 2020 quickly became a time of extreme disruption for the traditional delivery system prioritized in Transformed & Transforming. Aside from the limitation of in-person gatherings, the staff quickly realized that ministry leaders were carrying the brunt of the shift to online worship, deaths in their congregations, and extreme fatigue in navigating the change and fear many in their communities were experiencing.

The Transformed & Transforming team adapted, providing COVID-19 resources for ministry and mission. These resources included digital discipleship, adaptive leadership, self-care, lament, and staying on mission during a pandemic. In addition, initiative leaders pivoted to provide online learning opportunities, providing equipping offerings through Zoom and webinars. Through mid-2020, energy was spent in elevating the stories and expertise of leaders in the field who were adapting to new realities, while providing training and support for pastors. This included the development of online equipping and resourcing, including Faithward and its online learning and podcast platform. Transformed & Transforming renewed its commitment to provide resources that reflect our goals of creating nimble, agile resources that are responsive to the needs of our local leaders and congregations.

The social unrest in 2020 also provided an opportunity for the Transformed & Transforming staff to actualize the year-long training they had received with Reesheda Graham Washington on bias. This work included work with ableism, gender and intergenerational equity, and racism. Resources were created and curated for churches that provided places for lament, prayer, and reconciliation. Building an equity-based hospitality framework is a multi-dimensional endeavor, with both internal and external foci. For example, "accessibility" is about *who* has access to leadership and decision-making as well as *how* people are welcomed into a space.

In years eight to ten of Transformed & Transforming, Jill will lead this team through the decentralization of leadership in order to build out the vision and execution of Transformed & Transforming, reproducing catalysts and champions across the RCA. Jill is working strategically with the Lilly Endowment to further deepen the work of Transformed & Transforming.

In a decentralized model, the hope of Transformed & Transforming 3.0 is to multiply leaders "closer to the ground" who are able to provide contextualized support for cohorts. Although this work is currently manifesting through the work of guiding coalitions, we endeavor to accelerate that work, providing more opportunities for connection and learning as we equip and release leaders to continue the work. At this time, we are seeing the fruit of this multiplication model through Discipleship in Jeff Allen's cohort process, Sung Kim's Leadership Development cohorts, and Liz Testa's Women's Transformation and Leadership collaboratives.

As we shift into this model, we recognize our need to create agile, nimble resources that are readily available to ministry leaders, regardless of their geographical context. This requires a shift from in-person gathering only, leading us into a space where we are increasing our expertise in digital learning. This hybrid, “phygital” space (physical + digital) means exploring more robust online options, including classes, webinars, digital cohorts, podcasts, and more. The efforts of this work have manifested most clearly in the work of Faithward, which is currently housing the preliminary work of the online learning platform as well as the podcast network.

Our desire is to create and curate resourcing that both provides equipping for our current leaders and also helps us turn toward learning models for our emerging leaders. By leaning into the best of our in-person gathering practices, while reaching toward digital best practices, we hope to remain a preferred learning partner for our local churches.

The Transformed & Transforming team collaborates regularly with the work of Church Multiplication and Global Mission. Specifically, the team is working on building out discipleship, leadership, and missional engagement in phase two of the church multiplication process.

DISABILITY CONCERNS

The vision of RCA Disability Concerns is to welcome and engage the gifts of all people in Christ’s ministry, becoming accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves. This is a bold and compelling vision that aligns with Scripture: God’s reign as a unifying embrace of the love and grace of Jesus Christ that reaches all people—every race, tribe, people, and language, every type of disability and special need. Raising awareness and making our churches accessible to people with disabilities establishes a needed foundation, but our own attitudes about disability require even greater transformation. Ministries to and for people with disabilities that are grounded in compassion are important starting points. But such ministries are called then to mature into ministries with and by people with disabilities, recognizing everyone has gifts to serve the purposes of God’s kingdom mission. True belonging and the transformation that God seeks will be realized only when everybody belongs and everybody serves, regardless of ability.

A covenant with CRC Disability Concerns between the governing boards of the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC)—in place since 2009—has demonstrated a track record of multiplied effectiveness and continues to deepen ministry impact in both denominations and beyond, welcoming all the partners that God provides. The partnership in Disability Concerns continues to provide a model for how the RCA and CRC can serve collaboratively and in mutually interdependent ways to do more together than they could accomplish independently, while also leveraging fiscal and programmatic efficiencies.

In the 12th year of the Disability Concerns partnership, the two staff leaders of RCA and CRC Disability Concerns adapted quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on church and society in general, and people with disabilities in particular—many of whom are in higher risk categories than the population in general due to pre-existing conditions. Several in-person events pivoted to become virtual gatherings, with attention given to providing accommodations for those with hearing or visual impairments, among others. This hands-on learning with the Zoom digital platform also served to support ministry initiatives other than Disability Concerns so that they, too, could welcome greater participation of people with disabilities.

The joint RCA-CRC Disability Concerns Leadership Training, an annual late-summer, three-day, in-person gathering for key volunteers (called disability advocates) transitioned to a virtual event spread over two days, with optional sessions before and after the event. This change allowed for a higher-than-usual number of first-time participants who had been limited previously by geography, finances, or disability-related constraints. The transition to a virtual event also provided the opportunity to engage a more diverse range of speakers and panelists than an in-person event would have permitted, including speakers from British Columbia, Ontario, and Hungary.

Another in-person event in West Michigan—this one on mental health and the church, scheduled for October 2020—underwent a different sort of transformation. The event, known as “Bearing Hope: Mental Health and the Church,” had developed from a half-day gathering to a full day in the previous three years. When the pandemic forced the cancellation of the fourth annual gathering, the planning team (representing a partnership of five faith-based organizations in West Michigan addressing mental health) decided to launch a podcast instead. A vision for the podcast was developed, hosts were secured, and production began early in 2021 to record the first eight episodes of *Faith and Mental Health*, which launched in March 2021.

The RCA’s Disability Concerns initiative is led by Terry DeYoung. His travel plans for March through June 2020, including two weeks in New York and Jersey and a week in northwest Iowa, were canceled during the early months of the pandemic. Some of those meetings and speaking engagements were conducted virtually later on, but many are still waiting to be rescheduled. DeYoung also was honored by the Religion and Spirituality Interest Group of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities with the 2020 Henri J. Nouwen Award. Presented in June, the award affirmed DeYoung’s lifelong commitment to supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; his impact on the field of religion, spirituality, and disability; and his efforts ensuring that people with disabilities are welcomed, supported, and engaged in learning and living lives of faith, especially in their congregations.

Progress

A network of seven RCA regional mental health consultants—established as a pilot in early 2020, spanning four regional synods (Albany, Heartland, Mid-Atlantics, and New York)—continues its work to support and advise ministry initiatives related to mental health and the church. The group’s original vision was to consult directly with pastors, churches, and classes in their efforts to reduce stigma and provide education opportunities, but many of those intentions were put on hold as churches interrupted in-person gatherings. Yet, the rising incidence of mental health challenges in the midst of the pandemic across the population has elevated the importance of this work. These consultants are RCA members who have significant experience, training, and connections in a variety of mental health specialties.

After two reprintings of the second edition of the *Inclusion Handbook*, a primary resource for churches published in 2013, work on an updated and expanded third edition of the print version of the *Inclusion Handbook* is nearing completion. The handbook has been retitled *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*, and two partners have joined RCA and CRC Disability Concerns in this venture: Christian Horizons, a large faith-based provider of services for people with disabilities in Ontario, and Elim Christian Services, a faith-based provider located in the Chicago suburbs with deep ties to the RCA and CRC. After the print version has been published in 2021,

an online platform with interactive features and learning modules will be developed and hosted by the RCA's Faithward platform.

The issue of ableism—an unconscious bias and prejudice toward people with disabilities that's both personal and systemic—continues as an area of focus within Disability Concerns and beyond. In seeking to become a church where everybody belongs and everybody serves, disability advocates and RCA staff are starting to name personal and systemic biases toward people with disabilities, while pursuing the engagement of this challenging issue at GSC staffing levels, including all of the Transformed & Transforming ministry initiatives.

In recognition of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 2020, RCA general secretary Eddy Alemán and CRC interim executive director Colin Watson signed a joint resolution celebrating the progress that has been made by reaffirming the principles of equality and belonging for all, and calling on both denominations to renew their efforts toward full ADA compliance and toward becoming churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves. Congregations that had not already done so were urged to appoint a church disability advocate, adopt a church disability policy, and conduct an accessibility audit. Disability Concerns also sent a series of emails to RCA leaders and churches about the ADA, including video excerpts recorded in May 2020 with Sylvio Scorza, a wheelchair user and retired religion professor from Northwestern College who served as the RCA General Synod president in 1990. Scorza's president's report that year focused on the church's inclusion efforts.

Current Goals

Disability Concerns has been one of four Transformed & Transforming initiatives working since December 2019 on an equity-based hospitality framework to advise GSC staff to be more welcoming and hospitable to historically marginalized people groups. The first significant rollout of the equity-based hospitality framework values was a ten-week pilot learning journey called "From Outreach to Embracing," led by Denise Kingdom Grier. Some 80 registrants participated in regular breakout sessions throughout the ten weeks focused on disabilities, women, next generation, and racial equity.

In collaboration with the RCA's Next Generation staff, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns is developing a disability Sankofa virtual experience for 25 young people in their 20s to study the disability rights movement in North America and apply their own advocacy skills in community-based initiatives. Anyone under 30—sometimes referred to as the ADA Generation—understands inclusion to be a birthright, expecting public spaces and institutions to be accessible in every way, yet that is not the case in many churches. Through events like the disability Sankofa and the annual Disability Concerns Leadership Training, this theme will be highlighted in multiple events with a goal of engaging the next generation of church leaders and advocates.

DISCIPLESHIP

The Transformed & Transforming Discipleship guiding coalition defines a disciple as somebody who looks like Jesus (character) and who does the things that Jesus does (competency). This simple definition engages the two "greats" of Scripture—the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. In short, the focus and goal of the Discipleship leadership team and Discipleship guiding coalition is to help RCA churches to define a discipleship pathway that develops and deploys disciples who look and live like Jesus.

The Discipleship guiding coalition (led by Jeff Allen, Pat Dirkse, and Ruth Langkamp) is a collaborative team of discipleship practitioners from across the denomination. The coalition includes practitioners who are male, female, pastors, lay leaders, are from the east and west, are of various ethnic backgrounds, and who are from various mission contexts ranging from urban to suburban, church plants, smaller churches, larger churches, and mission outposts. This coalition of 12 “in the field” practitioners exists to connect leaders in conversation that often point to the provision of content, coaching, and the sharing of proven pathways that help teams move forward in community processes for adaptive change in their context.

Connections and Conversations

The guiding coalition engages in countless connection and conversation opportunities ranging from emails, phone and Zoom calls, and webinar and website interactions to classis and regional events across the vast geography of the denomination. These discussions frequently center around two questions: “What is your plan for discipleship?” and “How is that plan working?” Best practices are celebrated, and opportunities are extended that invite every RCA congregation to put in place a discipleship pathway (process or pipeline) that develops disciples who look like Jesus and who do the things that Jesus does in their context.

Content

In discussion with leaders, content is frequently a topic that comes up as churches look to move forward in the development of a disciple-making culture. A website, webinar, workshop, podcast, book, or a classis event are examples of Taste and See content opportunities provided to leaders and churches across the denomination. In initial conversations, guiding coalition members listen first, seeking to understand the unique needs and specific context of the leader and church. In the information age, content is abundant! As a result, listening is of utmost importance in order to discern and offer content suggestions that are helpful to leaders in their particular church and situation. In 2020, the RCA enabled increased access to content through the launch of an online learning platform via Faithward. As a part of this launch, Discipleship rolled out “Discipleship Begins with You,” a nine-month weekly coaching cohort for leaders in the RCA.

Coaching Cohorts

Coaching is, without a doubt, the most important step that leaders can take in their journey of discipleship. Why? It reflects a step of faith that demonstrates a personal commitment to move from “what is” to “what could be” as disciples and leaders. Further, this first step demonstrates humility and an understanding that as a leader, “I cannot expect people to follow me to a place that I have never gone before.” In this light, coaching can best be understood as inviting a Barnabas-like encourager to walk alongside the leader; that encourager is seeking to ignite and catalyze character and competency development that is directed by the Holy Spirit. On-ramp, or pilot, coaching is a frequent first step as leaders take a dip into new water for a brief season (usually six weeks). The frequency of coaching ranges from monthly to weekly (recommended to maximize relational connection and the pace of development) and invites leaders into an environment that provides both grace and truth—encouragement and challenge—to help the leader to grow personally as an example worthy of imitation in their particular congregational family. Coaching options can range from personal, to staff, to a consistory and/or classis, and the duration can be brief (six weeks) or can last multiple years. To start a conversation of

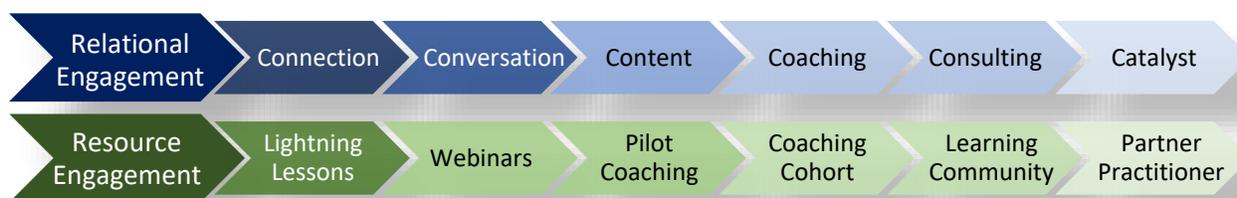
coaching possibilities for your context, contact Jeff Allen (jallen@rca.org), Pat Dirkse (pdirkse@rca.org), or Ruth Langkamp (rlangkamp@rca.org).

Communities and Change

While coaching frequently focuses on the development of character and competency in a leader, communities of learning are undoubtedly the most effective proven pathway for igniting adaptive change in a church family system. Learning communities involve teams of a minimum of three people each from multiple churches in a facilitated process that helps each team—called a Guiding Coalition for Change—to identify “what is,” to consider “what could be,” and then to develop objectives, strategies, and tactics to move forward into “what will be” in their particular church context. Learning communities provided in recent years include: Building a Discipling Culture, Growing Young, Cultivating Generous Congregations, Leadership Development, Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal), Faithwalking, Volunteer Engagement, and Local Missional Engagement. The RCA has developed relationships for coaching and learning community proven pathways with a number of partner ministries, including 3DMovements (3DM), Congregational Vitality Pathway, and Organic Outreach. The launch of a 100 percent virtual, online Cultivating a Multiplication Mindset learning community for RCA churches and leaders is planned for the early fall of 2021. For more information or to start a conversation about learning community options that best fit your context, contact Jeff Allen (jallen@rca.org), Pat Dirkse (pdirkse@rca.org), or Ruth Langkamp (rlangkamp@rca.org).

Progress

2020 provided challenges as well as opportunities to verify and clarify present offerings and future equipping needs of leaders who demonstrate a multiplication mindset. In particular, the Discipleship team fine-tuned a strategic proven pathway with multiple opportunities for engagement. This pathway is defined as follows:



Current Goals

Given the above, the Discipleship leadership team and the Discipleship guiding coalition will continue to move forward with the following goals and desired outcomes:

- Delivering “top of mind” awareness of the definition of a disciple as somebody who looks like Jesus (character) and who does the things that Jesus does (competency). (“Top of mind” awareness means communicating about something in a way that is so clear and consistent that people can state it “off the top of their mind.”)
- Delivering “top of mind” awareness of the discipleship focus on the questions “What is your plan for discipleship?” and “How is that plan working?” as well as provision of a

proven pathway and a pipeline for the development and deployment of disciple-making leaders who are engaging in a multiplication mindset.

- Providing tools and resources that make discipleship accessible, practical, memorable, and reproducible.
- Equipping and deploying partner practitioners who provide both “show” and “tell”; demonstrate both invitation (grace) and challenge (truth); and who equip as a “guide on the side” (someone who uses a mentoring/coaching approach) versus a “sage on the stage” (someone who sets themselves up as the expert with all the answers).
- Collaborating and engaging with strategic partners in order to live into a reimagined future focusing on discipleship, next generation engagement, leadership, local mission, and multiplication.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Who: The work of the Leadership Development initiative is guided by a coalition of pastors, regional executives, classis leaders, business entrepreneurs, and marketplace leaders representing different areas of specialized expertise in leadership development. The guiding coalition is led by staff member Sung Kim, who has been in this role (part-time) since November 2018 with support from leadership specialist Eduardo Rodriguez, who has been in this role (part-time) since June 2019.

What: The work of Leadership Development is to catalyze the multiplication of more and better leaders in ways that are smarter and faster than traditional methods of training both emerging and established leaders. Our goal is to develop leaders who demonstrate God-honoring character, emotionally healthy chemistry with others, and uniquely skilled competence where their “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (Frederick Buechner).

Why: We focus on leadership development because great and godly leaders transform the world. They lead teams, departments, and organizations that are more faithful and fruitful in every way. They are “humble, hungry, and smart” (Patrick Lencioni). At the same time, they understand that to lead others, you must first lead yourself.

How: We aim to accomplish our goal by (1) centralizing the most effective, research-based tools and resources and (2) decentralizing training and coaching at every level of the denomination, region, classis, and churches in the Reformed Church in America.

Progress

Leadership Development Cohorts

These cohorts are nine-month training intensives for leaders who long for deeper gospel transformation in themselves and in the world around them. They involve a 75- to 90-minute video call twice a month with a cohort of four to six other pastors. Nothing replaces the power of this simple twice-a-month rhythm for regular training, discussions, questions, and processing. The first call focuses on spiritual direction and emotional wellness. The second call focuses on practical strategies to increase the health and vitality of their churches. This process is also being used to identify and train leaders that can launch their own cohorts to multiply our impact.

- Senior Pastor Leadership Cohort: This cohort was launched on June 18, 2020, with a group of six senior pastors from all across the RCA. Pastors received real-time support,

encouragement, and equipping in areas ranging from staff management to developing a sustainable online ministry. This opportunity not only created a great learning environment but also a space for fellowship and emotional support during the turbulent and demanding season of COVID-19.

- Solo Pastor Leadership Cohort: This cohort was launched on September 24, 2020, with a group of five solo pastors under the age of 35 from all across the RCA. This group provided contextualized support and equipping for solo pastors who have their own unique set of opportunities and challenges—from the stress of wearing multiple hats, delegating tasks, and dealing with isolation to the stress of implementing change, navigating a pandemic, or handling any number of other unpredictable circumstances.

Courses

Leadership development courses are designed to provide equipping opportunities for ministry leaders who want to engage in a learning process to grow and develop their leadership. Courses are done via videoconferencing and span a variety of topics in leadership including self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership.

- Enneagram Made Simple, spring 2020: This six-session-long course launched on February 25, 2020, with eight church leaders who wanted to use the Enneagram not only as a tool to grow in their own self-awareness but also as a tool for their ministry leadership. In these sessions, we provided a framework of the Enneagram, described the nine personality types in-depth, and spoke to the various ways in which the Enneagram can enrich our personal, professional, and spiritual lives.
- Enneagram Made Simple, fall 2020: Due to the engagement and personal growth we witnessed in the spring Enneagram course, we offered a second opportunity for another group of eight church leaders to take this course on October 15, 2020.

Workshops

Leadership development workshops are designed to provide equipping opportunities for ministry leaders who want to engage in a learning process to grow and develop their leadership. Workshops are done via videoconferencing and span a variety of topics in leadership including self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership. All workshops allow for a follow-up one-on-one meeting with Leadership Development staff to discuss how participants can implement what they have learned in the workshop into their own context.

- Church Structure and Leadership Workshop: This online workshop took place on April 18, 2020, with 31 church leaders focused on organizing themselves to succeed in their mission. One of the most important topics for churches serious about being effective in their mission is church structure and leadership. It's true that a healthy church can operate with a poor governance model. It's also true that a church can follow a great model and still be unhealthy. However, if the goal is to remove roadblocks to effective ministry, empower leaders to lead as they have been charged by the Scriptures, and unleash the greatest number of people in meaningful ministry, then structure matters—a great deal.
- Leading in Times of Change: This workshop launched on August 15, 2020, with 29 church leaders aimed at equipping churches in the ever-changing landscape caused by

COVID-19 as it swept across the globe. The pandemic caused large cultural shifts that churches need to understand and navigate in order to succeed in a post-COVID world.

Consultations

Leadership development consultations allow for more personalized resourcing and support for churches that want to succeed in their mission and want their staff to succeed in leadership. Leadership Development staff have solutions that can help lead a church to write a new playbook that honors its mission and the communities it serves and makes the most of the church's resources.

- In 2020, 19 churches received a one-on-one consultation with Leadership Development staff to implement core leadership development concepts in their church. This personalized equipping allows us to go deeper rather than wider and go beyond the theoretical into real-world situations.

Resources

Leadership Development's resources are all researched-based, centralized, and relevant for today and tomorrow.

- **Core Strengths:** Core Strengths provides the opportunity for church leaders to better understand and appreciate themselves and the people they work with, which allows everyone to more effectively deal with high-stakes situations and deliver stronger results. Core Strengths equips ministry leaders with the necessary skills to engage in opposing viewpoints, promote healthy opposition, and resolve conflict that can lead to more collaboration and help adapt to future realities. Leadership Development staff are certified Core Strengths facilitators and are able to provide this service at a fraction of the actual cost for churches in our system.

Current Goals

Leadership Development Cohorts

- **Rural Pastor Leadership Cohort:** After speaking with rural pastors, Leadership Development staff recognized the unique challenges and opportunities of ministering in a rural context. These cohorts will be launched in coordination with rural leaders to provide an opportunity that will help pastors navigate the ups and downs of rural ministry.
- **Solo Pastor Leadership Cohort:** Due to the strong response of the first cohort, we are poised to provide another cohort experience for solo pastors.
- **Women's Transformation and Leadership Cohort:** This cohort will be a collaboration with Women's Transformation and Leadership to provide the cohort experience for church leaders in their system.
- **Latino Pastor Leadership Cohort:** This cohort will be a collaboration with the Classis de las Naciones to serve Latino leaders in their region and address the challenges and opportunities in their context. This will also allow Leadership Development to provide its cohort experience in Spanish for the growing number of Spanish-speaking people in the denomination.

- Church Planter Leadership Cohort: Pending conversations with Church Multiplication, Leadership Development hopes to provide its cohort experience for church planters in the RCA system. Church planters have an array of challenges and opportunities before them; Leadership Development believes that its cohort experience can provide the support, equipping, and experience that will allow church planters to succeed in their mission.
- First Call Leadership Cohort: This cohort is meant to provide first call pastors with the support they need to thrive. The first call experience has often been referred to as a second seminary, where the learning experience is centered on taking theory into practice. The transition can be rocky, so we want to provide the appropriate support, resourcing, and mentorship that allows first call pastors to succeed in their new leadership position and their future ministry opportunities.
- Large Church Leadership Cohort: This cohort will be in collaboration with church leaders from southern California and is meant to equip churches with a weekly attendance of 500 people and greater. This cohort will have six to eight church pastors along with three to five of their church leaders. It will be a blended learning process with both virtual and in-person gatherings.

Courses

- Advanced Enneagram: This is a continuation of the Enneagram Made Simple Course, providing an opportunity for church leaders to dive deeper into the true complexity of Enneagram.
- Enneagram Made Simple for Ministry and Teams: There has been a strong request from church leaders to provide a course that trains leaders to use the Enneagram as a discipleship tool that can be used in their ministry context.

Workshops

- Well-being: Building Resilience and Avoiding Burnout: This workshop will help participants question the long-term viability and sustainability of the ways that we work, highlighting ways of working that, if left neglected, can produce stress, conflict, physical and mental ill health, and exhaustion. It will help participants develop skills and practices to help them make changes in their day-to-day lives that will support their well-being and explore ways of working that keep themselves and their communities sustained, nourished, and effective in mission.
- Digital Strategies to Reach the Next Generation: In collaboration with Next Generation Engagement, Everest Leadership Network, and RCA communication staff, Leadership Development will be providing opportunities for churches to develop or strengthen their digital communication strategies, allowing them to make meaningful connections with the next generation.
- Church Structure and Leadership: Due to the strong positive response to the church structure and leadership workshop, Leadership Development will be developing this workshop into an online resource that churches can access anytime and anywhere.

Consultations

- Multi-site: Leadership Development will be providing one-on-one consulting with churches to develop multi-site strategies that promote growth and sustainability.

- Leadership Transition: Leadership Development will be providing one-on-one consulting with churches to develop leadership transition strategies to promote clarity, health, and sustainability.

LOCAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC MINISTRY INITIATIVES

Local Missional Engagement

Local Missional Engagement (LME) helps churches discern what God is doing in their church and in their communities and helps explore ways to bring those things together. LME focuses on five pillars for its work for coaching and equipping:

- Faith sharing: The work of evangelism in corporate and individual settings.
- Christian community development: Best Christian practices for community renewal, including asset based community development and robust community partnerships.
- Good neighboring: Practicing the art of neighboring as both a congregation and individuals, in the church and home community.
- Advocacy: The work of biblically centered justice, giving our time, talent, and treasure to spaces that are working to dismantle unjust systems.
- Missional imagination: Reigniting the idea of possibility and hopefulness for the church's engagement with its community and neighbors, inspiring courageous action and out-of-the-box thinking for kingdom impact.

As part of Transformed & Transforming, LME exists to help churches have dedicated pathways to be agents of change and renewal in their communities. LME is led by Eliza Cortés Bast, who also stewards the Strategic Ministry Initiatives. LME also houses two part-time staff people: Laura Osborne, as the coordinator for interreligious relations, and Eduardo Rodriguez, whose work is shared with Leadership Development, as the specialist for Leadership and Local Missional Engagement. In 2020, with the retirement of Earl James, Eduardo has also acquired the RCA's advocacy work and staffs the Commission on Christian Action.

Strategic Ministry Initiatives

Strategic Ministry Initiatives encompasses the collaborative and innovative work for equipping in the RCA. Throughout 2020, it has included the stewarding of the Lilly Endowment's Flourishing Churches grant, titled the Renovations Project. It also includes the development of Faithward.org as a digital equipping space, including supervision and implementation of the online learning platform and podcasts. In addition, it includes the management of the Church Growth Fund's Flourishing Churches grant process.

Progress

Like many other Transformed & Transforming initiatives, as well as for local congregations, the pandemic and social unrest presented a unique challenge in LME's missional work with churches. We quickly realized that part of our work was returning to an ethos of care and relationship building with local leaders as we all were trying to make sense of the moment we were in. LME gives thanks to God for the work that we saw this year and for the courageous ways churches tried new ideas and people shared their faith in new ways. Whether over Zoom or via a socially distanced prayer walk in their neighborhood, or advocacy in their local structures, the people of the RCA found many ways to express their missional hearts for their

neighbors and communities. LME celebrates the hard, adaptive work as well as the people who came to faith in 2020!

This year, LME saw the pivot to collaborative online learning opportunities as we hosted learning events in the Mid-Atlantic and the Far West with other initiative leaders in Transformed & Transforming. LME also joined with Women's Transformation and Leadership to assist with their online gatherings for equipping around mission for Building God's Church Together. Resources were updated through the LME guiding coalition and LME staff to reflect the realities of local mission in a pandemic space. Materials such as prayer walk guides were re-released through Faithward and other avenues to assist individuals and churches to adapt their missional work while socially distanced. Eduardo continues to assist with the dismantling racism work that is hosted by Women's Transformation and Leadership as one of five facilitators for the 1 Corinthians 13 Project.

The shift in online gathering also allowed the LME staff to provide tailored, contextualized consulting and coaching for churches and missional ministry leaders who were looking to both dream and adapt. Eliza and Eduardo were able to use the best of trusted partners and resources such as the Evangelism Leadership Fellows, Amplify, the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), Rooted Good (formerly Matryoshka House), and Faith-Rooted, alongside the work of local resources.

LME also participated in the deployment of disaster relief funds from Global Mission to support the relief efforts of RCA churches throughout North America in addressing the impact of COVID-19 in their local communities. Through Eduardo, we also co-hosted a joint COVID relief fund with the Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) World Renew. This fund also released much-needed funds to churches that were struggling with the local impact of the pandemic. Eduardo continues his work and connection with the CRCNA through a Community of Practice.

The interreligious work also saw a fruitful year, initiating and strengthening partnerships with the CRCNA, Shoulder to Shoulder, the National Council of Churches' Interreligious Convening Table, Religions for Peace USA, Journey into Friendship, and more. These groups continue to focus their work on the intersection of faith and justice on issues such as the diaspora, immigration and refugees, and more. Laura is also stewarding three learning communities highlighting interreligious work, with emphases on faith sharing, hospitality in the time of COVID-19, and college campus ministry with international students.

Although Transformed & Transforming has always housed many special projects, the work of Strategic Ministry Initiatives was introduced in late 2020. Throughout the year, Eliza had been gathering resources and ideas to implement new strategies for equipping. Much of this work was done through the work of Faithward.org—a digital inspiration of the RCA. The Faithward leadership team saw more than 240,000 people visit the site last year, divided almost evenly among age demographics. Out of the top ten articles most visited, we were grateful to see users not connected with the RCA look for articles on how to become a Christian and learning about God's love, as well as resources such as the Jesse Tree and Lent devotions. Faithward housed our resources for COVID, lament, and dismantling racism. Faithward had almost half a million page visits during the calendar year.

With many thanks to Barb Ellis of Transformed & Transforming and Matt Seybert in IT, Faithward beta-tested an online learning platform in late 2020, hosting the Women's Transformation and Leadership leadership collaboratives as well as discipleship cohorts. Faithward also began building the infrastructure to support a podcast network. Our desire is to see thought leaders from throughout the RCA and beyond continue to provide blog-based articles that inform our work as we continue to craft learning content and opportunities to serve the motivated local leader.

In addition, Strategic Ministry Initiatives launched Renovations, a Lilly-funded program that focuses on taking the best of our sacred and treasured traditions and reimagining them for the future of the church. Birthed out of a listening session in 2019, Renovations has gathered diverse field experts and leaders who are shaping the Christian church for the future. This project was intended to launch with in-person gatherings in 2020. However, due to COVID, it has shifted to a digital-first format, with sessions professionally recorded to launch on the online learning platform through Faithward.

Current Goals

LME will continue to provide updated resources, through coaching, consulting, and training that reflect local mission in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. This includes webinars, classes, and additional support, both physically and digitally to accommodate our current context. It will also, with the help of its guiding coalition, update printed materials and craft new ones for churches. This also includes unique and innovative approaches to hospitality and community engagement, such as the "Food for Faith" blog and other resources that integrate making disciples, ministry multiplication, and missional engagement. LME will also continue to explore stronger avenues of community development, including partnership with Oikos Accelerator, a program that helps individuals launch social entrepreneurship ventures.

Advocacy will broaden its work by networking "boots on the ground" leaders who are participating in the justice and advocacy space throughout North America. For 2021 and beyond, our hope is to have local pastors and leaders who are on the front edge of this work in the RCA connected with one another and to curate resources and support for their work. In addition, our hope is to continue to elevate the thrust of their work as it relates to the goals of Transformed & Transforming, particularly in the work of a multicultural future free from racism.

As coordinator for interreligious relations, Laura is excited for the launch of the Faith over Fear trainings, as well as the continued work of Journey into Friendships with the CRCNA. In addition, she will continue her work with all of our partners to further the work of interfaith dialogue and how it relates to RCA churches and local communities. Last, she continues to build and bridge resources to help people share their faith with those of another religion for the cause of Christ.

Strategic Ministry Initiatives will continue to build out the digital equipping and resource arm of the RCA, strengthening its offerings by increasing online learning and podcast opportunities. The online learning platform will house both synchronous and asynchronous offerings, assisting leaders to choose when and how their learning can happen. In addition, we will release our recordings for the Renovations Project. We will recruit churches for the learning cohort model, as well as release the offerings for asynchronous learning.

NEXT GENERATION ENGAGEMENT

Next Generation Engagement seeks to empower young adults, ministry teams, and congregational leaders to create a culture of intergenerational ministry—that is, all people of all ages serving in leadership positions at the church, classis, and denominational levels. Intergenerational ministry reframes the mental model of young people in the church; we are no longer seeking to “keep” these young people in our congregations. Instead, this ministry seeks to empower young leaders and congregations to serve one another into future ministry endeavors. Anna Radcliffe is the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement, Ruth Langkamp serves as the Next Generation Engagement program specialist, Erika Fleming serves as the administrative assistant, and Becky Getz serves as the communication coach.

Progress

More than 32 congregations have participated in Growing Young learning communities over the past three years. This spring, Next Generation Engagement is set to launch another completely virtual learning community in partnership with Fuller Youth Institute and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). We expect to launch with ten more congregations. Next Generation Engagement, in collaboration with the CRCNA, has successfully taken in a process called Generation Spark. Originated by Hope College, Generation Spark is a 12-week-long mentoring process that comes alongside young and older leaders to invest in their spiritual formation and community involvement. We have launched a pilot process with ten congregations. We are also in the process of listening to the 40 former participating congregations to better develop the process for greater effectiveness. Generation Spark is expected to make a denomination-wide release in fall 2021.

Next Generation Engagement has been participating in an ecumenical Christian movement hosted by Fuller Youth Institute called Ten by 10. This movement includes participating organizations like the Barna Group, Orange, and more than 40 denominations. This movement is discerning how to best prioritize the spiritual formation of young people by creating awareness and resourcing for more than 100,000 congregations. The aim of this movement is that millions of young people would encounter the radical love of Jesus.

Next Generation Engagement has begun facilitating more intentional space for children’s ministry leaders. Contractor Shelley Henning hosted three round table discussions to better hear from these leaders their hopes and expectations. Several leaders from around the U.S. and Canada participated in these conversations. These leaders elevated the need for someone to coordinate leaders, create spaces for processing, and develop coaches to continue building out contextualized resourcing and formational experiences for young people. Shelley currently has five coaches from around the U.S. undergoing coaching training. In addition, she hosts monthly conversations for any and all ministry leaders to process. She regularly has between 10 and 30 ministry leaders participating.

Next Generation Engagement has participated in the equity-based hospitality equipping event facilitated by Women’s Transformation and Leadership with nearly 80 participants from around the denomination. We have provided awareness about how leaders can begin the work of next generation inclusion and intergenerational equipping. Following the conclusion of this training, we will offer an exploratory webinar for those interested in developing next generation ministry strategies.

Through the work and support of communications editor Becky Getz and Next Generation specialist Ruth Langkamp, Next Generation Engagement's online presence aims to resource and equip all leaders to better work intergenerationally. Our priority is about building awareness around the current state of the church as it relates to youth. Over this past year, this resource has expanded to more than 600 subscribers.

Next Generation Engagement continues to deepen its partnership with the CRCNA through many collaborative efforts, including a joint leadership/guiding coalition strategy designed to equip local leaders to advocate for youth and young adults at classis and regional levels. Six regional leaders serve to connect with congregations and classis leaders across the denomination. We have begun developing a joint denominational database locating all CRCNA and RCA campus ministries across the U.S. and Canada.

Next Generation Engagement serves as the lead development team for podcast development for the RCA. We have partnered with Women's Transformation and Leadership to launch the Lavish Hope podcast. In March, we will release a podcast in partnership with Disability Concerns. Additionally, we will launch a podcast to promote the six defining characteristics of an intergenerational congregation.

Despite the pandemic, we continue to give thanks to God for all of the congregations that have adapted and made strategic changes to include all people in their communities. During a season when mental health has been particularly challenging among young people, this change has led to lasting impact that will exist beyond this COVID year.

Current Goals

Despite the difficulty of this season, we continue to rejoice and celebrate the ongoing goals for the upcoming 2020–2021 year. Over the next year, our team hopes to:

- Build out Next Generation Engagement resourcing for motivated leaders through our newsletter, podcasts, and other social media networks to promote awareness of next generation engagement issues.
- Launch Generation Spark, a mentoring process, to promote intergenerational relationships within worshiping communities; in addition, launch another Growing Young learning community to develop awareness and equipping in congregations to better engage all generations of leaders.
- Begin developing resources and connections for parents and youth leaders to better engage and come alongside the faith formation of youth and young adults.
- Continue developing classis catalysts, through the Next Generation Engagement guiding coalition, to promote awareness of Next Generation Engagement and appropriate equipping opportunities, ongoing needs, and necessary culture shifts for better development of next generation leaders.
- Strategize and soft launch the Ten by 10 movement—an awareness campaign facilitated by the Fuller Youth Institute, joining over 40 denominations and key thought leaders like Barna, Orange, and others to prioritize the faith formation of youth and young adults.

SHORT-TERM MISSION

The Short-Term Mission initiative (previously known as Volunteer Engagement) is focused on empowering, equipping, and engaging RCA volunteers of all ages in service for Christ through

short-term mission opportunities that have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities in which they serve. We believe that as people serve in short-term mission in the name of Christ, whether in their local community or around the world, that service can have long-term impact on all participants.

This team is focused on supporting congregations and equipping Christians for service with RCA missionaries and mission partners. We work with mission trip leaders and participants throughout the planning process, providing support on-field and helping ensure effective debriefing and follow-through.

Short-Term Mission is led by Stephanie Soderstrom.

Four Areas of Focus

1. **Mission Trips:** Working with local, long-term ministries, mission teams can help meet needs, build relationships, and share the hope of Christ. Mission trips are available for teams of all ages.
2. **Disaster Response:** When disaster strikes, RCA volunteers can help provide much-needed support in the months and years that follow. The RCA partners with World Renew - Disaster Response Services for domestic disaster response in the United States and Canada.
3. **Individual Volunteer Opportunities:** Opportunities are available for students and adults to serve for a few weeks or up to two years alongside RCA missionaries and partners. The Cultivate program, launched in 2018, provides individual opportunities for young people (ages 18–25), to serve alongside RCA missionaries and mission partners for either a summer or a year.
4. **Church Equipping:** Working with RCA churches, we will offer resources, training, and equipping processes to help them take their next step in short-term mission. These equipping resources will be available to churches that serve through the RCA and those that do not.

Many RCA churches have been engaged in short-term mission trips for years. Short-Term Mission's vision is to become value-added for these churches as well as churches that are new to engaging in short-term mission. Additionally, we will seek to engage individuals, especially the next generation, in dynamic mission opportunities and internships that allow them to utilize their unique gifts to contribute to the long-term goals of our mission partners.

Progress

Shortly after the beginning of the 2020 calendar year, the reality of COVID-19 and its impact on health and safety, especially as it relates to travel, became apparent. The work of Short-Term Mission has been greatly impacted by the global pandemic. We worked quickly with our partners to cancel mission trips that were planned for spring break and the summer of 2020 and made recommendations to all churches to cancel or postpone trips to all partners. Over the course of the calendar year, we made pivots in order to continue to support and equip our churches and partners as they continue to engage missionally, even when this means doing so without traveling.

The Cultivate program had three volunteers serving internationally at the beginning of 2020. We are thankful that we were able to quickly and safely coordinate their return to the United States.

Since March 2020, Cultivate has been on hold, as many of our sites are located in countries where travel is restricted, where community spread of COVID-19 remains high, or where access to high-quality healthcare is limited.

During the 2020 calendar year, the Next Generation Missional Engagement Scholarship fund awarded six scholarships, amounting to \$9,075 and benefitting 31 young people.

The Short-Term Mission team worked with mission partners to facilitate options for virtual engagement with the mission field. Virtual prayer walks were created for three mission partners (Many Hands for Haiti, Sethshabelo Family and Child Services, and the Presbyterian Church of Manaus [IPM]). A virtual partner gathering was held with the European Church Planting Partnership, Hungarian church planters from four locations, and supporting churches from the United States.

Current Goals

As we move forward, RCA Short-Term Mission is focused on continuing to support congregations in sending groups and individuals on mission trips when it is safe to do so. Our goal is to assist as many congregations and individuals as possible in planning mission trips. This will include helping groups and individuals find places to serve, providing equipping resources related to mission trip best practices, offering coaching calls for trip leaders, and awarding the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund Scholarship. We will also work to facilitate continued connection to the mission field using virtual methods, including prayer walks, gatherings, and one-on-one church connections with mission partners.

In 2021, we plan to release templates for planning mission trips with COVID-19 in mind (currently available on Faithward.org), short video trainings related to short-term mission basics, and continually updated best practices related to COVID-19 and short-term mission.

We plan to continue offering wrap-around support for mission trips with specific Global Mission partners and hope to increase that service when it is safe to do so. We will also recruit young adults for mission service through the Cultivate program and hope to reintroduce the program in the 2021–2022 year with increased safety measures and with partners in locations where it is possible for citizens of the U.S. and Canada to travel.

WOMEN'S TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP

Women's Transformation and Leadership has been established as part of Transformed & Transforming to help the Reformed Church in America pursue a vision for the full inclusion of women's gifts and influence in all areas of the church and beyond. Liz Testa leads the Women's Transformation and Leadership team. Lorraine Parker serves as part-time administrative partner, and Lesley Mazzotta is the part-time education and facilitation specialist. A cross-sector group of RCA leaders serves as the guiding coalition, helping to champion the mission, create and lead new processes, provide critical insights, and contribute as regional facilitators, teachers, and organizers for Women's Transformation and Leadership.

The past year has required many pivots, and Women's Transformation and Leadership has kept pace alongside Transformed & Transforming to move from "2.0" to "3.0" in real time, continuing our guiding coalition's commitment to a Holy Spirit-given vision to go "deep and wide." By moving nimbly to maximize virtual connections and digital resources, we have expanded

engagement and resources among our ministry's constituents as well as with Transformed & Transforming initiatives, Global Mission, the RCA racial/ethnic councils, ecumenical partners, and beyond. In doing so, we have multiplied and strengthened our commitment to encourage, equip, and empower women of diverse generations, geographic, racial/ethnic, and cultural contexts to experience Christ-centered transformation, develop leadership skills, and live vibrantly into their God-given gifts and callings as they, in turn, invite others to do the same (disciples who make disciples). An essential component of this endeavor is coming alongside leaders and congregations as they seek to welcome the gifts that women bring; invest in healthy, flourishing ministry partnerships between men and women; and catalyze lasting, sustainable change. By doing so, we usher in a vision of God's reign where sisters and brothers serve together to build and strengthen the body of Christ for mission in a world that so desperately needs to know the love, hope, grace, and healing that Jesus brings.

Women's Transformation and Leadership lives out this vision via five interwoven pathways: innovation, connecting, equipping, equity, and legacy.

Innovation

Women's Transformation and Leadership is an innovation incubator of new ideas for women-based initiatives as well as broader church culture shifts that help welcome women's gifts more fully and shape change in gracious, intentional ways. We create space for our guiding coalition's dreams and visions to be cultivated, developed, and launched. Examples in this past year include developing the Lavish Hope: Stories of Resilience and Overcoming podcast and creating interactive, transformational virtual gatherings that have 1) increased the impact of already-planned projects such as the Women of the Bible Study series, 2) sparked new foci such as spiritual direction and dismantling racism, and 3) fostered hopeful, supportive interpersonal connections among a far-reaching cross-section of diverse ministry leaders in the midst of a traumatic and isolating season.

Connecting

Women's Transformation and Leadership encourages women of diverse contexts and callings through the She is Called/Ella es Llamada campaign and network and offers transformational spaces to grow through Honoring Our Stories and Rekindle in-person events and virtual gatherings. During this season of pandemic restrictions, we have increased our digital presence via Facebook groups, Instagram, a quarterly e-newsletter, and resources available on our website and Faithward, and we continue to offer our She is Called T-shirts via our "pop-up shop" in Queens, New York, that Lorraine Parker oversees. We collaborate with RCA seminaries, the Commission for Women and other commissions, other Transformed & Transforming initiatives, and GSC staff to empower women in ministry and intentionally include their gifts, influence, and leadership in our assemblies.

Equipping

Women's Transformation and Leadership supports established and emerging women leaders through the She Is Called leadership collaboratives and Purposeful Living process (currently in English and Spanish). We support motivated leaders via the She Is Called Women's network with coaching, sponsorship, and spiritual direction opportunities as women seek God's calling on their lives and become well-equipped, confident, Jesus-centered leaders who, in turn, do the same for others. We create global mission experiences that are women-centered, offering North

American women and men the unique opportunity to meet our global mission partners in their contexts, learn about global women's history and contemporary issues, and develop a Christian response as leaders and ministry influencers.

Equity

Women's Transformation and Leadership ensures all women have barrier-free access to RCA resources and opportunities. We equip congregations and other contexts to welcome the gifts women bring and to nurture thriving ministry partnerships between men and women through the Building God's Church Together ministry. We created lasting change via the We Are Speaking call to action statement, and we continue to provide tuition assistance to part- and full-time, in-residence and distance learner female seminarians through the historic Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund. We are expanding into equity-based hospitality and dismantling racism initiatives, drawing the circle wider to include generations, disabilities, and race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds.

Legacy

Women's Transformation and Leadership celebrates the rich history of women in the RCA, past and present, laity and clergy, from all different backgrounds and contexts, through the "RCA Women: A Legacy of Leadership" booklet (updated with 33 new women in spring 2021), women's Sankofa journeys, Women's Stories Day (in partnership with NBTS's Reformed Church Center), the She Is Called/Ella es Llamada campaign, and the newly forming Women's Oral History Exhibit on the RCA website.

Progress

Virtual Responses to Pandemic

When COVID-19 began to affect North America in March 2020, Women's Transformation and Leadership quickly realized the need to pivot and create opportunities that continued to connect, encourage, and equip RCA leaders for this challenging and uncertain time. We created weekly virtual gatherings that helped leaders find innovative ways to offer ministry support to their congregants despite masks and social distancing, in the midst of pandemic restrictions and shut downs. These gatherings created sacred space for people to reflect on the personal and community challenges they faced, finding solidarity, prayer partners, and creative ideas for concerns ranging from online worship planning to rising domestic violence rates. From these initial sessions, longer-term thematic series were created. Overall, from March to December 2020, 72 virtual gatherings with a total of 1,510 participants were held.

The themed series include spiritual direction, dismantling racism, and the Women of the Bible study series. To attend to pressing mental and spiritual health needs, Lesley Mazzotta has offered spiritual direction sessions, one-on-one and in small groups. One group of 12 women leaders continues to meet weekly. When the racial tension in the U.S. reached a fevered level in late May 2020, Women's Transformation and Leadership offered virtual gatherings for storytelling and reflection, which has grown into a multi-faceted ministry, including the dismantling racism prayer discipleship track and an equipping track that connects with the racial justice and advocacy arm of Local Missional Engagement. Women's Transformation and Leadership took the She is Called Bible study series, volume 1, that was slated for print release in conjunction with Women in Ministry Sunday on May 17, 2020, and pivoted to offer it as a free

digital PDF for the whole church to access; as of February 23, 2021, it had been downloaded more than 600 times and received an inspiring nearly 55,000 page views on Faithward.org. This study guide proved to be especially inspiring to women seeking to dig deeper into God's call on their lives in this season, using nine biblical stories to catalyze their transformation and growth as leaders. An average of 65 people gathered weekly from July to September for a virtual "master class" hosted by Women's Transformation and Leadership and taught by a different author each week, including Tim Breen, Rob Dixon, Denise Kingdom Grier, Dustyn Keepers, Micah McCreary, Pam Otten, Denise Posie, Alisha Riepma, and Terry Ann Smith. A bi-weekly "reunion" series continued from October to December with an average of 20 women per session, co-led by Pam Otten and Liz Testa. As the pandemic continues to restrict travel and large group events, all of these virtual offerings will continue to go "deep and wide" throughout 2021.

Connection Events

Women's Transformation and Leadership was actively traveling in early 2020, prior to the March shutdown, with visits to Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, for workshops with students, faculty, and staff and chapel worship; Mission 2020 in Orlando, Florida, meeting with the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries' executive committee women and serving as She is Called ambassadors; NYC-area events including meetings with our South Africa mission sisters, Denise Kingdom Grier and Keabetsoe Sekoboto; and our final in-person event before the shutdown, "Rekindle NYC: Sisterships in Mission," highlighting four women living into their missional callings (Lesley Mazzotta, Deepika Srivastava, JJ TenClay, and Caroline Verkaik) and drawing attendees from 19 different churches across the tri-state area.

Spring 2020 Virtual Events

Three events scheduled for spring 2020 moved successfully to virtual formats:

- The Transformed & Transforming event with the Classis of California, focusing on small churches, local mission, and women and men in ministry. This led to The Rock Church in Los Angeles doing a summer series around Building God's Church Together.
- The fourth annual Women's Stories Day, "The Courage to be Honest," with Lynn Japinga, Lynn Min, Pamela Pater Ennis, and Irma Williams, co-hosted with the Reformed Church Center of New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
- Women in Ministry Sunday (May 17, 2020) was reimagined for a virtual audience, complete with companion resources and the Women of the Bible study series, volume 1 made available digitally. At the invitation of Sally Ann Castle, Liz Testa worshiped with Community Church of Douglaston in Queens, New York, preaching for their live virtual service.

Equipping Processes

Equipping processes continued throughout 2020 given their mostly virtual format. One major advancement in 2020 has been to move leadership collaboratives (LC) to the Faithward Learn online learning platform as of fall 2020.

The following seven She Is Called one-year leadership collaborative were completed or launched in 2020:

- Midland Reformed Church, Midland, Michigan, cohort led by Cheryl Heal
- NYC area multicultural/multiracial cohort led by Marilyn Correa and Lesley Mazzotta

- Regional Synod of Canada cohort led by Jennifer Lucking
- Central Plains Classis cohort led by Andrea Godwin
- Chicagoland cohort led by Jewel Willis Thomas
- West Michigan cohort led by Marcia Bosma
- Pacific Northwest cohort led by Rebecca Wulkan

Sixty-seven motivated leaders have been impacted by these small group cohorts.

In addition to the one-year LC, a new ten-week learning journey was developed and piloted. Purposeful Living: She is Called edition (Vida con Propósito; Edición Ella es Llamada), co-created by Karla Camacho and Asbei Sonia Loera Castro, is unique in that it is the first such process written first in Spanish and now being translated into English to be our first Spanish-native bilingual curriculum.

An exciting need and opportunity arose in 2020. As women felt God calling them to more education and equipping for ministry through the Women of the Bible study series and the NYC women's leadership collaborative, Women's Transformation and Leadership partnered with New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create the She is Called cohort of NBTS's fully online two-year certificate program in Church Leadership and Theological Studies. Ten RCA women from New York and New Jersey are journeying together through this eight-course program as they discern becoming preaching elders, master's degree candidates, and better prepared ministry leaders, with expected graduation dates of May or December 2022.

Current Goals

Connection Events

As pandemic concerns continue to curtail in-person events, Women's Transformation and Leadership will continue our current virtual gatherings as long as needed. We are also developing "signature events" and exploring safely distanced transformational leadership events. This includes a virtual Rekindle event in spring 2021 and potential small group retreats in New York/New Jersey in fall 2021, and a women's Sankofa journey through New York state (most likely for spring 2022).

Purposeful Living Cohorts

Purposeful Living Cohorts are planned in the United States' southwest region for spring 2021 (Spanish or bilingual for young girls, multi-age women leaders, and one with a focus on trauma healing), and other cohorts will potentially form in New York City and other regions as requested.

Resources

The *She Is Called Women of the Bible* study series, a Building God's Church Together (BGCT) resource, has been created as a companion to the four-part BGCT study that helps congregations embrace women and men serving together in healthier, vibrant ways. Editors April Fiet and Travis West and artist Crystal Wright (an RCA member and watercolor artist) are the main team for this three-volume series that takes biblical women's stories deeper, creating a study that is meant for everyone to engage in. It meets an articulated need in the church for fresh, accessible studies for all, coming from a Reformed perspective. Women's Transformation

and Leadership is praying for the same enthusiastic response to the virtual resources with the release of the English and Spanish print editions of volume 1 in spring 2021, with chapters contributed by a diverse group of RCA and ecumenical pastors and scholars. In addition, an online process on Faithward Learn will become available for self-guided or cohort engagement with synchronous and asynchronous learning options. Fundraising for volumes 2 and 3 began in late 2020, and we have raised \$10,705 to date, moving toward our goal of \$15,000. Work on volume 2 is in process, with most chapters submitted and the editing process under way. The anticipated release of Volume 2 is summer to early fall 2021. New She Is Called “& Me” T-shirts will be designed for the new list of biblical women and continue to help raise funds for women’s leadership development.

The Building God’s Church Together four-part study is also being prepared for the Faithward Learn platform by Lesley Mazzotta in consultation with Rob Dixon and April Fiet, with contributions from Pete Watts and Israel Camacho, and will be available by late spring 2021 for synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Lavish Hope, Stories of Resilience and Overcoming podcast, hosted by Liz Testa, has launched its first series of eight episodes, which are being highlighted weekly through the end of March 2021. This podcast is part of our focus on going “deep and wide”—deeper with our RCA constituents and wider with a broader audience of church and unchurched people, many of them in the 18–35 age bracket. Season one’s guests include a diverse group of women and men serving in an inspiring variety of contexts: Jael Serrano Altamirano, Rachel Lohman, Niccie Kliegl, Micah McCreary, Donna Owusu-Ansah, Vanessa Pollock, Mario Sprouse, and Lauralyn Vasquez. Each one offers tips and tools to help listeners embrace lavish hope and build resiliency as Christ-followers in today’s world. The production and marketing teams have done a phenomenal job of creating a top-quality finished product.

She Is Called Global Mission Experiences

Planning for upcoming She Is Called global learning experience trips continues, with much of the leg work completed to put details in place as soon as COVID guidelines allow global travel. Tentative dates are set for November 2021 for another She Is Called Holy Land trip for men and women leaders (partnering with Sally and Josh Vis), as well as ongoing conversations with our missionary colleagues Lia and Thiago Dantas in Brazil to offer a global experience with a women-centered, medical mission focus in 2022.

Intentional Focus on the Multicultural Future Freed from Racism

The development of an equity-based hospitality framework for Transformed & Transforming that embeds cultural agility around gender, race/ethnicity, generations, and disabilities into our initiative areas and leadership, with ripple effect into other ministries, continues to be led by Liz Testa. The initial team, comprised of Terry DeYoung, Earl James, and Stephanie Soderstrom, has expanded to include Anna Radcliffe, Ruth Langkamp, Grace Ruitter, Eduardo Rodriguez, Lorraine Parker, and Lesley Mazzotta as we have moved from the design to the implementation phase.

In addition to developing key definitions, a set of guiding values, and resources focusing on biblical hospitality, we contracted with Denise Kingdom Grier to facilitate From Outreach to Embracing: a Model for Equity-Based Hospitality, adapted for us and based on her doctoral work. Seventy-eight registrants from across the RCA and CRC are going through this ten-week

learning journey from mid-January to mid-March, engaging Denise's four-movement process grounded in the Gospel of John and centered around four Transformed & Transforming-based hospitality foci of disabilities, generations, race/cultural backgrounds, and women, with three additional themes of class, laity/clergy, and inside/outside the church interwoven throughout. Off-ramps are being developed from this journey to offer participants concrete next steps to deep their learning and bring resources back to their home contexts.

As part of her work with equity-based hospitality, Liz serves the GSC staff as a resource and guide to help ensure cultural agility and embracing of diversity is lived into. As such, she sits on the communication campaign teams alongside Christina Tazelaar and other colleagues as they create and shape content for the various themes, with goals and benchmarks pertaining to each one.

In response to the pressing racial and ethnic justice concerns that emerged between April and June 2020, there has been a Spirit-led focus on addressing racism, which was planted in 2020 and is beginning to take root and grow in 2021. In collaboration with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), the Commission on Christian Action (CCA), Maple Avenue Ministries, and New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), Women's Transformation and Leadership helped catalyze responses calling the church to stand in solidarity with Asian Americans suffering bias attacks and to create intentional processes for dismantling racism, particularly as it pertains to Black people in the United States. Women's Transformation and Leadership guiding coalition member Denise Kingdom Grier introduced us to the 1 Cor. 13 Project (www.1cor13project.com) as a way to engage this challenging work.

From that has emerged the dismantling racism prayer gatherings, led by Nancy Boote, Micheal Edwards, and a diverse group of leaders. Plans are also in place for various learning processes in 2021, including a cohort of white ministry leaders to go through the one-year Beyond Words: Count Us in Movement with Leah Ennis as the group's coordinator and support from Pete Watts, who introduced this opportunity to our team. Liz Testa and Eduardo Rodriguez are creating a bridge between the discipleship-based dismantling work toward more action-focused missional engagement next steps.

Another key connection in 2020 has been the bridge building that has occurred with Lorraine Parker's new responsibilities as administrative assistant to the African American Black Council (AABC), opening up a clear pathway for exciting collaboration opportunities and alignment of priorities.

VIBRANT CONGREGATIONS

Note: Vibrant Congregations is a joint ministry of the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA).

Vibrant Congregations exists to help congregations take fresh steps in ministry and mission. We invite congregations into a hopeful and welcoming space where they can discern a pathway to God's given future. In this space, they find hope rooted in God's will for their congregation. We also provide behind-the-scenes research and work to make this possible.

Central to this work is taking a congregation through a discernment process to discover their best partner to journey with them to their God-given, hope-filled future.

Vibrant Congregations typically connects churches to outside organizations (e.g., Churches Learning Change [Ridder], Center for Church Renewal, and Vibrancy Pathway) to pursue their appropriate pathway.

Behind the scenes, Vibrant Congregations works to connect partner organizations to each other to learn, to grow, and to strengthen our work with congregations. It also sets tables of conversation around critical issues such as leadership for renewal. At these tables, Vibrant Congregations draws on people from the RCA, CRC, and others to learn how better to empower churches and their leaders for their fresh steps.

Progress

- The expected launch of Vibrant Congregations (Vibrant) to the RCA and CRCNA congregations at the two denominations' synods did not occur due to COVID-19. A quiet launch happened in September and October 2020. We are presently working with both RCA and CRCNA congregations.
- A gathering of a dozen renewal organizations in June 2020 was held via Zoom to encourage and learn from each other.
- A new effort, Church Now Conversations, invites leading evangelical thinkers to speak to church leaders about what's happening in the church and society in North America. In 2020, we hosted people such as Rich Mouw, Kara Powell, and Ed Stetzer. Zoom recordings and notes of all Church Now Conversations can be found on Vibrant's website.
- Vibrant launched its website in 2020. The website offers multiple resources, including a 90-second survey to connect with Vibrant and the offer of a free U.S. demographic tool, MissionInsite.
- To respond to COVID-19, Vibrant created several resources for churches. These resources include a 30-60-90 day planning tool for congregations. Vibrant also led an RCA/CRCNA team that worked on responding to COVID-19. This team sought to keep an eye out for trends during this moment and pass on what it learned to both denominations.
- Vibrant has spent time this past year listening to the voices and concerns of ethnic communities. We are explicitly listening for ways Vibrant can serve ethnic communities in fresh steps in ministry and mission.

Current Goals

- Vibrant began a new cross-denominational team in 2021. The team has two people from the RCA and two from the CRCNA. The team works to share resources and ideas across the denominations.
- Vibrant is planning a "discernment center" for August 2021. The discernment center seeks to connect church leaders with their best renewal partner. One of the exciting pieces of the discernment center design is that it looks at the pastor or leader of a congregation and seeks to understand his or her leadership style and which renewal effort best fits that style.
- August will also see the first Church Now Cafe. The cafe will gather 50–100 leaders in an outdoor venue (COVID-19 permitting). These leaders will hear ministry practitioners describe what they learned this past year, and then participants will have conversations about what they've heard.

- 2021 will be a season of continuing to learn how Vibrant can better serve ethnic communities. Our goal is to work with one ethnic community in depth this year.

Follow us on Facebook (@Vibrant Congregations), or check out our website at vibrantcongregations.org.

RETIRED MINISTERS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

Because the General Synod did not meet in 2020, it was not able to take action to recognize those ministers of Word and sacrament who retired from active service in 2019. Thus, those who retired during both 2019 and 2020 are presented here for the General Synod to show its appreciation for their faithful service.

During 2019, 37 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service, and during 2020, 34 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service. Those who retired are being recognized by General Synod through its endorsement of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

L 21-1

To adopt the following resolution:

These individuals have loved Christ and fed his sheep. They have devoted themselves to spreading the Word and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Their contribution to a needy world is rich beyond measure; their record is on high.

The Reformed Church in America, with admiration, deep affection, and overflowing thanks to God, celebrates their lifelong service.

2019 retirements

**Timothy Alicki
Holland, Michigan**

**John Allen
Ewing, New Jersey**

**Beryl Banks
Gold River, California**

**Mark Bergsma
Kentwood, Michigan**

**Eric Boon
Mayville, Wisconsin**

**Peggy Byland
Traverse City, Michigan**

**Russell Camp
Kalamazoo, Michigan**

**Steven DeLoof
Holland, Michigan**

**Karla Diserens
Tuckahoe, New York**

**Alan Folkert
Zeeland, Michigan**

**Verlyn Hemmen
Eagan, Minnesota**

**Donald Heringa
Wingdale, New York**

**Richard Heusinkveld
Greenville, Michigan**

**Charles Higgins
Andover, New Jersey**

**Robert Hoffman
Berne, New York**

**Taylor Holbrook
Hopewell Junction, New York**

**Lary Jackson
Spring Lake, Michigan**

**Debra Jameson
Schenectady, New York**

**Charles Kleinhesselink
Everson, Washington**

**James Knol
Warwick, New York**

**David Martin
Edison, New Jersey**

**Michael Moran
New Milford, Connecticut**

**Benjamin Byoung Eun Park
Aurora, Colorado**

**Walter Pickup
Apple Valley, Minnesota**

Ronald Sanford
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Philip Schuiling
Aurora, Colorado

Robert Schuller
Newport Beach, California

David Schwabauer
Niles, Michigan

Michael Scott
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Cora Taitt
Bronx, New York

Dawn Vagle
Holland, Michigan

Thomas VandeBerg
Altoona, Iowa

William Van Herk
Vancouver, Washington

Cornelis Van Kempen
Holland, Michigan

Eugene Voss
Zeeland, Michigan

Paul Wernlund
Holland, Michigan

Richard Weyer
Forked River, New Jersey

2020 retirements

Ann Akers
Port Jervis, New York

Steve Bierly
Zeeland, Michigan

Glen Blumer
Norwalk, Iowa

**Duane Brown
Jacksonville, Florida**

**Timothy Brown
Holland, Michigan**

**Richard DeBruyne
Redlands, California**

**Raymond Dekker
Fremont, Michigan**

**Joyce de Velder
Gansevoort, New York**

**EJ de Waard
Wainfleet, Ontario**

**Douglas Dobbie
Prairie City, Iowa**

**Gail Ebersole
Aurora, Colorado**

**Douglas Freeman
Richardson, Texas**

**Susan Hetrick
Phoenix, Arizona**

**Margaret Hoekstra
Holland, Michigan**

**Norma Hook
Zeeland, Michigan**

**Carolyn Keith
Brewster, Massachusetts**

**Kenneth Kobza
Centennial, Colorado**

**Cornelis Kors
Seal Beach, California**

**Carolyn Lewis
Ravena, New York**

**Daniel Meeter
New Paltz, New York**

**Melody Meeter
New Paltz, New York**

**Michael Molenaar
Spirit Lake, Iowa**

**German Moreno
Lake Worth, Florida**

**William Morris
Wellston, Michigan**

**Thomas Ondra
Phoenix, Arizona**

**A. Eugene Pearson
Lakewood, Colorado**

**David Poppen
Boyden, Iowa**

**Peter Sanfilippo Jr.
Staten Island, New York**

**Edward Schmidt
Holland, Michigan**

**Gerald Sittser Jr.
Spokane, Washington**

**Donald Stager
New Brunswick, New Jersey**

**Gregory Ten Brink
Holland, Michigan**

**Mark Vellinga
Orange City, Iowa**

**Cary Winn
Rockford, Illinois**

NECROLOGY

The necrology report in this workbook also includes RCA ministers of Word and sacrament who passed away in the year 2019, since there has not yet been an opportunity for their names to appear in an Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod, given that there was no General Synod meeting in 2020.

As referenced in the Office of Historical Services report, the reduction in total staff hours in the Office of Historical Services has resulted in a much leaner appearance for the necrology report. In past years, the composition of the necrology report required many hours of research, which was not possible this year.

2019

	<i>Date of Birth</i>	<i>Date of Death</i>	<i>Age</i>
Duane Tellinghuisen	March 17, 1926	January 14, 2019	92
John Staal Jr.	May 6, 1926	January 29, 2019	92
Warren Burgess	December 16, 1927	February 19, 2019	91
Rebekah Pratt	July 29, 1982	February 19, 2019	36
Bruce Penn	July 4, 1928	March 9, 2019	90
David Jurgens	May 15, 1930	March 24, 2019	88
Douglas van Gessel	June 29, 1930	June 29, 2019	89
Melvin de Vries	December 30, 1924	July 1, 2019	94
Gerald Mahler	January 15, 1940	July 19, 2019	79
Eugene Van Zee	October 27, 1948	July 21, 2019	70
Stanley Rock	April 22, 1937	August 3, 2019	82
Sharon Thoms Scholten	August 10, 1933	August 11, 2019	86
William deForest	May 5, 1937	August 14, 2019	82
Robert Spencer	August 2, 1931	September 5, 2019	88
Donald Barnes	July 10, 1932	October 2, 2019	87
Herbert Van Gaasbeek DuMont	April 2, 1923	October 13, 2019	96
Thomas Zylstra	November 7, 1925	November 16, 2019	94
Theodore Muller	September 22, 1926	November 22, 2019	93
Richard Brihn	September 4, 1939	November 24, 2019	80
William Nelson	July 8, 1928	November 25, 2019	91
Wallace Stoepker	June 21, 1921	December 13, 2019	98

2020

	<i>Date of Birth</i>	<i>Date of Death</i>	<i>Age</i>
John Veldman	April 4, 1936	January 1, 2020	83
Marlin Vander Wilt	August 8, 1936	January 25, 2020	83
Jonathan Loper	November 29, 1961	January 28, 2020	58
Carl Vogelaar	March 16, 1925	February 23, 2020	94
Kenneth Vermeer	December 29, 1928	February 27, 2020	91
James Ebbers	October 6, 1926	March 3, 2020	93
John Nordstrom	March 11, 1932	March 17, 2020	88
Elton Bruins	July 29, 1927	March 23, 2020	92
Ronald Vande Bunte	December 19, 1944	March 24, 2020	75
Albert Studley	November 24, 1927	March 28, 2020	92

Zoltan Kiraly	March 9, 1920	March 30, 2020	100
Robert Bender	May 27, 1930	March 31, 2020	89
Lawrence Wilkes	May 3, 1939	March 31, 2020	80
Allan Janssen	March 31, 1948	April 3, 2020	72
Rufus McClendon	March 22, 1938	April 9, 2020	82
Abraham de Vries	December 21, 1926	April 20, 2020	93
William Burke	August 14, 1939	April 26, 2020	80
Joseph Muyskens	January 7, 1932	April 25, 2020	88
Gregg Mast	February 7, 1952	April 27, 2020	68
Ralph Houston	October 10, 1941	May 2, 2020	78
Ivan Rymes	May 11, 1926	May 11, 2020	94
Nancy McClure-Long	April 9, 1948	May 17, 2020	72
John Jenner	December 9, 1941	June 1, 2020	78
Donald Maxam	January 10, 1930	June 3, 2020	90
Robert Pope	October 15, 1925	June 13, 2020	94
William Hill-Alto	January 24, 1950	June 25, 2020	70
Jay Lindell	November 9, 1959	July 8, 2020	60
Donald Lenderink	November 14, 1929	July 26, 2020	90
Ellen-Jo (E.J.) Emerson	November 2, 1950	August 7, 2020	69
Ronald Gross	February 12, 1942	September 13, 2020	78
Gerrit Brus	June 19, 1931	September 19, 2020	89
Daryl Vetter	September 9, 1939	October 8, 2020	81
Stephen Hanson	December 11, 1945	October 17, 2020	74
Robert Palma	May 10, 1934	October 17, 2020	86
James Van Roekel	November 10, 1929	October 21, 2020	90
James Stevens	November 17, 1936	October 22, 2020	83
Vincent Fasano	December 20, 1934	October 26, 2020	85
George Magee	November 9, 1936	October 30, 2020	83
Harold Brown	August 25, 1939	November 3, 2020	81
Norman Chen	December 23, 1948	December 3, 2020	71
Ellsworth Ten Clay	November 6, 1922	December 5, 2020	98
John Helmus	September 24, 1931	December 6, 2020	89
Robert Langenberg	April 28, 1929	December 11, 2020	91
Merwin Van Doornik	July 15, 1935	December 15, 2020	85
Donald Den Hartog	September 4, 1933	December 16, 2020	87

Report of the General Synod Council on Global Mission

Note: General Synod Council ministry reports contain updates and progress reported to the General Synod Council in March 2021 for the calendar year 2020. 2021 updates and progress will be reflected in next year's report.

POLICY WORDING

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) will connect and engage people to what God is doing in the world, through mission partners that cross boundaries in word and deed with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S INTERPRETATION

Mission becomes a way of life when we reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in neighborhoods, countries, continents, and throughout the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we boldly give witness to the hope within us and willingly serve others by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in every corner of the world. The RCA commitment is to respond with God's love to meet spiritual and material needs around the globe. We are excited to engage mission through our churches by equipping mission leaders to maximize the impact their mission investment can make around the world. We are eager to move into a future where RCA Global Mission is part of a mission movement—a movement that comes from within our congregations and is built on the passions of our members, and a future where we make connections through our history and expertise, where we connect you with faithful partners and help coordinate, inspire, and support you in mission.

Individuals and churches experience transformation as they open themselves to be used by God and reach out in giving and receiving, learning and sharing, and extending the kingdom of God through missional engagement. It means bringing the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the message, mobilizing the RCA congregations to connect with global partners for greater kingdom impact, helping resource volunteers for expanding involvement in mission efforts, and extending compassion, mercy, and justice in places of discrimination, poverty, famine, disaster, and injustice. In a world of brokenness and need, we offer help, hope, and tangible expressions of God's love.

GLOBAL MISSION

Over the past 378 years, RCA Global Mission has impacted millions of people around the world with the love of God. And God's faithfulness continues. Our goal is to provide opportunities for RCA and Reformed churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful, helping us all live and love like Jesus.

Today, RCA missionaries and partners are bringing hope through the light of Christ. All of this is made possible by the faithful generosity of churches and individuals as RCA Global Mission does not receive denominational assessments or covenant shares. It is because of your gifts that this work continues and enables the hope of Christ to reach even more people.

Progress

2020 was a year of pivoting how we do mission due to COVID-19, but that did not stop God's work. Instead, it created opportunities to come together and serve God's people globally in new ways. We worked closely with RCA missionaries and partners to provide COVID-19 relief to those on the margins.

In May 2020, generous churches and individuals gave over \$119,000 to provide immediate relief for people around the world impacted by COVID-19. These gifts helped individuals in several countries and contexts around the world—a few of those being church planter families in Nepal, community members in Peru, women and children in India, missionary families in Brazil, HIV-positive communities in South Africa, and theological education students in Cambodia.

We have seen the amazing ways missionaries and partners have quickly adapted using technology and creative measures to stay connected with their supporting congregations. They have also used this same vigor and passion to adapt the way they serve their respective local communities, even when the pandemic displaced a handful of missionaries from their homes in the field and made it increasingly difficult to follow God's call in mission in traditional ways. Out of adversity came a season of growth with new church plants, thousands of baptisms, and countless ways people have felt and seen the love of Christ in action.

Communication efforts increased in 2020 through a quarterly newsletter sent to individuals who support RCA missionaries, projects, and disaster relief, have been involved in short-term mission through the RCA, and are active RCA pastors. Through this piece, generous donors have received updates on how God is working through their gifts globally. To sign up to receive this publication, please visit www.rca.org/subscribe.

We are continuously grateful to God for the ways God provided in 2020 so more people could hear the good news and experience the love of Christ in word and deed. For more information on how RCA Global Mission is funded and for answers to frequently asked questions, please visit www.rca.org/mission/faq.

Current Goals

RCA Global Mission's current goals are derived from our commitment to strongly reflect and mobilize the passions and gifts of RCA congregations to serve. These goals include:

- Increase mutually beneficial collaboration between RCA Global Mission and all RCA congregations, including those that may want to move on from the RCA.
- Create new pathways and on-ramps for all congregations to get and stay involved in the life and ministry of RCA Global Mission.
- Recruit the next generation of missionaries and partners.
- Communicate our field stories to our constituents, creating relevance for North American congregations and offering opportunities to serve with us.
- Increase the financial commitment of churches by adding 33 newly funded partnership in mission shares.

GLOBAL MISSION

Working together to share God's love with the world

RCA Global Mission exists to strengthen and grow the global church by supporting ministries of compassion, developing leaders, and sharing the good news. Our goal is to provide engagement opportunities for RCA churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful that help us all to live and love like Jesus.

Partnership in mission shares

The mission personnel and staff of RCA Global Mission would like to express appreciation to the churches and individuals of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) who so generously support our mission programs. The RCA mission program is supported almost entirely by contributions and partnership in mission (PIM) shares. Without you, there would be no RCA Global Mission.

The RCA has 82 active partnerships in 45 countries around the world. There are 45 mission personnel and 47 partner personnel (who are employed by the partner but supported through RCA partnership in mission shares). These mission personnel are supported by 443 churches and 102 individual donors through partnership in mission shares. There are over 120 active projects, including disaster response and projects of compassion. These projects were supported by gifts from 176 churches and 521 individual donors.

Global Mission proposes that the value of a full partnership in mission share be raised from \$6,800 to \$6,900 in 2022. We are also asking that every RCA congregation that does not currently support an RCA missionary with a partnership in mission share consider taking on a full or partial share of support.

GM 21-1

To increase the value of a partnership in mission (PIM) share for 2022 to \$6,900.

Transitions in Mission Personnel

Bob Oliveira served as a bridge-builder between the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPM) and partner churches in North America, donors, and project staff. Since 2018, Bob led initiatives to connect local passions to global partnerships and cultivate generational impact. His work helped Christians in Brazil and North America to grow mission partnerships that have ignited church multiplication and transformed communities along the Amazon through word and deed. Bob retired from mission service on August 31, 2020.

Barbara Kapenga began mission service in 1981. Barbara was instrumental in training thousands of pastors, evangelists, and church leaders in Sudan, Niger, Ethiopia, Malawi, and neighboring countries. She served the Presbyterian Church of Sudan, Giffen Theological Institute, and Nile Theological College in Sudan; Dogon Gao Bible School in Niger; Mekane Yesus Seminary in Ethiopia; and Josophat Mwale Theological Institute (JMTI) of Nkhoma University in Malawi. Barbara retired from mission service on December 31, 2020.

GM 21-2

Let it be resolved that the 214th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona, from October 14 through October 19, 2021, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Barbara Kapenga and Bob Oliveira and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission.

New Mission Assignments

Blaine Newhouse will serve as the senior pastor of the English Language Congregation (ELC) of the National Evangelical Church of the Kingdom of Bahrain, a church planted by the RCA in 1893. His wife, Kathleen, teaches at Al Raja School. They have the unique opportunity to be the very presence of Christ in a part of the world where Christianity is often misunderstood.

Gretchen Schoon Tanis will pastor the Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover (RELISH). Gretchen will lead a community of English-speaking international students and expat working individuals and families in worship, in addition to a weekly Bible study for young adults. Her goal is to offer a dynamic worship experience where families and young adults can find a place to call home and can grow in their relationship with God.

Hannah Kummer will serve as a case manager for Mediterranean Hope, a ministry program of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy that mobilizes the church and community to welcome sojourners in their midst. Hannah will help with safe travel, legal avenues of entry, and successful integration of refugees who are settling in Italy. She will also help coordinate legal aid and resources for displaced asylum seekers in Rome.

Nicole Opgenorth will serve as a cultural and language translator for visiting groups at the Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD), an RCA partner. She enters homes, farmlands, and churches to listen to what God is doing. In turn, she shares with RCA supporters how their gifts are empowering rural communities to lift themselves out of poverty through pastoral training, leadership development, economic empowerment, food security, and environmental care.

Deaths

George Magee passed away on October 30, 2020. He, along his wife, Joyce, served the RCA as missionaries in the northern island of Hokkaido, Japan, for 42 years. George and Joyce were involved in evangelism and church planting. The majority of Japan's postwar career missionaries left after one or two terms. Of the few missionaries who stayed, such as the Magees, it is impossible to measure the impact they had in small churches, remote rural preaching stations, and house churches.

Carolyn Otterness passed away on November 22, 2020. Carolyn and her husband, Dick, served in Hungary among the Roma people in many development areas: helping the Roma people start their own congregations, establish relationships with existing congregations, access health care, go to school, find work, and start their own businesses. The Otternesses also served in Ukraine and Rwanda in areas of reconciliation for historically estranged ethnic groups.

Report of the General Synod Council on Church Multiplication

Note: General Synod Council ministry reports contain updates and progress reported to the General Synod Council in March 2021 for the calendar year 2020. 2021 updates and progress will be reflected in next year's report.

POLICY WORDING

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) will foster a sustainable movement of church multiplication through starting new congregations and equipping church planters both locally and globally.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S INTERPRETATION

New churches—micro churches, fresh expressions, missional communities—reach new people in new ways with the good news of Jesus Christ. The commitment of the RCA is to start new churches that further the gospel—reaching the spiritually disconnected, bringing them into fellowship, and introducing them to the God of grace who transforms lives and eternities.

An environment for church multiplication is created through an intentional system and process. It begins with prayer and empowering through the Holy Spirit. It grows as new leaders are called and developed. It is built on a solid foundation of assessment and evaluation of church planters and church planting locations, then strengthened through training and equipping. It is life-giving in the ongoing ministry of church planters and new churches in providing coaching relationships and networks of planters for learning, support, and accountability. It expands as new churches reproduce, and healthy, parenting churches catch a vision to partner and multiply in the starting of additional new churches.

The benchmarks for new churches are to see a newly planted church become:

- Self-sustaining in being able to support the cost of ministry for that congregation.
- Self-governing in being able to produce and provide spiritual leadership capable of being discerning, giving direction, and conducting discipline.
- Self-propagating in being able to reproduce new followers of Jesus Christ, new ministries, and additional new church starts.

A sustainable church multiplication system is developed in partnership with the assemblies within the RCA. The General Synod Council (GSC), regional synods, classes, and consistories work cooperatively and collaboratively to start new churches and to provide a resourced system that is capable of raising new church planters and launching new congregations.

CHURCH MULTIPLICATION

Planting new churches is the most effective way to make new disciples and fulfill the Great Commission. This has continued to be true since the first century apostolic expansion of the church. Therefore, the Church Multiplication team is devoted to planting 1,000 new churches by 2038, with the desired outcome of making 100,000 new disciples of Jesus Christ.

To accomplish this goal, we work with classis and regional synod teams and, more recently, international partners, equipping them to start new churches. Strategic partnerships are being formed to increase our capacity to plant an average of 50 churches per year, or one every week.

The Church Multiplication staff team consists of Mike Hayes, church multiplication catalyst; Tricia Leistra, operations manager; Dawn Muller, administrative assistant; and Randy Weener, director of Church Multiplication.

Progress

- Reducing expenses by restructuring plant grants.
- Strengthening our investment by providing psychological and marriage evaluations for the planter and spouse as well as a project management app.
- Expanding the donor base.
- Connecting: an RCA Women Planters online group meets monthly for prayer, encouragement, and sharing resources. The RCA has more than 20 women planters at present.
- Stimulating new plants:
 - Locally Grown is a hybrid digital and in-person cohort to identify and train the next generation of church planters from within church plants that are between two and five years old. Eight planters are going through the process.
 - To stimulate Fresh Expressions of church (freshexpressionsus.org), Church Multiplication has hosted an introductory webinar and vision days in both English and Spanish in conjunction with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). In addition, 14 churches are in learning cohorts that we anticipate will lead to new Fresh Expressions of church.
 - Church Multiplication has hosted informational seminars with students and faculty at Western Theological Seminary and New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
 - Three phygital (physical + digital) plants are being launched.
 - Twenty-six domestic New Congregation Plans (NCPs) were approved from January to December 2020. Another nine NCPs received approval between General Synod 2019 and the end of 2019.
- Expanding communication:
 - Weekly news and resources communications are sent to planters.
 - Monthly news and resources communications are distributed to sending churches, classis multiplication teams, stated clerks, and other planting catalysts.
 - In January and February 2021, church planting was spotlighted in RCA communication as part of an evangelism communication focus.
 - The RCA website is being updated with current information and resources related to church planting.
- Celebrating the expanding diversity of recent plants:
 - Since October 2019, 35 domestic NCPs have been approved. Eighty-three percent of these plants (29 of the 35 total) are led by planters of color.
 - We are adding people of color to our church multiplication teams and task forces.
- Planting internationally:
 - Through our partner Jibit Asha in Nepal, 34 new churches have been planted and another 72 apprentices are being trained. RCA Church Multiplication provided training equipment.

- Seven new pastors were commissioned in the Dominican Republic to plant churches. RCA Church Multiplication provided planter assessments and is making training material available.

Goals

- Develop strategic, sustainable funding sources for planting, including business-as-ministry and co-vocational models.
- Empower sending churches and planters of color by creating places for them to influence the RCA's future.
- Advance Fresh Expressions of the church:
 - 25 per year toward our goal of 200 in 8 years.
 - Increase disciple-making focus to the third and fourth generation of disciples.
- Advance prayer for and by planters.
- Protect the well-being of planters and their families amid the stresses, risks, and isolation of church planting.

Report of the General Synod Council on Multiracial and Multicultural Future Freed from Racism

Note: General Synod Council ministry reports contain updates and progress reported to the General Synod Council in March 2021 for the calendar year 2020. 2021 updates and progress will be reflected in next year's report.

POLICY WORDING

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial and multicultural future freed from racism, engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S INTERPRETATION

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

By journeying into the future with a commitment to unity, reconciliation, and justice, we build Christ's church on a firm and diverse foundation that extends God's grace to the world. Through forgiveness, deep relationships, active service, and love for each other, the church is able to live out the message of God's love. The RCA commitment is to name racism as a sin and to work against its prevalence and pervasiveness both within our relationships and our denominational system and in the wider domestic and global communities. Our efforts at eradicating racism call for us to change not only our systems but also our hearts for each other and for the life matters that concern each other. It requires transformation of both institution and of our person. It impacts what we embrace, what we include, what we see, and how we respond and resource. A multiracial and multicultural future freed from racism must first be envisioned, then articulated, and finally actively engaged in as the preference and commitment of all.

MULTIRACIAL AND MULTICULTURAL FUTURE FREED FROM RACISM

Transformed & Transforming has been working on embedding the concept of a multiracial and multicultural future freed from racism in theory *and* practice into the initiatives of Transformed & Transforming, at the same time partnering with other General Synod Council (GSC) ministry areas via a holistic approach that will bring about lasting change. We have also been building on last year's goal to assist the Transformed & Transforming executives and their initiatives to increase their cultural agility outcomes in ways that equip them to lead well with ripple effects into the broader church. This work has grown intentionally and exponentially in Holy Spirit-led ways over the past year, as the global pandemic drew us closer together via technology, and racial injustices could no longer be ignored.

Two distinct yet intertwined pathways have emerged: one focused on equity-based hospitality, the other on dismantling racism/racial justice and advocacy.

Progress

Dismantling Racism

In response to the pressing racial/ethnic justice concerns that emerged between April and June 2020, there has been a Spirit-led focus on addressing racism, which was planted in 2020 and is beginning to take root and grow in 2021. In collaborations between Women's Transformation and Leadership, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), the Commission on Christian Action (CCA), Maple Avenue Ministries, and New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), responses calling the church to stand in solidarity with Asian Americans suffering bias attacks and to create intentional processes for dismantling racism, particularly as it pertains to Black people in the United States, were developed and launched.

Through the virtual gathering platform initiated by Women's Transformation and Leadership at the beginning of the pandemic, Denise Kingdom Grier introduced us to the 1 Cor. 13 Project as a way to engage this challenging work and embrace the deep heart transformation work needed in the wake of surging racial injustice against African Americans/Black people. This is a process that can lead to true repentance through a process of "rehearsing, re-minding and remembering," using 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 as the foundation.

After a group of more than 70 met throughout summer 2020, a dismantling racism prayer movement was born. This movement is led by Nancy Boote, Liz Testa, Micheal Edwards, Cynthia Peters, Lorraine Parker, Pete Watts, Rick DeBruyne, and other leaders. These bi-monthly prayer meetings are sacred times of lament, confession, and hope, grounded in vulnerability, humility, unity, and trust. Not only does this prayer movement bring together diverse leaders from the RCA and sister denominations, it also has created a natural bridge with the African American Black Council (AABC) and between the discipleship work of dismantling racism and advocacy.

Beyond Words

The Beyond Words: Count Us In Movement is a multi-city, ecumenical initiative in which faith leaders and pastors take direct action to address structural injustice and systemic racism. The RCA and Beyond Words, in collaboration, are inviting ministry leaders on a journey toward justice, exploring the way we build our relationships, use our financial resources, understand history, share the gospel, and live out God's call to love our neighbor. This process was introduced with two online connection events aligning with Martin Luther King Day 2021 to honor and celebrate his legacy and propose a process to continue his work. These two events, co-hosted by Liz Testa (dismantling racism), Pete Watts (AABC and ReWire/Beyond Words), and Eduardo Rodriguez (advocacy) saw strong response with over 100 people in total attending both connection events.

The invitation for our ministry leaders continues on Thursday, March 25, 2021, for the Beyond Words: Count Us In Movement National Assembly. This will be a time of confession, repentance, and public statement centered on a commitment to a 12-month cohort around an action plan to model unity in a time of great division. The RCA's cohort will be shepherded by Pete Watts and coordinated by Leah Ennis.

Creating Space for Non-Black People of Color/Ethnic Diversity

When it comes to the work of dismantling racism, we all play a part that involves different conversations and actions. Emerging from the work of the 1 Cor. 13 Project came a desire for non-Black people of color to explore and discuss how to contribute to dismantling racism in their

own unique way. In a collaboration between equity-based hospitality and advocacy, we will be providing listening space for Latino(a) Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and multiracial ministry leaders to share history, current realities, and personal stories to discern the ways we are called to bring about racial justice in our own context. Virtual listening sessions will begin in late spring 2021.

Robben Island

To create a future freed from racism, we must start investing in the youth who will be the leaders of tomorrow. As a result, in pursuit of this vision, there was a collaborative effort between Local Mission (Eliza Cortés Bast and Eduardo Rodriguez), Next Generation Engagement (Anna Radcliffe), and Advocacy (Earl James) to launch a new pilot project aimed at equipping and empowering college students to do the work of racial justice in the world. Five students were selected from our three RCA-affiliated colleges to participate in the leadership collaborative. The process, which concluded in early 2020, consisted of three in-person meetings in Charlottesville, Virginia; Phoenix, Arizona; and Ferguson, Missouri (canceled due to COVID-19); where the collaborative met with local faith leaders advocating for the marginalized in their communities. Together we unpacked our stories of impact and influence and learned more about past and contemporary advocacy work and resources cultivating the leadership and mission of the next generation.

Equity-Based Hospitality

Flowing out of the work done in 2019 with Reesheda Graham Washington, Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders formed a team to develop a framework for equity-based hospitality, including definitions, a set of values, and a model to initiate engagement with off-ramps that leverage the rich resources of the four initiatives that focus on drawing in those historically at the margins: people with disabilities, the next generation, women, and people with racial/ethnic diversity. Alongside these are other marginalizing factors: class, laity/clergy, and inside/outside the church.

The initial equity-based hospitality team, led by Liz Testa and comprised of Terry DeYoung, Earl James, and Stephanie Soderstrom, has expanded to include Anna Radcliffe, Ruth Langkamp, Grace Ruitter, Eduardo Rodriguez, Lorraine Parker, and Lesley Mazzotta as we have moved from the design to the implementation phase. The diversity of this team is intentional and instrumental in ensuring all constituencies are represented.

First and foremost, this is a discipleship framework, rooted in growing in the character and competency of Jesus. Our working definition of equity-based hospitality is one in which the biblical practice of welcoming both friends and strangers is embraced in generous, kind, respectful, flexible, barrier-free ways that takes people's needs into account so they can find space to truly belong, experience the freedom to live into their God-given gifts and callings, and contribute to the body of Christ in unique, strengthening ways. This practice is one that embraces the mutual hospitality of guest and host and can be readily adapted to different contexts. In addition, biblical hospitality is defined as a sacred duty to treat strangers and friends alike, welcoming one another into our homes, communal spaces, and lives. As reflected in Scripture, we ought to be ready, at a moment's notice, to welcome people into our home and/or church community, God's *oikos* (household).

Nine Values of Equity-Based Hospitality with Reflective Scriptures (NRSV):

1. Sense of belonging and ability to contribute: Everyone has the opportunity to participate, contribute, and belong, since every member of Christ's body is essential and fulfills a unique function in the body. (Reflective Scripture: 1 Peter 4:10)
2. Access for all: We provide all people with barrier-free access to God and God's community, removing any barriers we create and could change. (Reflective Scripture: Luke 8:40-55)
3. Intentional diversity: Actively pursuing and intentionally embracing diversity and equity in race, gender, ability, age, vocation, ethnicity, and more, we are conscious of who is invited, who leads, and who is not in the room. With no distinction between tribe and nation, the Lord is the Lord of all. (Reflective Scriptures: Romans 10:11-12 and Revelation 7:9)
4. Authenticity, vulnerability, and humility: In our behavior, leadership, and overall presence, we model mutual respect for one another through vulnerability, humility, and grace. (Reflective Scripture: Micah 6:8)
5. Trust: Building a shared commitment of mutual trust and equity, we respect the needs, values, beliefs, and voices of all, acknowledging we are members of one body. (Reflective Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-30)
6. Content and context are important: We exercise care and practice intention in who leads, plans, and presents, and we customize content and our approach according to our audience and their context for ministry. (Reflective Scripture: Luke 24)
7. Attention to power dynamics: We do not exclude the participation needs of the few or the one over the preferences of the majority. Instead, we anticipate the varied needs of all so that each one can participate fully—rather than waiting for or expecting that a minority voice will speak out on their own behalf. (Reflective Scripture: Acts 6:1-7)
8. Putting audience needs first: Actively listening, observing, understanding, and respecting the needs of the audience, leaders align content, presentation, and communication around the needs of the audience—not simply the needs or preferences of the leader. (Reflective Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21)
9. Respect participation levels: Recognizing God's variety in learning styles and modes of engaging, and acknowledging circumstances that are within and beyond individual control, we respect individual choice and create space to come and go. (Reflective Scripture: Mark 10:17-31)

In addition to developing key definitions, a set of guiding values, and resources focusing on biblical hospitality, we contracted with Denise Kingdom Grier to facilitate "From Outreach to Embracing: a Model for Equity-based Hospitality," adapted for us and based on her doctoral work. Seventy-eight registrants from across the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) are going through this ten-week learning journey from mid-January to mid-March 2021, engaging Denise's four-movement process grounded in John's gospel and focused on the four hospitality-based Transformed & Transforming foci of disabilities, generations, race/cultural backgrounds, and women, with three additional themes of class, laity/clergy, and inside/outside the church interwoven throughout. Off-ramps are being developed from this journey to offer participants concrete next steps to deepen their learning and bring resources back to their home contexts.

To help create a culture of "embracing" and embed culture agility and equity-based hospitality across the RCA, Liz Testa serves the GSC staff as a resource to help ensure cultural agility,

diversity, and equity is lived into in godly, gracious, and intentional ways. As such, she sits on the communication campaign teams alongside director of communication Christina Tazelaar as she leads us in creating and shaping content for the various themes, with goals and benchmarks pertaining to each one, as set forth by the staff executive leadership team. This has already started to bear fruit as communication materials and staff teams have more diverse representation, and staff leaders are beginning to embed the theology and language of Christ-like, equity-based hospitality into their communications, planning, and story-sharing.

To reflect the diversity that is present in the RCA, and to continue moving toward a multiracial and multicultural future freed from racism, the communication team (CAPS) prioritizes representation in its communications. In 2020, CAPS released a photo diversity guide for staff use and set goals for photo representation from various groups of people in RCA communications. In the bi-monthly News & Resources eblast over the last year, of the people pictured, 52 percent were women, 41 percent were people of color, and 33 percent were next gen (defined as those under 40). This met or exceeded their goals for these groups and resulted in increases of 16 percent more women and 7 percent more people of color. Furthermore, they are working on an identified growth opportunity for representing people with visible disabilities.

Current Goals

Dismantling Racism

We plan to continue bi-monthly prayer gatherings through 2021 and offer a 1 Cor. 13 Bible study learning journey to continue the work of heart transformation.

Beyond Words

The launch event is Thursday, March 25, 2021, for the Beyond Words: Count Us In Movement National Assembly. This will be a time of confession, repentance, and public statement centered on a commitment to a 12-month cohort around an action plan to model unity in a time of great division. The RCA plans to pilot a cohort of eight to twelve like-minded pastoral leaders from across the U.S., shepherded by Pete Watts and coordinated by Leah Ennis.

Creating Space for Non-Black People of Color/Ethnic Diversity

Building off the best practices demonstrated in the Building God's Church Together virtual gathering model, starting in spring 2021, we will launch a series of four listening sessions comprised of a cross-section of leaders from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, casting a wide net to help create space for understanding their own experiences as they hear other people's journey. We will leverage the Honoring Our Stories process in these listening sessions to elevate the trials and tribulations of their experiences to build understanding, solidarity, and a way forward. This will lead to a pilot cohort, designed around the learnings from the listening sessions, where the larger body will be invited to participate. We anticipate partnering with the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries, Hispanic Ministries, Women's Transformation and Leadership, Local Missional Engagement, Advocacy, the Church Multiplication team, and Global Mission, building a network that will allow us to elevate and multiply this work.

Robben Island

In a collaboration between Next Generation Engagement, Local Missional Engagement, and Short-Term Mission, we are planning to launch the second iteration of Robben Island in fall 2021 with six college students from the three RCA-affiliated colleges. The cohort will be modified using a framework provided by Disability Concerns. The cohort will also be co-led by a previous Robben Island participant in efforts to empower and multiply leadership.

Equity-Based Hospitality

Transformed & Transforming executives continue to work on embedding cultural agility and equity-based hospitality values and best practices into their leadership and initiatives. Phase two of the From Outreach to Embracing model for equity-based hospitality will include embedding the concepts and ethics of “embracing” into all areas of Transformed & Transforming. In addition, the March 2021 pilot learning journey off-ramps for the areas of disabilities, generational, race/ethnicity, and women will include a variety of “Taste and See” events, materials and resources, and deeper dive cohort and leadership collaborative opportunities to catalyze transformation and growth, both personally and contextually. Our team is working on an intentional, holistic pathway that equips the motivated leader to move nimbly forward with tools to engage their faith communities.

Report of Words of Hope

Words of Hope believes that all people in all places should have access to God's Word. With Words of Hope, people are connected daily to the truths of Scripture so that they can grow in faith and share it worldwide.

Words of Hope works to share the good news in all ways possible in order to provide access to Scripture in heart languages, remote locations, and a variety of media types. Where poverty, geography, or persecution hinder the spread of the gospel, Words of Hope partners with indigenous Christian leaders to equip them to more effectively minister in their own language and context, among their own people.

Words of Hope's regions of ministry include Albania, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Niger, North America, South Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda. Each ministry field requires its own unique media outreach approach. Depending on the variety of resources and challenges in a given region, an assortment of radio programs, text messages, social media, print materials, and satellite television is used to proclaim the gospel.

Some notable highlights from Words of Hope's ministry in the past year include an increased focus on daily devotional distribution in North America, gratitude for God's providence that sustained and grew outreach efforts in the midst of the pandemic, and an exciting new partnership with Western Theological Seminary.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, many were forced to shelter in place in their homes. Worshiping in person became rare. People who had already lived in isolation became lonelier still as visiting rights were rescinded for prisons and nursing homes. It was during this time that Words of Hope's daily devotional booklet became even more critical as a point of connection. Chaplains were able to use the resource to encourage those in their care, and for this we are very thankful!

In the past year, we also expanded the devotional into some new formats. Words of Hope devotional series are now available on YouVersion's Bible app. To date, nearly 250,000 people have completed Words of Hope reading plans in the Bible app. Our daily devotional will also be featured on radio stations soon. The daily texts are being adapted into short, encouraging radio segments that will be available for stations to pick up.

God's provision has been evident in sustaining and growing Words of Hope during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provision was felt not only in North America, but specifically in Uganda as well. In 2019, the Ugandan ministry team had a vision for using video and computer equipment to livestream worship services and teaching programs on social media. Donors responded to the vision, and the equipment was purchased and sent.

As COVID-19 began threatening lives and livelihoods in Uganda, the president of the country made the decision to shut everything down, asking residents to stay at home and social distance. But he also asked the archbishop of the country, Stephen Kaziimba, to produce a series of daily video devotionals to encourage Ugandans while they were forced to stay home. Through the Lord's provision and Stephen's connection to Words of Hope as the chairperson of the in-country board, all of the recording equipment was already in place to make livestreaming of these daily meditations accessible for Christians across Uganda.

Viewers of the programs were so impressed by the quality that the national Ugandan television stations picked up the livestreams as well! Words of Hope messages from the archbishop and from director Titus Baraka were viewed by hundreds of thousands of people across the country daily!

Looking to the future, Words of Hope's board of directors launched a three-year capital campaign in the spring of 2020. This campaign is called Vision of Hope and has a goal of raising \$1.5 million in new and increased giving for special projects that will a) expand our follow-up capacity so that we can respond to the unprecedented interest in the gospel that our teams are experiencing, b) refresh our 55-year-old office building in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and c) upgrade technology across all of our ministry fields.

One of the expanded projects that is part of the Vision of Hope campaign is a partnership with Western Theological Seminary. We will be working together to produce a seminary-level distance learning program for Christians in Iran who are leading secret house churches. We invite your prayers for this new venture.

Words of Hope is deeply grateful for the support of RCA churches that continues to sustain this outreach ministry. In 2020, contributions from RCA congregations totaled \$428,267. We celebrate this generosity, knowing that these dollars are allowing people to be introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thank you for sharing hope worldwide as we work together to proclaim the good news in all ways possible.

Report of the Church Growth Fund, Inc.

The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. (CGF), is a non-profit corporation that functions under the supervision of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) General Synod. The CGF supports the work of the denomination by making affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings and other properties used in ministries. The CGF loan programs offer unsecured loans up to \$200,000 and secured borrowing up to \$5,000,000.

As a primary source of funding for loans, the CGF sells interest-bearing investments called savings certificates. The CGF offers two types of savings certificates:

1. Term savings certificates, which are available in maturities from one to ten years.
2. Demand savings certificates, which allow the investment and redemption of amounts in the certificate at any time (subject to the limits described in the CGF Offering Circular).

As a way to further support the denomination, the CGF contributes a portion of its earnings annually to the General Synod Council (GSC), which awards the funds as ministry grants for three RCA programs:

1. Church Multiplication, which provides grant funding to church plants. In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2020 (FY20), the CGF contributed \$441,000 for church plant grants.
2. Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund, which provides scholarships to middle school–age children through post-college young adults to cover part of the cost of mission trips and internships, disaster response work, vision and study tours, and missional training experiences. In FY20, the CGF contributed \$50,000 to this fund.
3. Flourishing Churches Grant Program, which provides grants for facility improvements to economically challenged RCA congregations whose ministries are thriving. In FY20, the CGF contributed \$300,000 for this program.

More specific information on CGF loans and how to invest in savings certificates is available on the CGF website at www.rca.org/cgf. The audited financial statement may be found on the RCA website at www.rca.org/finance.

Assets

In FY20, assets increased by \$2.2 million (2.78 percent) to nearly \$83 million. CGF assets at the end of FY20 consisted primarily of loans of \$59.3 million and cash and investments of \$24.5 million. Loans during FY20 decreased by \$3 million (4.8 percent) as the CGF funded \$5.2 million in new loans to ten RCA congregations and related agencies, while receiving \$8.4 million in loan principal payments from existing borrowers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, the CGF offered all of its borrowers the option of loan payment relief to help them through a difficult time. A total of 51 loan modifications to 41 borrowers were made as a result of this offer. Despite the pandemic, the overall financial health of CGF church borrowers remains strong. This has resulted in few delinquent loans in the CGF portfolio and contributed to the CGF continuing its long history of never having experienced a loan principal loss. We continue to have a few church borrowers

that are challenged to repay their loans, and the CGF works in partnership with these affected congregations by restructuring debt repayment terms to ensure viable continuance of their ministries.

Savings Certificates

At the end of FY20, the CGF had savings certificate investments of \$34 million representing a slight increase of \$760,000 (2.26 percent) over the previous year end. In FY20, the CGF received \$7.5 million in new savings certificate investments, but this was offset by churches redeeming funds to be used for ministry projects. Savings certificate investors continue to recognize the favorable return received on their funds as well as how their investment supports the mission of the CGF. Funds received from investment in savings certificates are used primarily by the CGF to make loans to RCA congregations throughout the United States and Canada.

CGF savings certificates are state-regulated securities. Currently, the CGF is authorized to sell savings certificates in 27 states, which are listed on its website at www.rca.org/cgf. Rates of interest paid on savings certificates, along with other information on the CGF and how to invest in savings certificates, can also be found on the website.

Earnings

In FY20, the CGF showed net earnings of \$2.2 million before making discretionary contributions to the GSC for church ministry grants, a slight decrease of \$98,000 (4.25 percent) from the previous year. Net earnings after grant contributions were \$1.4 million, a decrease of \$118,000 (7.7 percent) from the previous year.

The difference in earnings in FY20 compared to FY19 were primarily a result of (a) a decrease in loan interest due to a decrease in average loans outstanding, (b) an increase in interest expense due to an increase in deposits and an increase in the average cost of funds, (c) an increase in contributions and bequests due to a large bequest received and the receipt of a grant from the GSC as part of the PPP loan program, and (d) a decrease in operating expenses due to fewer employees for a portion of the year and reduced travel due to the pandemic.

Ministry Grants

In 1999, the CGF began contributing a portion of its earnings to the GSC to be used for grants to new church plants. Since 1999, the CGF has contributed over \$6.5 million to support the RCA church multiplication initiative, from which 392 church plants were approved, with the majority of them receiving grant funds to help start their ministry.

The CGF also continued its annual support for the next generation, providing financial assistance to RCA youth for mission trip experiences. Since the inception of Next Generation Engagement in 2015, the CGF has been its primary financial supporter, making contributions totaling \$450,000. Since the program has been in place, 2,421 young people have benefitted from scholarships awarded.

In FY18, the CGF launched the Flourishing Church Grant Program, which provides grants of up to \$50,000 to churches for facility improvements necessary to continue and grow already successful ministry. To date, 24 RCA congregations have been grant recipients.

In total, the CGF contributed \$791,000 in FY20 to fund RCA ministry grants.

Financial Strength

A measure of financial strength of an entity is its level of net assets, also known as capital or equity. As of September 30, 2020, the CGF had net assets or capital of \$48,357,704. This represents the accumulation of earnings and contributions received over its years of operations.

The funds received from savings certificates are used by the CGF primarily to make loans to RCA churches. The ability of the CGF to repay savings certificate investors is related to its level of capital, net earnings, as well as repayment of the loans funded from certificate investment dollars. CGF loans typically are secured by first mortgages on church facilities. Strict guidelines in approving loans are followed by the CGF to make sure congregations can sustain such debt payments. While past performance is no guarantee of future events, the CGF has never experienced a loss of principal on any loan. No CGF savings certificate investor has ever experienced a loss of investment or missed receiving an interest payment.

Financial Highlights	FY 2020	FY 2019
Total Assets	\$82,981,397	\$80,740,353
Net Assets (Capital)	\$48,357,704	\$46,939,092
Savings Certificates Outstanding	\$34,428,846	\$33,667,285
Number of Churches with Loans	112	115
Dollar Amount of Loans Outstanding	\$59,327,650	\$62,328,504
Number of Loans Funded in Year	10	26
Dollar Amount of Loans Funded in Year	\$5,205,239	\$8,203,235
Net Earnings Before Ministry Grants	\$2,209,612	\$2,307,621
Contributions to GSC for Ministry Grants	\$791,000	\$771,000

Future CGF Activity

The CGF will continue to follow its primary mission of providing affordable-rate loans to RCA churches for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings used in ministry. The CGF has also set as a goal the ability to contribute increasing amounts to the GSC for ministry grants to support growing church planting initiatives, Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund scholarships, and the newest program, which is to provide grants to flourishing but financially challenged churches in need of building renovation for ministry.

The functional purpose of the CGF is to make loans, and if the ability of the CGF to make loans is diminished, it will lessen its ability to advance its mission. If all churches that leave the denomination would be required to repay their CGF loan upon leaving, it would have a significant impact on the CGF. While the current CGF bylaws state that the CGF makes loans to local churches in the RCA, it doesn't specifically state what happens to those loans when a church leaves the RCA. In recent years, the CGF has had only a few churches with CGF loans that have left the denomination, and in those instances, they have been asked to repay the loan upon departure from the denomination. With the possibility of a greater number of churches with CGF loans leaving the denomination, the CGF has decided to clarify this issue.

The board wishes to amend its bylaws to explicitly allow outstanding loans to a church formerly organized as an RCA church to remain outstanding, and to also allow the CGF to make new loans to former RCA churches.

Continuation of the lending relationship between the CGF and a former RCA church will not be automatic. The CGF has developed a process for borrowers that intend to leave the denomination and desire to continue their loans with the CGF. As part of that process, the church will be required to complete an Application for Continuance of the CGF Loan, which will allow the CGF to do a thorough review of the church's situation before granting continuance. The standards for approval for a loan continuance and new loans to a former RCA church will take into consideration the fact that accountability to a classis will no longer exist for congregations that are no longer part of the RCA.

Both the CGF and churches leaving the RCA will benefit from maintaining a lending relationship.

1. If a significant number of churches leave the RCA, including a number of churches that currently have loans with the CGF, not making bylaws changes like these will result in a decrease in immediate interest income to the CGF from existing loans being paid off as well as a decrease in future interest income due to the CGF having fewer churches as potential borrowers. Less interest income will cause a decrease in earnings for the CGF. The CGF typically contributes 50 percent of its annual earnings to the GSC to be used for ministry grants. A reduction in CGF earnings will result in fewer dollars available for those programs that benefit from this source of funding.
2. The church that has separated from the RCA will benefit from a favorable rate on its loan. Loan terms offered by the CGF are generally more favorable than what can be obtained from other lending sources. There are also places in the U.S. and Canada where local financial institutions do not make loans to religious organizations. This makes the CGF the only borrowing source available for some churches. If the CGF cannot provide loans to such churches, these churches leaving the denomination will have to either pay back their debt in full or refinance their debt at potentially less favorable terms. The result is higher monthly payments and less funds available for ministry.

It is in the spirit of gracious separation that the CGF wishes to continue making loans to former RCA churches. This will also help maintain the CGF's fiscal health so that it can continue giving ministry grants for church multiplication, revitalization, and Next Gen ministry in the RCA. The CGF board of directors is recommending approval by the General Synod of the following changes to the CGF Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws.

CGF 21-1

To amend Sections A and B of Part Second of the Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. Articles of Incorporation and Articles II and IV of the Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. bylaws as follows (additions are underlined and deletions are stricken):

Articles of Incorporation

- A. The purpose of the corporation shall be to support the work of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America ("GSC") by making loans to local churches, organizing churches, classes, and other assemblies, institutions, and agencies (or their corporate affiliates)~~and affiliates~~ of the Reformed Church in**

America (“RCA”) that are (i) constructing or purchasing church buildings for its ministries, (ii) otherwise improving property that is already owned by them, or (iii) subject to any limitations set forth in the by-laws of this corporation, purchasing land for future use or development by or on behalf of a local church, and by making grants to the ~~General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America~~ GSC (or any successor to the ~~General Synod Council~~ GSC that serves as the executive committee of the ~~General Synod of the Reformed Church in America~~ RCA [“General Synod”]) for the purpose of funding church multiplication (previously known and referred to as evangelism and church development), revitalization endeavors of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA, and for Next Generation (middle school age through post college young adults) scholarships to fund volunteer opportunities, advocacy experiences, and mission internships. Exceptions can be made allowing loans to be outstanding and disbursed to churches formerly organized as an RCA local church or collegiate church. The corporation is an agency of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA, and as such is subject to all provisions of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA Book of Church Order (as the same may be amended from time to time) applicable to such agencies. The corporation shall function under the ecclesiastical authority of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA through the ~~General Synod Council~~ GSC.

- B. The corporation is the successor in interest to the Reformed Church in America-Extension Foundation, Inc. and the Church Building Fund of the Reformed Church in America; has received and manages their respective assets; has assumed their respective liabilities; may solicit monies from current or former assemblies, institutions, and members, agencies (and their corporate affiliates) of the RCA, and instrumentalities of the Reformed Church in America from current or former members of such assemblies, institutions, and agencies or their governing boards, and from current or former donors to such assemblies, institutions, and agencies (or their corporate affiliates) by gifts, bequests, grants, and the issuance of notes and other evidences of indebtedness; and may disburse said monies as loans or grants to the entities and for the purposes set forth in Paragraph A of this Part Second.

Bylaws

Article II

- A. This corporation is the successor in interest to the Reformed Church in America - Extension Foundation, Inc. and the Church Building Fund of the Reformed Church in America; has received

and manages their respective assets; has assumed their respective liabilities; may solicit monies from ~~members, agencies, and instrumentalities of the Reformed Church in America~~ current or former assemblies, institutions, and agencies (and their corporate affiliates) of the Reformed Church in America ("RCA"), from current or former members of such assemblies, institutions, and agencies or their governing boards, and from current or former donors to such assemblies, institutions, and agencies (or their corporate affiliates) by gifts, bequests, grants, and the issuance of notes and other evidence of indebtedness; and may disburse said monies as loans to local churches, organizing churches, classes, and other assemblies, institutions, and agencies and (or their corporate affiliates) of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA, that are (i) constructing or purchasing church buildings for its ministries, (ii) otherwise improving property that is already owned by them, or (iii) subject to any limitations set forth elsewhere in these bylaws, purchasing land for future use or development by or on behalf of a local church, and may disburse a portion of said monies as grants to the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America ("GSC") (or any successor to the ~~General Synod Council~~ GSC that serves as the executive committee of the ~~General Synod of the Reformed Church in America~~) RCA ("General Synod")) for the purpose of funding church multiplication (previously known and referred to as evangelism and church development), revitalization endeavors of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA, and for Next Generation (middle school age through post college young adults) scholarships to fund volunteer opportunities, advocacy experiences, and mission internships.

Exceptions can be made allowing loans to be outstanding and disbursed to churches formerly organized as an RCA local church or collegiate church.

- B. The purpose of the corporation shall be to support the work of the ~~General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America ("GSC")~~ by making loans and grants to the entities and for the purposes set forth in Section A of this Article II. The corporation shall function under the ecclesiastical authority of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~ RCA through the GSC. The corporation shall have the power and authority to engage in any and all activities and pursuits that are lawful, reasonably related to the purposes set forth in the certificate of incorporation of the corporation, or Section A of this Article II, and not inconsistent with any other provision of these bylaws.

Article IV

- A. The corporation shall have not less than six nor more than twelve voting directors, all of whom shall be members in good standing of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~RCA and of at least the minimum age prescribed by the New York not-for-profit corporation law. The precise number of directors shall be determined by the board of directors. The General Secretary of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~RCA shall be an ex officio member of the Board of Directors, without vote but with the right to attend all meetings and to speak on any matter before the corporation.
- B. All voting directors shall be nominated by the General Synod Commission on Nominations from nominees submitted by the board of directors for each board position that is to be filled, and elected by the General Synod. When submitting nominees, the Board of Directors shall endeavor to reflect the diversity of the ~~Reformed Church in America~~RCA. The length, number, commencement date, and calculation of the terms of all directors shall be as provided in the RCA's *Book of Church Order*. All voting directors shall be ineligible for one year after they have served two consecutive terms.

The length, number, and commencement date of the terms of all directors shall be established in a manner that attempts to cause the second term of not more than one voting board member to expire in any one year.

- D. No employee of the General Synod of, ~~the Reformed Church in America ("General Synod"), the General Synod Council ("GSC"), or the Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America~~RCA who is directly accountable to ~~The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc., the corporation,~~ nor a spouse, parent, sibling, or child of such person, shall be eligible to serve as a voting director.

Some of the proposed changes (e.g., "Reformed Church in America" to "RCA") are included to make things consistent so that entities are referred to by an abbreviation rather than the full name of the entity after the abbreviation has been introduced.

Limits Regarding Unsecured Loans

Current CGF bylaws require all loans to be secured by a mortgage or deed of trust on property with the exception of a limited amount of unsecured loans (loans without collateral). The CGF has received applications from churches which, based upon the term of the loan, an identified and assured repayment source, and the borrower's financial condition, would qualify for an unsecured loan, but the current bylaws limitations on the amount of unsecured loans prohibit such a transaction. As a result, such loans have been made on a secured basis requiring additional documentation and substantially higher closing costs. If a church can obtain an unsecured loan, the savings in closing costs can be used for ministry.

Currently, the practice is to calculate the limits for unsecured loans as a percentage of total assets. Going forward, the CGF believes the practice should be to calculate the limits as a percentage of net assets. This is more common in the banking world and will be more consistent with other calculations that the CGF uses and will minimize the fluctuations in limitations. The following is a comparison of the proposed change in limits when calculated using the existing method compared to the proposed change in calculation (using net assets and total assets as of May 31, 2021).

- Total unsecured loans outstanding to any one borrower:
 - Current calculation using 0.25 percent of total assets = \$218,099
 - Proposed calculation using 1.00 percent of net assets = \$500,099

- Total principal of all unsecured loans:
 - Current calculation using 1.25 percent of total assets = \$1,090,496
 - Proposed calculation using 5.00 percent of net assets = \$2,500,496

As a result, the CGF board of directors is recommending approval by the General Synod of the following changes to the CGF bylaws (additions are underlined and deletions are stricken):

CGF 21-2

To adopt the following amendments to Article VIII, Section B of the Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc., bylaws (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

- B. The maximum amount of each loan, the time for which it is granted, the terms of its repayment, the rate of interest to be charged, shall be fixed from time to time as the Board of Directors may deem appropriate. Loans may be made on an unsecured basis, *provided* that the total principal amount of all unsecured loans outstanding to any one borrower does not exceed ~~one quarter of one percent (0.251%)~~ one percent (1.00%) of the ~~total~~net assets of the corporation, and *provided further* that the total principal of all unsecured loans outstanding to all borrowers does not exceed ~~one and one quarter~~five percent (~~1.255%~~ 5.00%) of the ~~total~~net assets of the corporation.**

Report of the Board of Benefits Services

The Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and incorporated and approved by an Act of the Assembly of the State of New York on April 16, 1923.

The General Synod has delegated to BOBS the responsibility to manage and administer the retirement and insurance programs required by the *Book of Church Order's* (BCO) Formulary No. 5, to manage and administer the BOBS's retiree chaplains and assistance programs, and to ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits, long-term disability benefits, and any other programs or services related to the financial wellbeing of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the RCA.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the board met virtually on October 21–22, 2020, and again on March 22–23, 2021, instead of in person. The volunteer board consists of at least nine but not more than seventeen members, including pastors and professionals from business, finance, investments, and law. Board membership also includes the president and vice president of the General Synod, the moderator of the General Synod Council (GSC), and the general secretary.

Ends and Executive Limitations

BOBS, like the GSC, utilizes the principles of policy governance to conduct its work and to guide its oversight and supervision of its executive director in the fulfillment of the purposes it was established to accomplish by the General Synod. Key to its use of the principles of policy governance is the responsibility to state clearly the reasons BOBS exists. In policy governance, the reasons are stated as “ends.”

The board provides direction to and oversight of the executive director's work through the following ends that were adopted at the October 2020 board meeting:

E-1 Manage and administer the retirement programs required by *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-1.1 Participants have a means to wisely set aside funds at a rate commensurate with other church plans.

E-1.2 Participants have a means to convert accumulations into retirement income choices including guaranteed lifetime income options.

E-2 Manage and administer the insurance programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-2.1 Reasonable health insurance benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants through our partnership with Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). Recognizing that the partnership with RBA is a board decision, the executive director is tasked with the following end: “Advocate for the purposes of E-2.1 and monitor and report the effectiveness of current partnership with RBA to the board.”

E-2.2 Ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans available to participants and eligible participants.

E-3 Manage and administer the Retiree Chaplains and assistance programs.

E-3.1 Active and retired participants and spouses have access to an assistance fund that may be available based on demonstrated need and is limited by available funds.

E-3.2 Employ a network of retired pastors and elders who maintain contact with and provide pastoral care for retired ministers and their spouses or surviving spouses and with lay missionaries who served for ten or more years.

E-4 Provide other programs or services related to the financial well-being of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.

E-4.1 Participants and eligible participants have access to and are encouraged to use information and educational resources that allow them to make timely financial decisions regarding their retirement and their health, life, and disability-related benefits.

E-4.2 Investigate and, if appropriate, ensure availability of programs or services related to multidimensional wellness and well-being.

Review of Services and Ministries

As stated in the *BCO*, a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Formulary No. 5) for all ministers serving the church under call or contract by paying the stipulated contributions to the RCA 403(b) retirement plan. In addition, consistories must “provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance” for a minister and his/her immediate family (*BCO*, Appendix, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134-135]). New in 2020, if the minister and his/her family elect medical coverage through a spouse’s employer-sponsored group plan, the church will compensate for “any medical premium costs incurred by [the pastor’s] immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated” (*BCO*, Appendix, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134-135]). These stipulations apply equally to full-time and part-time ministers.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this general rule. Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 of the *BCO* states that “a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Appendix, Formulary No. 5) for retirement and insurance for all ministers serving the church under call or contract unless (a) regarding retirement, the minister is covered by the retirement plan sponsored by the Regional Synod of Canada or the retirement plan of the communion where the minister’s membership is held, (b) the classis determines that the minister is serving the church part-time, as defined by the Board of Benefits Services, and that circumstances warrant that the consistory be exempt from this requirement, or (c) the minister is serving less than part-time as defined by the Board of Benefits Services” (2019 edition, p. 15).

Retirement Services, Fidelity Investments, and Fund Management

Thos Shipley, retirement plan administrator, and Feifei Liu, benefit actuarial analyst and project coordinator, are in regular contact with any number of participants, beneficiaries, church administrators, and Fidelity Investments to service the needs of our participants from enrollment through retirement.

To participate in the 403(b) plan, employers need to complete and submit an adoption agreement to the BOBS's office. The adoption agreement is a compliance document that can allow a consistory some flexibility in defining the terms of its participation in the RCA 403(b) retirement program. The agreement recognizes the RCA 403(b) plan as the retirement plan of the employer. If an employer submits funds on behalf of its ministers, the board also recognizes this action as evidence that the employer has adopted the agreement. Staff will continue to request adoption agreements from employers as required by the plan. The agreement can be downloaded from the employer section of the BOBS webpages:
<http://images.rca.org/docs/bobs/AdoptionAgreement.pdf>.

All employers are expected to use Fidelity's Simplified Contribution Platform (SCP) or Plan Sponsor WebStation (PSW), to remit their contributions directly through the Fidelity website instead of manually by check.

In collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC), in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement programs. BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants from Lockton Investment Advisors.

In response to participant request, BOBS added an additional environmental, social, and governance (ESG) fund. There has been a large increase in desire to align investing with personal values. Research shows that 67 percent of millennials would contribute more or increase their contributions if investments would contribute to the greater good. In June 2021, BOBS added Pioneer Balanced ESG K (PCBKX), which offers a balanced blend of ESG equities and fixed income holdings. Other ESG funds available in our line-up include Parnassus Core Equity Institutional (PRILX); Fidelity International Sustainability Index (FNIDX); and PIMCO Total Return ESG Institutional (PTSAX).

Effective January 1, 2021, BOBS implemented a fee reduction for our participants from 21 basis points to 19 basis points. This represents a cumulative decrease of over 50 percent in the past eight years.

After five years of availability, about 4 percent of participants are enrolled in the Fidelity Personalized Planning & Advice (FPPA) program. FPPA is an optional service that provides professional management of a participant's plan account for a small advisory fee based on total assets invested. Participants receive ongoing investment management, retirement, and financial planning support from a team of professionals. The strategy aligns with the participant's personal goals and is monitored and adjusted based on the market or life changes. This investment service is optional. Enrollment campaigns are held annually to allow a participant to enroll at a discounted price to test the program.

In order to maintain security and reduce fraud, Fidelity uses a two-factor authentication for participants performing certain high-risk transactions (password and user ID requests, rollover requests, etc.) on netbenefits.com.

New participants establish accounts online through the Fidelity NetBenefits website, where participants are automatically enrolled in the appropriate target date fund. Participants can change their employee contributions and designate or update beneficiaries directly on the Fidelity website. As part of Fidelity's NetBenefits enhancements, an alert will show at the top of the NetBenefits homepage for participants who do not have a beneficiary on file. All participants are encouraged to review and update their personal contact information on NetBenefits at least annually. This includes address, email address, phone number, and beneficiary designation.

A number of participants have asked us if their funds in the RCA retirement plan administered by BOBS are safe. Some of the anxiety may be because so many people refer to the RCA retirement plan as a pension plan. However, the RCA retirement plan is not a pension plan; it is a deferred compensation plan with accounts designated for each participant. The dollar amount shown on a participant's statement from Fidelity represents the amount actually in that account as of the effective date of the statement.

If a participant is no longer employed by an Employer (as defined in the plan document—typically assemblies, institutions, or agencies of the RCA), or, in the case of an ordained minister, if they demit from the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament or transfer their ordination outside the RCA, then BOBS must initiate distributions to the participant per their original Distribution Election form immediately. This is so, regardless of why employment ended or demission occurred, including affiliation with another denomination. In addition, BOBS is a separate entity from the GSC. The assets of BOBS stay with BOBS, and the rights, responsibilities, and fiduciary obligations of BOBS to implement the terms and conditions of the plan remain with BOBS (again, as provided in the plan document).

The plan document also speaks about the funds:

- The funds contributed to participants' accounts are held by BOBS in separate accounts for the benefit of the participants.
- Because the plan is characterized as a deferred compensation plan:
 - The funds are characterized as assets of BOBS until distributed to the participant. The assets are not assets of the General Synod or GSC.
 - The plan assets are characterized as being part of the general, unpledged, unrestricted assets of the board, subject to claims of the creditors of the Employer (the corporations of the RCA, and the assemblies, institutions, or agencies of the RCA, excluding the Regional Synod of Canada and any of its churches, related agencies, and institutions) and the RCA and BOBS.
 - While funds are subject to the claims of the general creditors of each employer and the RCA and BOBS, in many instances, it may be difficult for any creditor of that employer to establish what portion of the participants' accounts could be levied to satisfy a claim that is made.

The plan document also speaks about what it would take to terminate the plan and what would happen to the funds if the plan was terminated.

- It is the intention of the Board of Benefits Services to continue the plan indefinitely.
- The plan can be terminated in its entirety, but only if the Board of Benefits Services acts to do so AND the General Synod approves the board's actions.
- If the plan would be terminated, the credited amounts in each participant's account would be paid to the participant for whom the account exists.

Finally, each summer, we offer the reallocation program that allows eligible participants to "transfer" their money from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) program. Read more about this later in this report.

RCA 403(b) Retirement Contribution Verification Project

BOBS staff continues to collect the necessary information from RCA employers for the 403(b) contribution verification project. The contribution verification project was initiated in 2012 to audit the participation and payment of the required employer contributions related to the retirement accounts of eligible ministers under call or contract. Many employers were out of compliance with the plan document and the BCO and had not contributed the required 11 percent of compensation to eligible RCA ministers' retirement accounts.

Approximately \$1.7 million has been collected and added to the retirement savings accounts of RCA ministers since this project has begun.

The necessary information is requested annually from employers through the Retirement Security Form (RSF), a confidential portion of the Consistorial Report Form (CRF) system. Each year, there are a significant number of churches that do not complete the RSF, do not respond to the requests for payment, or only provide the basic information requested to perform the review. As a result of not having the needed information, it is impossible for staff to verify that the contributions have been made and are accurate. The plan document states that the responsibility for making contributions lies with the church employer. Staff feel confident that we have made reasonable efforts to collect these contributions on behalf of our participants, but we cannot do this without the cooperation of the churches.

We have targeted a number of employers that we know that we are unable to collect retirement payments for and wrote off the estimates on the financial statement. We identified the churches that never adopted the plan, churches that have either closed or disbanded, and pastors who have either passed away or transferred their ordination. We have requested the needed information for years and realize that in these situations, we will not be able collect payments for the ministers or their beneficiaries. This plan was discussed with and pre-approved by our auditors in November 2019. As a result, we wrote off \$513,060 as part of the audit year ending September 2020. We have continued to work on this project in 2021 using the same criteria and added those who no longer have payroll records (employers are required to keep payroll records for seven years).

Reallocation Program

The RCA retirement plan, a non-qualified plan, holds funds for 1,538 participants with a market value more than \$257 million as of December 31, 2020. This plan was closed to new participants and contributions as of December 31, 2004. The plan has advantages and disadvantages. BOBS feels that the potential disadvantages are compelling enough to provide

an opportunity for participant funds to be transitioned out of the RCA retirement plan and into the RCA 403(b) retirement program.

Following approval by the 2015 General Synod, the legal plan document of the RCA retirement plan was amended to allow the reallocation of participant funds from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) retirement program. BOBS implemented a process in the summer of 2015 for participants to reallocate their retirement savings. This reallocation is a two-step process that requires participants to provide relevant information to confirm their eligibility and determine the dollar amount that can be reallocated. Staff work closely with Fidelity Investments in the process, and the review is completed in strict compliance with the IRS 415(c) rules. Participation in this program is encouraged but optional.

The Reallocation Program was offered for again in the summer of 2020 to participants in connection with the 2019 tax year. One hundred and thirty-three participants were able to reallocate over \$5.1 million. The average balance transferred was consistent with prior years, but the individual participation was down about 22 percent. Some of the reasons for the decreased involvement is that participants no longer met the eligibility standards because they did not earn RCA dollars in the prior five years or they no longer had a balance in the RCA retirement plan.

In June 2021, the Reallocation Program was offered to participants in connection with the 2020 tax year.

More information about the program can be found on the BOBS website at www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/reallocation.

Insurance Programs

BOBS continues to collaborate with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) regarding the provision of medical benefits through the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). RCA and CRCNA entities are eligible to participate in RBA benefit offerings by agreeing to the Terms of Participation. The terms require that entities agree to enroll all eligible full-time staff minimally in one of the group basic life insurance plans. If the employer wants to provide medical insurance, the employer must agree to enroll all full-time employees in a medical plan unless the employee has coverage through a spouse, parent, or Medicare. The RBA offers a group basic life insurance of \$175,000 or a new \$75,000 basic life insurance plan. Part-time staff are eligible to participate as well. Optional benefit offerings include dental, vision, supplemental life insurance, accident, and critical illness insurance.

Active RCA-ordained ministers regularly working a minimum of 17.5 hours per week are automatically enrolled in long-term disability insurance administered through BOBS. Those not enrolled in life insurance through the RBA are enrolled in group life administered through BOBS. BOBS contracts with Lincoln for both life and long-term disability plans. Premiums for insurance remained the same from 2020 to 2021. In providing these benefits for eligible ministers, churches have access to an affordable group plan that allows them to easily fulfill the requirements of BCO Formulary No. 5. Cineca Anthony, BOBS's life and long-term disability (LTD) administrator, works with churches to ensure proper insurance coverage is available and provided to all eligible RCA ministers. Cineca also helps pastors and/or their beneficiaries navigate the insurance system when claims needs to be filed.

Churches are billed quarterly for BOBS's group plans. In order to not jeopardize the terms of a group plan, churches must pay the premiums to BOBS directly for their pastor's coverage.

Reminders are sent to the church when an invoice is not paid by the due date. If payment is not received, a notice of cancellation is sent to the minister, to the treasurer, and to the classis. The loss of or lack of coverage is a violation of the *BCO* and puts church employers out of compliance with Formulary No. 5. This loss of coverage also puts the minister and his or her beneficiaries at financial risk should an illness or death take place if the minister is not covered by the required insurances.

Part-time ministers who regularly work a minimum of 17.5 hours and no more than 29 hours per week may be exempt from participating in the insurance programs, as stated in the *BCO*. To apply for an exemption, a waiver of insurance form must be completed; signed by the minister, the consistory, and the supervising classis; and returned to BOBS. The waiver is available by contacting BOBS. Ministers who work 30 hours per week or more are not eligible to be exempt from benefits.

Ministers without charge can be covered by group life and LTD for 90 days after their last day of work. The most recent church where the minister served needs to pay the premiums for this extended period. Upon termination, policies can be converted or ported to an individual plan. All participants are encouraged to keep their beneficiary information updated by using the beneficiary designation form: www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Life-Beneficiary-Form.pdf.

Churches can help us in two ways:

1. Keep BOBS's staff aware of current salary information. This information is requested at the time of enrollment and each open enrollment period following. We also request current salary information in a special campaign each summer. This information is essential so ministers are enrolled in the proper amount of long-term disability coverage.
2. To make quarterly payments for insurance through electronic fund transfer (EFT) or pay by credit card through the online payment site instead of sending manual checks. Fewer manual checks will help us to improve efficiencies. This can be conveniently done by completing the ACH form that is part of the church's quarterly invoice or by contacting Terri Boven at tboven@rca.org.

Minimum Standards for Insurance

As stated in Formulary No. 5 of the *BCO*, "Such insurances shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services" (2019 edition, p. 135). For 2021, the minimum standard of coverage established by BOBS is met by offering coverage that approximates the consumer plan, as offered by the RBA.

- The consumer plan carries a coinsurance of 80 percent, an individual deductible of \$3,000, and a family deductible of \$5,600.
- The maximum in-network, out-of-pocket cost is \$5,000 for an individual and \$10,000 for a family.
- Coverage is 80 percent after the deductible has been met and until the out-of-pocket maximum has been reached.

- Once the out-of-pocket maximum has been met, the plan covers 100 percent of eligible medical expenses.

Definition of Part Time

Similar to the requirement that BOBS set the minimum standard for medical insurance, BOBS is also required to establish the definition of “part time.” Because each insurance provider has varying eligibility requirements, the definition of part time varies based on the product.

- For life and LTD insurance purchased through BOBS, part time is defined as working a minimum of 17.5 hours but not more than 29 hours per week. Those working 30 hours per week or more are considered full time.
- A definition of part time for the RCA 403(b) retirement program is anyone working 1 to 19 hours per week; however, consistories are required to make contributions for all ministers serving the church under call or contract. Those working 30 hours or more are considered full time.

If insurance is purchased through the RBA, its terms of participation require that any insured member must work a minimum of 20 hours per week to be enrolled in medical, dental, and vision insurance. For further clarification, contact RBA at 800-701-8992.

The definitions are published in the “Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information” brochure that is updated and distributed to ministers, churches, classis clerks, and regional synod executives each fall. The electronic version of this brochure is posted on the RCA website at www.rca.org/airb.

Retiree Chaplains Ministry and Assistance Program

BOBS, through the retiree chaplains program, employs a network of retired pastors and elders who maintain contact with retired RCA ministers and their spouses, surviving spouses, and lay missionaries with ten or more years of service. Thirty retiree chaplains, led by Mornier Rich, call on and visit more than 1,000 retirees across the U.S. and Canada each year. This ministry is designed to not only care for our retirees, but also to keep retired pastors and their spouses connected to the RCA after a life of service. Retiree chaplains also play a key role in the assistance program because they know the needs of the retirees and are able to identify those who are experiencing hardship due to a financial need.

Each spring, the retiree chaplains gather in person to share stories, receive any updates on internal processes, and spend time in prayer. In 2020 and 2021, the annual gatherings were canceled due to COVID-19. To stay connected, staff leads a quarterly Zoom call, which is giving the retiree chaplains an opportunity to encourage each other and spend time in prayer. The regional gatherings of retirees were canceled as well. We are making plans to gather again in person in April of 2022.

The assistance program provides grants to eligible ministers and their surviving spouses and dependent children. Financial assistance is primarily awarded for needs related to housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, funeral grants to surviving spouses, retirement contributions for disabled ministers, and other one-time or emergency needs. Financial assistance is also available for costs related to the higher education for children of deceased ministers and for medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new

church plant. Matching grants are available for emergency needs of active RCA ministers. Missionaries with ten or more years of services and former employees of the Southern Normal School are also eligible for grants from the assistance program. (The RCA operated this boarding school in Brewton, Alabama, for 86 years.)

This need for assistance is established through a formal assistance application that documents income and expenses of the applicant. In fiscal year 2020, 75 people received grants totaling \$333,000 for monthly assistance for essential needs, medical premiums, funeral grants, and retirement contributions for disabled ministers. The assistance program is providing monthly grants to 35 recipients in 2021. We are grateful that the funding continues to be available for this program because the needs are evident.

Each year, grant recipients express their gratitude with notes of thanks to the staff. The needs of our retirees are real, and the dollars we are able to give make a difference.

- One retiree in upstate New York shared how the work of Gregg Mast impacted him as a retiree. He wrote, "I have meant to write you about the program but to my neglect never did. The Rev. Gregg Mast became our chaplain and was outstanding in carrying out his duties. He blessed me with visits that made me feel part of the RCA again and so much more. ... You gifted us with his appointment for he was so much more than just a person who stopped in a for a visit but a real friend. Thank you again for allowing him to minister to us."
- We received the following note: "Thank you very much for the support the Reformed Church in America has given to our mother over the years. Mom died in February 2021 and we are grateful for the monthly assistance grants she received."
- One surviving spouse expressed, "I can't express how touched I was by your kind and generous gift at this – the most trying time of my life. Your prayers that I might experience the true and real presence of our Lord at this time of excruciating loss are very much appreciated. May God prosper the work of your hands."

The assistance program is funded through three sources: assessments, contributions, and endowment earnings.

1. **Assessments:** In 2020 and 2021, assessments designated for the assistance fund were \$2.00 per member.
2. **Contributions:** Any donation to BOBS that is not specified for another fund is deposited into the assistance program fund.
3. **Endowments:**
 - **ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund Policy:** A board-restricted endowment fund has been established with the reserves from the medical plan that was managed by the Board of Benefits Services. Earnings from this fund are being directed to the assistance fund.
 - **Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Fund:** This fund was established by the Mulders specifically to support the assistance program. Only the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
 - **Frank Williams Fund:** This endowment specifies that the interest shall only be used to aid ministers who have special emergency needs. This has traditionally been used to provide assistance to active RCA ministers on a matching-funds basis with the consistory, other RCA employer, or classis of membership.

- **Stillwell Trust:** The interest can only be used to fund the assistance program. Beginning in 2017, the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
- **Restricted legacies and assistance funds:** These are board-restricted funds to be used for assistance. In 2017, the Children's Fund (formerly the Orphans' Fund) was rolled into the assistance fund, expanding the coverage to include the provision of higher education grants for dependent children of deceased RCA ministers of Word and sacrament.
- **Van Brunt Trust:** The distributions from this trust are made each quarter to the assistance fund.

We are grateful for the many donors who give to the assistance fund each year and to General Synod, which has annually approved a portion of the assessments be designated specifically to care for retirees.

Well-being and Education

Through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, matching funds from BOBS, and funds from individual donations, BOBS plans to give \$1.5 million over a three-year period to reduce or eliminate ministers' personal debt and help them in working toward long-term financial health. Lilly Endowment Inc. believes that financial burdens carried by pastoral leaders are significant barriers to effective, faithful, and fruitful ministry. Through this process, grant recipients are expected to disclose their financial situation, agree to financial counseling, meet regularly with an accountability partner, and participate in a financial educational program. We hope, through this grant program, that financially struggling clergy will be given the tools to become financially healthy clergy, and the impact will be that both pastors and their congregations thrive. The RCA website has information about the grant program:

- www.rca.org/benefits/clergy-grants-financial-flourishing
- www.rca.org/news/ministerial-excellence-fund-offers-debt-relief

In 2020, our goal was to contribute and raise \$200,000 so that we could give away \$400,000 in grants for both the Ministerial Excellence Fund and the Bless Your Pastor Campaign. We were able to contribute and raise over \$275,000 and offer over \$550,000 in grants! Much of the money raised came from ministers themselves, showing a shared partnership in working toward financial health.

On March 8, 2021, the review committee granted a potential \$390,000 in gifts to relieve the debt of 52 ministers. Three tiers of grants were offered: a "High Impact" grant of \$10,000; a "Gift Plus" grant where BOBS gives \$5,000, plus an additional \$2,500 when the recipient raises funds to match that additional \$2,500; and a "Matching" grant, where BOBS gives \$2,500 when the recipient raises \$2,500 to match those funds. BOBS pays grant funds directly to the lender based on the documentation provided by the recipient. One recipient expressed their reaction when they learned that they received the grant:

It was a Sunday morning when I first heard. Worship was 20 minutes away from starting. The early-birds were making their way to the sanctuary as they passed by my office where I sat alone making last minute preparations for the service. I was moments away from powering down my laptop when I noticed an email from the ministerial excellence fund in my inbox. Out of curiosity I opened the message and saw the news: I was the

recipient of the \$10,000 high impact grant. I about fell out of my chair I was so excited, and humbled! I can still remember the deep feeling [of] relief that washed over me as I [sat] there in silence. I had to pause and pray, gathering my thoughts. I [was] minutes away from leading our congregation into an encounter with God and I was convinced that I had just had a private encounter with the Almighty myself. With that grant my wife and I were able to pay off the rest of my student loan debt and part of hers but the impact was more than financial. It was emotional and relational. The funds opened for us new conversations about the future and forged for us a new bond over our finances. We also decided that we couldn't keep this news to ourselves and would actively tell our congregation about the impact of the funds we received. Since we had already been in the process of hosting members of our church in our home for dessert and coffee (about every other week in groups of about 8-14 people) we chose to share our journey with this grant in those conversations. We were blessed in sharing. They were blessed in hearing. We were all blessed by growing through a moment of vulnerability.

BOBS launched the second annual Bless Your Pastor campaign in October 2020. We encouraged every RCA church to take a special offering to give to their pastor in October, November, or December. As an extension to the Ministerial Excellence Fund, BOBS offered a matching grant of up to \$2,000 that was paid toward student loans or medical bills if the offering was used to pay down debt. We also encouraged clergy to take this opportunity to invest in themselves, even if their congregation did not participate. Ministers could personally contribute the funds and BOBS matched it. Finally, BOBS partners with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in this initiative. Any church that took a special offering to give to their pastor was eligible for a \$250 Amazon gift card from the NAE. Our goal was to raise more than \$33,000 in matching funds, which was the 2019 total. We are pleased to report that BOBS was able to raise \$71,000 in matching funds that allowed us to give over \$140,000 in grants.

BOBS has also partnered with LSS Financial Counseling to provide pastors with a service that has a focus on creating a budget, debt consolidation, student loan management, and improving credit scores, among other things. This service is not only available to our pastors, but is also available to anyone in their household who would benefit from the service. Each person who utilizes the service gets up to six sessions with a certified financial counselor.

BOBS has a partnership with Everence Financial, which offers a seven-part financial planning process with a team of Everence-certified financial planners. They address cash flow, protections, taxes, investing, estate planning, retirement, and charitable giving. Our goal in 2020 was to enlist 25 pastors (and their spouses, if applicable) in the program, and we exceeded that goal by April. In 2021, our goal was to enlist 40 more households in the program. This yearlong experience costs \$1,500 per pastor. We are able to subsidize half of that cost with our grant from the Lilly Endowment and funds raised from classes, bringing the final cost to only \$375 for most RCA ministers.

One of our favorite stories is about a pastor who was curious about participating in the financial planning process with Everence financial advisors, but was hesitant and cautious at first. After an initial conversation to feel them out, he decided to go for it. As the process unfolded, he and his wife discovered that they could refinance their home and save close to \$50,000 over the course of the loan.

BOBS created a new process for welcoming and orienting newly ordained ministers of Word and sacrament. When we receive a blue form from a classis clerk indicating that a minister has been ordained, we send them a welcome email. Included in the email is an invitation for a Zoom meeting with retirement and financial education coordinator Billy Norden. Most newly ordained ministers accept the orientation invitation and spend half an hour learning about their benefits and the services provided by BOBS and having the opportunity to ask questions. BOBS also designed a new document that offers an easy-to-understand summary of pastors' benefits.

To address the emotional well-being of pastors, BOBS has contracted with Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services to provide free, confidential, short-term Christian counseling services through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This contract includes an expanded network of providers so pastors and their families can seek services in their community. Eligible clergy and their households also have access to a 24-hour phone line to explore their concerns with MSW or PhD counselors. If needed, clergy and members of their household are entitled to up to three face-to-face consultations per problem. In addition, clergy have access to assessments, articles, videos, templates for legal forms, and training via an online web tool. More information can be found at www.rca.org/benefits/employee-assistance-program. The employee assistance program is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To receive services, call 833-244-2490 and identify yourself as an RCA member.

RBA continues to offer physical well-being opportunities for its members. The Real Appeal weight loss program was reintroduced during open enrollment for 2021 and is available for participants today.

Board and Staff Transitions

The Board of Benefits Services expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Kent Vant Hul for his employment as a retiree chaplain. With deep sadness and gratitude for their faithful service, we say goodbye to Ellen-Jo Emerson, Allan Janssen, and Gregg Mast. We welcome new retiree chaplains Noreen Fargione, Perry Raak, Douglas Shepler, Wayne Sneller, Larry Ten Hanken, and Everett Zabriskie.

Finance and Annual Audit

Please see the Report of the Office of Finance to review BOBS's finances and annual audit.

Re-domiciling Corporation in Michigan

General Synod 2019 approved the articles of incorporation and the bylaws of The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America, Inc., a Michigan nonprofit corporation. As a result, a new corporation was established and vendor contracts and agreements, along with most of the assets, were transferred effective January 1, 2020. January 1, 2020, also marks the time that BOBS began doing business as a Michigan nonprofit corporation. With the help of Paul Karssen and Angela Worthley, BOBS managed to transfer the last of the assets (several annuities owned by the board on behalf of participants) from the New York corporation to the Michigan corporation. The necessary papers for the dissolution of the New York corporation have been sent to the attorney general's office, and BOBS is waiting for their approval to dissolve the New York corporation. Once approved, a final communication will be sent to the New York State Department of Financial Services informing them that the New York corporation has been dissolved.

BOBS will maintain office space, staff, and day-to-day operations in The Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1606, New York, New York.

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

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 (CCA) 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 grow 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, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-11).

Communication from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) and the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM)

In the fall of 2019, the CCA received a letter from one of the commissioners of CORE regarding the Reformed Church in America’s (RCA) 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 at 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 they 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. This has led to litigation. In recent years, 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 crossed into Native American burial grounds. While these are some examples of how public policy affects tribal communities, it is clearly 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 siblings 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.

Communication with CPAAM

At the beginning of North America’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world began hearing stories of Anti-Asian violence being spurred by a false notion of Asian and Asian Americans’ culpability in spreading the virus. The CCA was honored to work with CORE in writing the statement, “A Call to Stand with Asians and Against Racism” (www.rca.org/a-call-to-stand-with-asians-and-against-racism).

As the pandemic continued, we continued to see acts of violence, hatred, and ignorance affect our Asian American and Pacific Islander siblings. This was highlighted most traumatically in the brutal slaying of eight people in Atlanta in March 2021. Six of the victims were Asian or Asian American women.

Members of CCA met with members of CORE and CPAAM to process the grief and trauma of this violence and ongoing threats. We began working on a revised statement calling for more specific action to be taken by RCA congregations and members in support of our Asian American and Pacific Islander siblings. At the time of this writing, that statement and call for action has not been finalized or published.

In light of this work, we make the following recommendations:

CA 21-1

To join the Commission on Christian Action 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 General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commissions on Race and Ethnicity and Christian Action, to advocate for the concerns expressed by the indigenous congregations in the RCA.

CA 21-2

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.

CA 21-3

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Christian Worship, to craft a Liturgy of Lament for use by RCA congregations relating to the specific roles the RCA has played in oppression of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people of North America, from our earliest days on the Lenape land our church forebears called New Amsterdam, to our members' involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, to present day issues of injustice and indifference.

Creation Care and the Climate Crisis

As members of congregations in the RCA, 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 (justice.crcna.org/about-0)
- Lutherans Restoring Creation (lutheransrestoringcreation.org)
- Presbyterians for Earth Care (presbyearthcare.org)
- United Church of Christ Creation Justice Churches (www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/creation_justice_churches)
- Creation Justice Ministries (*formerly the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program*) (www.creationjustice.org)

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. Across the U.S., 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.ucsusa.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. 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. From California wildfires to the deep freeze of Texas's energy grid to the increase in severity of dust storms across Africa's Sahara Desert region, God's people cannot wait. The church must begin to take the action our national and international leaders have struggled to take.

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:

CA 21-4

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.

CA 21-5

To direct the general secretary 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 Faithward content featuring articles about creation justice and best practice testimonials from churches and classes.**

- **Use RCA online channels to list videos and resources teaching the theological justifications for creation justice.**

CA 21-6

To direct the GSC, through its Investment Committee, to require transparency from RCA investment partners as to where all RCA funds, including retirement funds, are invested and to move toward full ESG (environmental, social, and governance) portfolios within an 18-month period.

CA 21-7

To urge congregations and classes to share ideas and resources about actionable 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.**

Repeal of the 2002 War Authorization Act

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is a national, nonpartisan, Quaker organization that lobbies the 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.

Nineteen 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 U.S. 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 last year, former 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 of the following reasons:

- 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 2021. 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.

CA 21-8

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 their respective U.S. congresspersons and senators to encourage the repeal of the 2002 Iraq War Powers Authorization.

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, political candidates and office holders at all levels use social media to insult their opponents. 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 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, as Matthew says in chapter five, “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 5:22-26 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. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

Do we strive to be gentle and self-controlled in church assemblies, and do we require this of others? 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. We are called to be lights in this world.

Galatians 5:14-15 says this: “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (NIV). It is later in this passage that we receive the fruit of the Spirit and a gentle admonition to engage with one another in right and loving behavior.

In this vein, the Commission on Christian Action has devised the following nine guidelines—based on the fruit of the Spirit revealed in Galatians—to encourage our assemblies and bodies to engage in civil discourse.

1. Show **love** to your fellow delegates. How are your words or silence affecting those around you? Are you creating an environment that is hospitable and allows for differing opinions and the work of the Holy Spirit? Are your words and actions rooted in love and showing respect for those around you?
2. Seek **joy** in the work of this body. We have been called together to do the work of Christ’s church. We should look for opportunities to rejoice in the good work God has done in and through the Reformed Church in America.
3. Act to create **peace** and highlight areas of shared interest. One of the mottos on the RCA crest is “Eendracht Maakt Macht,” which translates to “in unity/concord there is strength.” The church is stronger when we can celebrate the many things we have in common.

4. Practice **patience** and follow proper *Robert's Rules of Order*. Wait for the moderator or president to call on you before speaking. This allows your fellow delegates time to process what each speaker preceding you has said.
5. Our words and actions should reflect **kindness**. Demeaning and belittling comments, including eye rolls, exasperated sighs, or rude remarks are always inappropriate and should be unwelcome on the floor of General Synod and in any space, let alone the church.
6. Assume **good intent** from the others in this body. Seek to understand the intention and content of speakers who are expressing ideas you disagree with. What message are they trying to convey? How might their experiences, which differ from yours, shape their thinking on this? Can we find empathy for their opinion even if we don't agree with it?
7. Show **faithfulness** to God, to one another, and to the church you've been called to serve. Have you brought a personal agenda into this meeting, or have you set it aside to hear the Holy Spirit, to learn with and from your fellow delegates, and to serve the Reformed Church in America faithfully?
8. Be **gentle** with yourself in times of misunderstanding or confusion. Ask clarifying questions; if you're unsure of something happening or being said, someone else will be too.
9. Practice **self-control**. Refrain from speaking over one another or engaging in outbursts of emotion. If side-conversations are necessary, respect those at your table and around you and take the conversation off the plenary floor.

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:

CA 21-9

To commend the guidelines for civil discourse 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.

CA 21-10

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

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.

Immigration and the Crisis at the United States' Southern Border

- <https://worldrelief.org/church-leaders-resources-download/>
- <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/44693-5-ways-the-church-can-address-the-immigration-crisis.html>

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

- <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/the-opioid-crisis-practical-toolkit.pdf>
- <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/the-opioid-crisis-is-the-life-issue-christians-must-address>
- <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/Christian>

With this report, the commission acknowledges and thanks Jane Brown and Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell, who completed their terms of service on CCA in 2020, and Beth Carroll, who served with us until 2021. The commission also wishes to honor the deep commitment to justice of the late CCA commissioner E.J. Emerson, who died in August 2020. Her voice and compassion are deeply missed.

Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Education and Discipleship During a Pandemic

During the time of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptation has been a necessity. This has applied to the work of education and discipleship as well. All over the church, pastors and lay leaders have needed to find new ways to reach out to parishioners and communities. We have seen more and more churches use technology like livestreaming and Zoom to establish new digital platforms on which to do the ongoing work of discipleship.

Many churches have even reported a significant increase in the number of people who view online services and participate in digital learning opportunities. Churches have found ways to adapt, and God has graciously used these new efforts to continue to grow the kingdom of God. Many churches also provided Bible worksheets and educational tools sent home to engage children with what they were learning in children's programming and to enable participation in online church services. Many families appreciated how the necessary adaptations created the practice of a special time and faith conversation with their kids—whether it was attending services online or talking through discussions and worksheets.

It has been an unusual year, but in many ways, the challenges of the pandemic have expanded many of our churches' ideas of what it means to teach and reach people of all ages and all abilities using various forms of communication. In an unexpected advantage, being online created additional accessibility for people who previously were unable to worship in church because of physical or mental barriers.

Additionally, many adults appreciated being able to participate in multiple churches online, particularly the delight of hearing different services preaching on the same Scriptures taken from the Revised Common Lectionary. God was able to use our difficult situations to broaden our understanding of ministry, outreach, and inclusion in profound ways during this difficult season.

Now that we are beginning to see more of a return to what life looked like before the pandemic, the tendency could be to go back to what we were doing before COVID-19 as well. This would be a mistake as it would stifle the fruit of innovation that we have seen over the past year. Rather than seeking to "return to normal," what could it look like to continue to innovate for the sake of the gospel? What could it look like to continue to learn best practices from each other?

Care and Concern for Educators

One of the many impacts of the pandemic has been a high level of fatigue and burnout among those who serve in ministry. Many pastors, educators, youth workers, etc. are tired and weary after an extremely difficult year. Aside from the larger issues of increased cost of schooling and seminary, higher student debt, and rising health care costs,¹ clergy and youth workers often feel like they need to be working all the time and do not have time for rest, let alone a whole

¹ The National Association for Evangelicals found that 59 percent of pastors have no health insurance, and 62 percent have no retirement fund or plan. In 2018, the average total student loan debt for a seminary graduate was \$54,600. See the full report here: <https://blessyourpastor.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NAE-Research.docx.pdf>.

Sabbath. Working in ministry has never been easy, but when the world is as exhausting as it is now, those who tend to the spiritual needs of others are overwhelmed by this burden. The idea of “calling” may sometimes distort expectations of what a ministry job should feel like, the sheer number of jobs that many are performing, and how their larger community could help to alleviate burnout.

According to Alexis, a former youth minister, “Being a youth pastor requires more than my Biblical Studies degree. You are an event planner, a counselor, a graphic designer, a marketing team, a public speaker, and a lot more. The high turnover in youth ministry is not a secret. What I would love to see is the culture around ministry to change, because what we are doing right now isn’t working. Pay your staff better. And if you can’t do that, set up better systems of support for them. Acknowledge that emotional and spiritual work is still difficult, even if it looks to you like only soft skills. I felt like I had a calling. I’ve been told that I do by spiritual leaders I really respect. But it has been such a struggle and I so often feel like I’ve failed God and I’ve failed my kids. I wonder if maybe I was wrong about that.”²

We have seen advocacy for churches to provide their pastors some extra time away for rest and renewal after the leadership demands of the past year. However, we really haven’t seen that conversation happen when it comes to youth workers and educators. So, we’d like to give a few words of encouragement for how you can care for the youth workers and educators in your churches and communities.

First, thank them for everything they’ve done to lead and serve through the pandemic. Make sure they know that all they have done has not gone unnoticed. Share stories with them of how God has used them to bless, disciple, and care for people during the pandemic. Second, give them opportunity for extra rest and renewal. This could be an extra week of vacation, the ability to attend another conference, or something else. Find ways to let them know that their personal health—physical, mental, and spiritual—is just as important as everything that they do for your church.

The Mission of Education and Discipleship

One of the first commands that Jesus gave the disciples after the resurrection was to “go and make disciples of all nations.” The core of the work of the early church was around discipleship. It was the task of going out, sharing the good news, and nurturing people in the growth of their knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ. It is this same important work that the church continues to do to this day.

The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education has endeavored to embody the work of the gospel through the cultivation of disciples of all ages. In the past, the commission has focused on diversity training, certification of lay leaders, and the promotion of educational resources for discipleship. In more recent years, the commission fostered intentional discussions about the meaning and changing nature of discipleship in the twenty-first century, and how to encourage intergenerational discipleship. It also created a directory of Christian

² For more stories of clergy dealing with burnout, see Anne Helen Peterson, “The Contours of Clergy Burnout,” September 24, 2020; <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-contours-of-clergy-burnout>.

educators to better equip and communicate with the church's diverse group of discipleship leaders. Presently, the commission is intentionally exploring tangible ways to financially support the professional development of discipleship and Christian educators through attending professional organizations and conferences such as CERCA (Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America) and APCE (Association of Presbyterian Church Educators), respectively. In addition, the commission is dedicated to affirming the essential program of Children and Worship in the work of sharing and nurturing the gospel.

In 2019, the General Synod affirmed the importance of the work of education and discipleship in the church and with this commission. We are grateful for all of the good work that is being done in our churches in the areas of Christian education and discipleship and for those men and women who are doing this important work. In our rapidly changing world, the unchanging priority of Christian education and discipleship becomes even more important and we are excited to see all of the thought and prayer that is going into discovering and creating new models for this work.

We are seeing the evolution of how churches seek to embody Christ's command to make disciples. Our team reached out to RCA staff and churches to see what trends and best practices are bearing fruit, transforming lives, and mobilizing people into mission for God's kingdom in the places that they live, work, and play.

Two trends we heard early and often: first, information by itself is neutral. To acquire knowledge—to learn a concept, read Scripture, or learn about a spiritual practice—does not change a life. In Matthew 7:24 and 26, Jesus speaks to this (bold added):

Therefore everyone **who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ... But everyone who **hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice** is like a foolish man who built his house on sand (NIV).

Sharing and gathering information can be a part of discipleship but is not, by itself, discipleship. Information does not necessarily lead to transformation, spiritual growth, or increased maturity in Christ. In some churches, gathering more information through classes, reading books, and conferences has become a detriment to discipleship by creating a false sense of growth and change. Secondly, the value of process over program: most people that we spoke to share a skepticism of the latest and greatest program, book, box set, or other resource that proposed to be the "magic bullet" to grow their church, make disciples, and more. Instead, churches spoke highly of discipleship that is more process-oriented and has a more organic and relational feel. Some processes that are bearing great fruit across the RCA include Faithwalking (faithwalking.us), 3DM, and the Congregational Vitality Pathway (vitalitypathway.org).

Central to these best practices is a focus on growing in community, specifically in coaching relationships for accountability and support. Another central trait of effective discipleship is a focus on practicality and practice. To follow Christ is innately active and requires a response from us. The most fruitful practices leverage space for information, practice, and reflection on the work.

One last trend that we heard is that conversations about discipleship get stuck sometimes because of how different people and generations prefer to learn, work, and live. We heard countless stories of one generation that believes that discipleship happens in rows in

classrooms while another generation thinks it happens in circles in a more interactive format. We don't pretend that either is the right answer, but we simply acknowledge that some of our churches get stuck because of various generations' styles. Some people end up talking over each other and using the same words to mean very different things.

Children and Worship

Children ages three to nine in more than 300 RCA congregations experience age-appropriate worship each week through Children and Worship. Children and Worship is a cooperative ministry of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). This program continues to be one of the most effective ways of nurturing children's faith and preparing them for worship with the whole congregation.

The Children's Ministry team at New Hope Church in Powell, Ohio, began utilizing Children and Worship again last summer after a ten-year pause with the program. Members of their church are trained as Children and Worship leaders, and the decision was made to re-engage with the program. Children's Ministry team lead Rachel Tate had this to say after they re-launched last summer:

New Hope's first Children and Worship was amazing! The story of The Light was shared. We had 18 K–2nd graders and 23 3rd–5th graders. After years of entertainment and technology driven programs, we were extremely interested in seeing how the children would react to slowing down in Children and Worship. They loved it! The leaders loved it! The shepherds loved it! It was truly wonderful. The children were engaged, well behaved, and happy! The set up was simple. The message was clear. We're so thankful for this program, the leaders who have gone before us, and the space to slow down and literally take time for and with God.

The commission continues to urge the RCA to dedicate itself to the goal of committing substantial resources to the ongoing religious development of children.

APCE and CERCA

The annual Association of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) conference was held in Little Rock, Arkansas, from January 29 to February 1, 2020. The theme of "Getting Outside the Box: Discipleship through Retreat, Mission, and Justice Ministries" continued the above conversations among the 27 Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America (CERCA) members gathered with our broader Reformed ecumenical partners. While the paid position and title of Church or Christian Educator does not exist in the RCA to the extent that it once did or to the extent it still does with our many Presbyterian friends, we can all agree that Christian education still takes place in all of our churches, and providing ongoing opportunities for learning, growth, and resources is important.

The nearly 40-year partnership of CERCA and APCE, combined with the annual APCE conference, is an opportunity for ongoing development for our churches' educators that we continue to lift up as a solidly Reformed event. Whether educators are new or experienced, paid or unpaid, there are always new things for us to learn, and there is value in us doing this together across generations and contexts of how each of our churches engages this ministry of teaching and discipleship. The commission feels so strongly about this that the \$1,000 in funds

that were approved by the 2019 General Synod for the “professional and personal growth of those working in RCA educational/discipleship ministries” were invested back into the Supporting and Equipping Educators’ Development (SEED) Scholarship Program offered through our denominational discipleship office, which awarded two \$500 scholarships to interested attendees this year. The SEED scholarships are available to as many as eight applicants each year, so please make this known to those who could use it at the 2022 event in Chicago at the beginning of February!

Acknowledging the ongoing changes in the church and educational ministries, CERCA, in alignment with the purposes of this commission, will be attempting to create a greater awareness of the networking, support systems, and opportunities for ongoing preparation for ministry for our denominational educators. To that end, one of our long-term ecumenical partnerships called Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Ministry (PREM) or, later, Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Partnership (PREP) is dissolving. Each member denomination will be receiving a portion of the financial assets in hopes that this money will be reinvested in each denomination’s educational ministries. It is this commission’s hope, in support of CERCA, that the anticipated \$43,000 will be returned to CERCA as the body that has been engaged in this ecumenical partnership and could use these financial resources to achieve greater effectiveness in its ministry to support all who are working in RCA educational/discipleship ministries.

**CERCA ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION
(CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS, REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA)**

Pursuant to the action of General Synod 2019 (DE 19-2), the General Synod Council has created a \$10,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of \$1,000 per year in order to provide for professional and personal growth of those working in RCA education and discipleship ministries (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, etc.).

Scholarships will be awarded on a biannual basis (February and August), pending applications and funds available. Applications may be submitted in advance or subsequent to educational opportunities. Preference will be given to those individuals not previously having received money from this fund.

To apply, complete the application below and send it with a letter of support from your consistory (governing board) to Barbara Ellis at the address at the end of this document.

Please print. Attach an additional sheet if necessary.

Date _____

Name _____

Street Address _____

City _____ State/Province _____ ZIP/Postal code _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Church membership _____

1. What educational opportunity would you like to attend/have you attended, and in what way do you see this benefitting you and/or your church's ministry?

2. What is the total cost for this opportunity? What amount are you requesting? And what, if any, financial assistance will your church provide?

3. What other continuing education opportunities have you attended/are you currently engaged in?

4. What role do you envision Christian education/discipleship playing in your future ministry?

Completed application and letter from consistory should be sent to:

Barbara Ellis, executive assistant

Reformed Church in America ♦ 4500 60th St. SE ♦ Grand Rapids, MI 49512 ♦ bellis@rca.org

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2019 edition, pp. 67-68]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the *Book of Church Order* in this way (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2019 edition, p. 112]):

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed newer ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members; elected or appointed, paid or volunteer; who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, and in which we in the RCA are seeking to invest our whole selves into the work of Transformed & Transforming, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of "working with all the partners that God provides," as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA

through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming globally at this point in history. This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. The first portion of the report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA's formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but on the work and witness of the RCA. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in the church's history, as the church continues to struggle with its response to Jesus's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

World Council of Churches

The largest and oldest organized expression of the modern worldwide ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC), "is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ."

The WCC gathers its community from 345 churches in 110 countries, representing over 500 million Christians worldwide. Member churches (or denominations) consist primarily of those from the historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox Church, including most of the world's Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC's founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Major parts of world Christianity, including churches from Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, however, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, but participates in various theological dialogues and cooperates in some other ways.

The WCC's highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years. Its 11th assembly, originally scheduled to take place in September 2021 in Karlsruhe, Germany, is now slated to be held in the second half of 2022, under the theme "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity." The Central Committee is the continuing body that implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget, and secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies. Eddy Alemán serves on the Central Committee, continuing the unbroken line of general secretaries of the RCA serving the WCC in this capacity.

The work of the WCC, at times, is to provide a Christian witness in ways that perhaps no other group in the world can do. One way in which the WCC does this is through Thursdays in Black. Thursdays in Black is a council-wide campaign that takes a stand against gender-based violence to ensure that women, men, boys, and girls, are safe from rape and violence in homes, schools, work, streets—in all places in our societies. The Thursdays in Black movement grew out of the WCC's Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998), in which stories of rape as a weapon of war, gender injustice, abuse, violence, and many tragedies that grew outward from such violence became all the more visible. But what also became visible was women's resilience, agency, and personal efforts to resist such violations. The campaign is simple but profound: Wear black on Thursdays. Declare on social media (#ThursdaysinBlack)

that you are part of the global movement resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence. Show your respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence. Encourage others to join you.

For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, go to www.oikoumene.org.

World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. The RCA was a charter member of the former WARC and enthusiastically worked to support the coming together of these two ecumenical bodies into one. This renewed fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, Waldensian, United, and Uniting churches is a network of 230 Protestant churches in 108 countries, with a combined estimated membership of 100 million people.

The 26th General Council of the WCRC took place in June 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, with the theme “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” The council dealt with issues of justice, church unity, and world renewal. More than 1,000 delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests gathered in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation, which has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. Additionally, the council celebrated the signing of the “Wittenberg Witness,” a document crafted between the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation that expresses a commitment to Christian unity as Reformed and Lutheran Christians live and work together to further a common Christian witness to a broken and troubled world.

The WCRC is “called to communion and committed to justice.” Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC is always being transformed as it strives for the full and just participation of all. In its diversity, the WCRC seeks to be a living expression of “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As a global *koinonia*, the communion is marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. With all the partners God provides, the WCRC works for the transformation of the whole world, so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

The WCRC may be best known worldwide for the Accra Confession, a groundbreaking statement issued at the General Council held in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates of social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at <http://wcrc.ch/accra>.

The RCA’s Lisa Vander Wal serves as a vice president of the WCRC. The commission wishes to publicly commend her for the important leadership she is providing to the worldwide church through her multifaceted work with the WCRC.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, go to www.wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence, drawing for the first time world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches into a new place of relational, rather than structural, fellowship. Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the global south, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF's work.

In 2018, Casely Essamuah was installed as the newest secretary of the GCF. An ordained minister in the Methodist Church, Ghana, Essamuah describes himself as "evangelical and ecumenical." Coming originally from Africa and now ministering in North America, he views himself as a "bridge-builder" between the churches in the global north and global south.

The facilitation group met, with the addition of young adult consultants, in Denmark in the fall of 2019, at the invitation of the Moravian Church, with a focus on the directives that came out of the GCF's Third Global Gathering (held in Bogota, Colombia, in April 2018). The facilitation group's chief purpose is to plan activities for the next three to five years, based on the ideas that emerged from the Third Global Gathering. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the GCF committee and facilitation group, and Stacey Duensing serves as young adult consultant for the GCF.

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 38 NCC member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include over 40 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC.

By necessity, the work of the NCC has evolved in dramatic ways over the last decade, in response to a precipitous decline in revenue. NCC general secretary and president James E. Winkler presides over a very differently structured organization than the one that existed a generation ago. Still, the NCC continues to offer an important witness to the power of a shared voice among Christians. The newest multi-year initiative of the NCC focuses on ending racism. The NCC continues to respond to other urgent issues that Christians face, most recently mass incarceration and interreligious relations with a focus on peace. General secretary Eddy Alemán serves on the governing board of the NCC. The RCA is also represented on the NCC's Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations, Christian Education, Faith Formation and Leadership, and Faith and Order. The commission thanks Laura Osborne, Norma Coleman-James, and Monica Schaap Pierce for their ongoing service on these Convening Tables.

The website of the NCC is www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us.

Christian Churches Together

Formed in 2001, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from the Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations such as Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, and Sojourners. It is this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes the CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. One of the distinctive characteristics of CCT is its intentional focus on relationship-building and mutual understanding, instead of theological consensus-building. This characteristic has invited these diverse Christians to come together in a unique and holy manner that continues to gain momentum.

In 2019, Christian Churches Together held its convocation in Montgomery, Alabama. With the theme “Beloved Community,” speakers and participants engaged in dialogue on the nature and purpose of the church in a culture still plagued by racism. The group prayed over historic sites in the United States’ history of enslavement and toured the deeply moving Legacy Museum and lynching memorial. The RCA delegation consisted of Monica Schaap Pierce, who also serves on the steering committee of CCT, Carlos Corro, Stacey Duensing, and Eddy Alemán.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates laud the annual convocations as opportunities to build personal relationships with people across the church in the U.S., to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

CCT’s website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its mission and activity. There you will also find common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

RCA—Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the RCA, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. For example, Daniel Meeter recently completed his service as a member of the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Paul Janssen serves on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s ecumenical committee, and representatives from the Formula of Agreement churches serve as corresponding delegates to this body each year. While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant

Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula's provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a newly revised guide in "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament" document: images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories that are considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches. The commission would like to thank former RCA staff members Andy Bossardet and Molly Towne and the Commission on Church Order for their work on this updated guide.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

For over 50 years, the RCA has participated in an ongoing theological dialogue with other Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives. In 2017, the Reformed–Roman Catholic consultation concluded its eighth round of dialogue. Included in the dialogue were representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the RCA. The RCA was represented by the late Allan Janssen, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Monica Schaap Pierce. The dialogue focused on ecclesiology, and, in particular, on the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, and unity and diversity in the life of the church. The dialogue also examined ecclesial ministry and oversight and uncovered a unifying affirmation that ecclesial ministry and oversight are undertaken personally and collegially in service to the church, not just for the church's own sake, but for the sake of the world God so loves.

The commission commends the report of the eighth round, titled "The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World," to churches for study. The text can be found at images.rca.org/docs/synod/TheOneBody.pdf. The ninth round of dialogue will commence upon approval by partner denominations and will focus on the relationship between justification and justice. The prospectus for the ninth round can be found at images.rca.org/docs/synod/ProspectusNinthRound.pdf.

Unity Begins at Home

Reflecting on its mandate for Christian unity, the commission is concerned about fissures of disunity within and among local churches and in the RCA as a whole. Diversity of thought is realistic and healthy. Diversity is realistic because the church is comprised of a multiplicity of people with sundry gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Diversity is healthy because, through these diverse gifts, creativity emerges and with it, fresh approaches to upholding sacred traditions as well as addressing new issues in changing times. Diversity is not inimical to unity. Rather, the unity that has already been established in Christ comes to its fullest expression through the various gifts of the faithful, which are unified in their service to the gospel.

The RCA has a long history of collaborating with other Christians of diverse cultures, histories, gifts, and beliefs. Whether in hospitals founded by missionaries, in a local vacation Bible school hosted with neighboring churches, or in dialogue with other communions, we partner with other believers in order to advance Christ's mission on earth. Our common, unifying work is a response to Jesus's prayer that we "may all be one" (John 17:21). In the Bible, Christian unity is

described as a gift and a call. It is a gift that has already been realized by Jesus Christ, who has broken down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). It is a call to bear one another's burdens so as to make visible to all a unity that God already sees (Galatians 6:2).

Yet, within our denomination, we have turned away from the gift of oneness. Stymied by fear and pride, we have fallen short of our call to manifest the unity that we have in Christ. Rather than modeling wholeness within the RCA, we have allowed walls to be built up and have allowed hostilities to fester. The ecumenical pursuit of Christian unity is deficient without internal concord. It is inconsistent for us to reach out in ecumenical relationships while failing to reach across our own denomination to extend hospitality and strive for compromise.

The urgent work of reconciliation and cooperation within our denomination requires renewed strength and courage, which we can only find in God. It necessitates trust in, and openness to, the Spirit. It demands an unqualified, intentional, and prayerful commitment to heal the brokenness of the body of Christ. As a commission, we prayerfully urge our denomination to seek a deeper and more authentic expression of oneness that we have in Christ. For Christian unity—while universal in God's promise—must begin at home.

Marking Ten Years Since the Adoption of the Belhar

In 2020, we commemorated ten years since the RCA adopted the Belhar Confession as its fourth Standard of Unity, thereby affirming it as a statement of its fundamental beliefs. Notably, the RCA was the first denomination within the United States to grant the Belhar such a place within its confessional identity. In 2016, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) added the Belhar to their Book of Confessions. In 2017, the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the Belhar Confession as a contemporary testimony.

The History of the Belhar

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. First drafted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1982, the DRMC formally adopted the confession in 1986. It is now one of the “standards of unity” of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), the church that was formed out of the uniting of the DRMC and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. The Belhar's theological confrontation of the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa. But the Belhar's relevance is not confined to southern Africa. It addresses three key issues of concern to all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God's justice. As one member of the URCSA has said, “We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone.”

The Belhar Confession was adopted by the RCA's 2009 General Synod. It was then ratified by two-thirds of the RCA's classes and incorporated into the *Book of Church Order* as a doctrinal standard at the 2010 General Synod. The RCA has published “Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice” (images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideComplete.pdf) as a study guide designed to help people reflect on the Belhar Confession as a living confession of faith that speaks directly to ministry and mission in North America.

What Purpose Does a Confession Serve?

A confession affirms that God is active in history. The nature and action of God are imbedded in creation—the world. God calls the church into existence to be a community that arises out of the world and lives in the world, for the world. A confession declares that the church is gathered not on its own behalf or for its own purposes, but to be the manifestation of God’s healing, redeeming, repairing, and renewing of the *oikoumene*, or whole inhabited world. Or, as we say in the language of our day, the Belhar empowers a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God. A confession gives expression of faith, by and through the church, giving rise to action/mission that becomes a historical witness to the truth that God is a living, active, expressive, moving God in events and time. A confession also speaks internally to the church as a statement about its fundamental beliefs, vision, and mission. As such, it inwardly forms the church and reminds it of its vision and mission.

Ten Years of the Belhar

Over the past ten years, the Belhar Confession has become a part of the RCA’s witness in many diverse congregations and contexts. It is recited in worship, celebrated through song, confessed in prayer, and celebrated in litany. It has inspired churches to pursue racial justice, to welcome the stranger, and to seek unity where there is division. There is much to celebrate about the ways in which it has shaped the life of the RCA over the last decade.

As the RCA finds itself in yet another season of disagreement, polarization, and potential schism, we acknowledge that there is so much of this confession that we have failed to uphold. We have failed to reconcile with neighbors and church members who may disagree with us on a variety of issues. In a denomination that is predominantly white, we have failed to establish racial justice and to make all people feel welcome. We have failed to stand in solidarity with refugees who seek asylum in our country. We have failed to remember that unity is “gift and an obligation.” There is much to lament about the ways in which the RCA has failed to live up to the principles of the Belhar over the last decade.

In commemoration of the momentous occasion of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Belhar (though the anniversary was in 2020, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, this has been our first opportunity to meet as a General Synod since then), the Commission on Christian Unity wishes to remind the delegates of our confessional commitments to unity, justice, and reconciliation as revealed in the Belhar Confession. We commend to you the many excellent resources offered by the RCA for utilizing the Belhar in worship (www.faithward.org/belhar-confession-worship-resources) and invite you to study with your congregation the study guide “Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice” (images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideComplete.pdf) as you pursue unity, justice, and reconciliation in your own context.

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to offer deep gratitude to Jodie Wu and Michael Hardeman, who both completed their second terms in 2020, as well as Lowell Ten Clay, who completed his term on the commission in June 2021. Michael served as moderator, and all three have led ecumenical engagement in their local contexts and have participated in national ecumenical gatherings. The commission is also grateful for the work of Donna Field, who stepped down in 2021 after serving four years on the commission. The commission also extends deepest gratitude to Jim Payton

from the Christian Reformed Church in North America, who has contributed greatly to the work of the commission during his several years of service.

Finally, the commission expresses its profound appreciation for the excellent work of ecumenical associate Monica Schaap Pierce. Though the staff position of ecumenical associate was eliminated at the end of September 2020, the commission remains grateful for her contributions to the commission and to the RCA's ecumenical work during her service. The ecumenical work of the RCA is done by many, and the chief ecumenical officer is Eddy Alemán.

REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE

The missional mandate for the work of the Interreligious Relations Subcommittee of the Commission on Christian Unity is found in the 2018 Report of the Interreligious Task Force:

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God's saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. We are, in this sense, a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God's renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while also embracing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) (*MGS 2018*, p. 92).

The position of coordinator for interreligious relations was filled in June 2019. The Interreligious Relations Subcommittee was formed in August 2019. The subcommittee has met via Zoom five times and met for a two-day, in-person meeting in February 2020. During the February meeting, we were joined by the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) interreligious committee. The team meets every other month, currently via Zoom.

One of the subcommittee's joint projects with the CRCNA is *Journeying into Friendships*. The *Journeying into Friendships* network is a place for connection; for mutual encouragement, prayer, and learning; and for working together to develop a library of resources, invite more people to join us, walk alongside congregations stepping into ministry with refugees, immigrants, or international students, support church planting movements among our new neighbors, and promote a Reformed approach to interfaith dialogue that balances openness with authentic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition to discussing how we have worked together and how we might do so in the future, the CRCNA and RCA teams made a joint commitment to share resources. Right now, our joint work is focused on:

1. A shared database of interreligious "champions" to help connect churches and individuals with practitioners of interreligious work. With that information, we can help resource churches that have these champions in their area and help find resources in the areas that don't.
2. A joint website to help resource churches. These resources would include, but are not limited to, webinars, books, curriculum and study guides, and videos.

The RCA team is currently working on:

1. An interreligious mandate with the biblical and theological rationale for engaging across religious differences.

2. Resourcing churches that are trying to connect with their neighbors of another faith and elevating the stories of churches that already are connecting with these neighbors.
3. Collaborating with RCA Local Missional Engagement, refugee coordination, and other departments that intersect with other faiths.
4. Exploring how RCA colleges and seminaries are training the next generation of leaders in world religions. If this isn't being done or can't be done, then we can find a way to work more closely with the churches nearby to help equip students. The subcommittee is working now to add a seminary and undergrad student to the committee.
5. The subcommittee is working with RCA Short-Term Mission to ready volunteers to help love their neighbor of another faith as they serve at home and abroad.
6. The team will be working closely with the Al Amana Centre in Oman to help bring more groups to be trained in interfaith work, Scriptural reasoning, and interfaith dialogue.

The subcommittee is committed to working with our ecumenical partners as we conduct and lead interreligious engagement on behalf of the RCA. One of the ways in which we do this is through the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC convened a gathering in Cardiff, Wales, from October 31 through November 3, 2019, titled "Towards Fostering Interreligious Dialogue Ecumenically." Harold Lay represented the RCA at the gathering. He is a member of the Interreligious Relations Subcommittee.

The WCC called for representatives from member churches to attend this first gathering of interfaith leaders. Thirty people attended, representing 23 countries, including Christian-minority countries such as Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia.

Interreligious dialogue and cooperation are central to who the WCC is. It has been part of the WCC since its founding in 1948. In all parts of the world, there is ongoing interreligious dialogue. But many factors undermine the good work that is occurring. There is a strong desire in many countries to form strong social cohesion with diversity, but fearmongering and bigotry often undermine those efforts.

A clear challenge is to articulate the Christian vision in such a way to overcome fear (fear felt by Christians and non-Christians alike) and work for the common good of all living in God's world. Dialogue and cooperation can serve both evangelism and witness by holding up God's vision in Christ for the good future of the world. The challenge is to create win-win situations rather than win-lose situations.

The church focuses on Christ. We have a distinctive witness. But then, who is Christ in our world, the world of religious pluralism? The gathering in Wales was a forum to share what is happening in our diverse settings and share together the ways we are expressing God's vision and salvation. The RCA has been and will continue to be a participant in this mutual work through the WCC and other ecumenical bodies.

Along with its work with the WCC, the RCA is involved with the National Council of Churches, where Laura Osborne sits on the Interreligious Convening Table. This table helps facilitate interreligious dialogues across the country. Best practices, connections, and planning are all shared at the meetings.

Along with our other ecumenical partners, the RCA is involved with Shoulder to Shoulder, a strategic partner in countering discrimination and violence against Muslims. Laura Osborne is on the steering committee for Shoulder to Shoulder.

Our current communication focus is sharing stories from the field from our neighbors around interreligious work in the RCA.

Respectfully submitted,
Laura Osborne on behalf of the Interreligious Relations Subcommittee

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The commission last met in person on February 7–9, 2020, in Phoenix, Arizona, just as word of the pandemic reaching the continent was hitting the news. Since that time, the commission has met on October 22, 2020, and January 21, 2021, via Zoom, and has held a collaborative meeting with representatives from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship digitally on April 28, 2021.

Prior to the pandemic, the commission was working on two items which did not lose their significance but rather lost their prominence as things around the RCA and the world changed quickly and dramatically. Prior to General Synod 2020, the commission was planning on sharing with the denomination guidelines to help make the Lord's Table more welcoming, especially to those with gluten sensitivities or intolerance. The questions shifted to: is taking the sacrament even possible virtually? And then, how do congregations prepare and share the elements in ways that minimize risk of infection? The commission decided it was best to wait on releasing these guidelines. This work continues, and the hope is to provide more on this topic to General Synod 2022.

The commission has been working at analyzing and drawing helpful insights from the two-denomination-wide survey (Reformed Church in America [RCA] and Christian Reformed Church in North America) on worship which was completed in 2019. An overview and initial impressions were presented at General Synod 2019 with the intention of continued integration of this data into our work over the coming year. While the data is still valid and helpful, every single congregation within the RCA has had their worship impacted in ways that could not have been foreseen. The results of the survey are not invalidated, but the realities in the congregations of the RCA are now very different.

While the number of congregations that have an online way for people to connect with their worship service has increased to levels which would have been unfathomable two years ago, it is not clear what practices and patterns will be adopted long term. However, the worship within the congregations of the RCA remains central in the lives of the congregations and is a unifying element within the RCA.

An example of this unity can be seen in the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper throughout the RCA. The vast majority of congregations come to the table at least once a month, and a reassuring 90 percent base their observance on the RCA liturgy (many word-for-word, and many with adaption to fit their context). As a commission, we desire to support unity within our worship, while recognizing the different cultures, histories, and styles within our denomination which seek to disciple an ever-widening diversity of people loved by God.

Thank you

The commission expresses gratitude to Lisa Hansen and Robert Fretz for their service on the commission. Additionally, we are grateful for Ricardo Velazquez, who served as our staff person for almost two years and provided a helpful perspective and a wonderful servant's heart, and before that, Dann Stouten, for his years of service to the commission.

Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) is responsible for “making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the *Book of Church Order*” (BCO) and for providing “advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the *Book of Church Order*” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b [2019 edition, pp. 112-113]).

To fulfill these responsibilities, the CCO met in person October 17–19, 2019, in Grand Rapids, Michigan; January 22–24, 2020, in Chicago, Illinois; and in a series of 12 Zoom video conferences in 2020 and 2021. While the CCO did not receive any referrals from the 2019 General Synod or from the 2020 General Synod (which did not meet), this report reflects our work arising out of consultations with General Synod officers, General Synod Council (GSC) staff, the Vision 2020 Team, and others, as well as clarification of other items encountered by the commission in the ordinary course of our work.

Consultations and Collaboration with the Vision 2020 Team

The CCO spent a portion of its in-person January 2020 meeting conferring with the Vision 2020 Team, which was meeting separately at the same time and location. The commission assisted the Vision 2020 Team by providing answers to polity-related questions and provided guidance on implementation of various possible scenarios.

When the Vision 2020 Team issued its report on June 30, 2020, as part of its Recommendation 3 for mutually generous separation, it noted that “we will seek the assistance of the Commission on Church Order both to determine what portions of the following provisions will require *BCO* changes and to write these proposed changes in order to develop specific language of the recommendation that will be submitted to the 2021 General Synod.” Further consultation and collaboration between the commission and a subcommittee of the Vision 2020 Team resulted in the regulations that are proposed in the Vision 2020 Team’s final report to the 2021 General Synod.

Why Adopt Regulations?

The General Synod is specifically authorized “to make all rules and regulations necessary to put into effect any and all articles of the Government, the Disciplinary Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America” (BCO, “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures,” Section 1 [2019 edition, p. 75]). While formal regulations have not been used recently, an infrequent use of a provision in the Constitution does not invalidate the provision; rather, it demonstrates the wisdom of infrequently using such a provision except for “such a time as this.”

In *Constitutional Theology*, Allan Janssen reflects on historical precedents for the use of regulations, as well as relatively recent discussion by the General Synod to reconsider our method of regulating the work of the church, concluding, “A Reformed church should be capable of establishing its constitutional basis, which can be amended only after considered and patient reflection by the entire church, and at the same time constructing a set of rules that can be amended more easily to meet expected changes in circumstance” (second edition, p. 248 [Reformed Church Press, 2019]).

If adopted, the regulations will provide an orderly, consistent, and fair implementation of the recommendation to accommodate mutually generous separation following the current process by which a consistory may petition its classis for leave to withdraw from the denomination as outlined in the *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10 (2019 edition, pp. 40-44). The sunset provision included in the regulations ensures that they particularly address this specific, unique situation in the life of the RCA without an untethered reach beyond this specific situation.

The adoption of regulations also keeps our Constitution smaller and more responsive to the needs of our congregations in mission. The advantage is that the proposed regulations can be adopted and implemented immediately by this General Synod, without the need for a lengthy process to amend the *BCO* that would also permanently add to its length, and they can more easily be revised or rescinded when necessary.

The CCO remains available for advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the provisions of these regulations as well as the *BCO*.

Transfer of Ministers of Word and Sacrament to Other Denominations

The commission was asked to clarify whether an RCA minister of Word and sacrament can be transferred to another denomination, and if so, what effect such a transfer has on that minister's membership in the classis. Yes, a classis may transfer a minister of Word and sacrament to any denomination that will receive an RCA minister by transfer. When the minister is received into another denomination, the transfer results in a demission (an action of the classis declaring that a minister has voluntarily relinquished the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament in the RCA).

If such a minister later requests transfer back into the RCA, the receiving classis must follow the process for "Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations" found in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14 (2019 edition, pp. 50-52). While this process may be easier for any ministers who have previously held ordination in the RCA, no other process exists to transfer into the RCA. Note that such a transfer is distinctly different from a "request for reordination" as described in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 14 (2019 edition, p. 56-57).

An expanded paper explaining the reasoning, discussing additional questions, and providing an example certificate for the transfer of ministers to another denomination was made available on the stated clerks' private page hosted on the RCA website. Given the likelihood that classis clerks may be receiving a number of requests for the transfer of ministers to another denomination parallel to churches requesting transfer to other denominations, the commission presents the following two recommendations to add the example certificate of transfer as a new formulary:

CO 21-1
To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

18. Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament to Another Denomination

(To transfer a minister to another classis within the RCA, use Formulary No. 9.)

Demission of a Minister

**To the [NAME OF RECEIVING BODY AND DENOMINATION]
From the [CLASSIS NAME] of the Reformed Church in America:**

This is to attest that the Rev. [FULL NAME] is a member in good and regular standing of the [CLASSIS NAME] of the Reformed Church in America, and is now requesting transfer to the [NAME OF RECEIVING BODY AND DENOMINATION], to whose Christian fellowship and care [HE/SHE] is hereby affectionately commended. When received by the [NAME OF RECEIVING BODY] the Rev. [LAST NAME]'s relation to this classis and the Reformed Church in America shall cease.

**[CLERK'S NAME], Stated Clerk
[DATE]**

**Please complete the form below and return it to:
[NAME OF THE RCA CLASSIS]
[ADDRESS OF THE CLASSIS]**

Receipt of a Minister

**To the [CLASSIS NAME] of the Reformed Church in America
From the [NAME OF RECEIVING BODY AND DENOMINATION]:**

This is to certify that the Rev. [FULL NAME] was received to unite with the [NAME OF RECEIVING BODY] on [DATE OF RECEPTION].

**[SIGNATURE OF THE OFFICER OF THE RECEIVING BODY OF THE DENOMINATION]
[NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE RECEIVING BODY]**

The second of the two recommendations adds a corresponding parenthetical note of clarification to the existing Formulary No. 9 for the transfer of a minister to another classis within the RCA:

CO 21-2

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Formulary No. 9 (2019 edition, p. 138) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

9. Certificate for the Transfer of a Minister of Word and Sacrament

(To transfer a minister to another denomination, use Formulary No. 18.)

Conversation with CORE Representative and the General Secretary

Commission moderator Joshua Scheid had a series of initial conversations with Nate Pyle (representing the Commission on Race and Ethnicity [CORE]) and general secretary Eddy Alemán about the relationships between the General Synod and CORE and the General Synod Council and the racial/ethnic councils, specifically exploring whether the commission and councils are strategically aligned to help the RCA make continued progress in its commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism. While the CCO does not have any action items resulting from the initial conversations, the commission affirms the desire for greater collaboration between the general secretary, CORE, and the racial/ethnic councils.

Pandemic-Initiated Inquiries from General Synod Officers and GSC Staff

The commission received many inquiries related to application or interpretation of the *BCO* in the peculiar circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the decision not to convene the 2020 General Synod. What follows is a summary of some of the more significant advisory responses provided by the commission.

Adoption of General Synod Assessment Amount for 2021

While the General Synod bylaws give the General Synod Council (GSC) the responsibility of proposing an assessment amount to the General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c [2019 edition, p. 108]), it is the General Synod's authority to approve the assessment amount. GSC staff asked whether it was appropriate, if the General Synod could not meet in 2020, for the GSC, acting in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, to adopt an assessment amount for 2021.

The commission advised that while the proposed course of action was less than ideal, it may be appropriate under the unique circumstances described. The commission also encouraged the GSC to limit its action to a continuation of assessments for the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Theological Education, to not exceed the amounts for those categories established for 2020 by the 2019 General Synod, and to seek ratification of the amount at the next session of General Synod.

Approval of Church Growth Fund Bylaws Amendment

GSC staff asked whether it was appropriate for the GSC, acting in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, to approve amendments presented by the Church Growth Fund Board to its bylaws, with the following General Synod ratifying such actions.

Because the Church Growth Fund bylaws state that they "may be amended by a majority vote of the voting directors after such proposed amendments have been *approved by a majority vote of the General Synod*" (emphasis added), the commission concluded that it seemed

inappropriate for the GSC to act on behalf of the General Synod to approve a proposed amendment to the Church Growth Fund bylaws.

Process for Calling a Special Session of General Synod

GSC staff informed the commission that after the 2020 session of the General Synod was canceled, questions arose regarding when and how a special session of the General Synod may be called. Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 2 of the *BCO* (2019 edition, p. 70) reads:

The president of the General Synod shall call a special session of the synod at a place determined by the president, vice president and the general secretary of the synod upon the joint application of three ministers and three elders from each of the regional synods, all of them serving currently as accredited delegates to the General Synod. Three weeks' notice of the session shall be given to the members of the synod, such notice to state the purpose of the session.

The commission discussed whether this section describes the only circumstance under which a special session may be called, or instead describes a set of circumstances under which a special session *must* be called but not to the exclusion of other situations under which a special session *may* be called. Two key points in our review persuaded the commission to advise that the process described is the *only* circumstance under which a special session may (and consequently must) be called. One, the fourth Principle of Interpretation in *Robert's Rules of Order*, which suggests, "If the bylaws authorize certain things specifically, other things of the same class are thereby prohibited" (*Robert's Rules of Order*, 12th edition, pp. 624ff). Since no other method of calling a special session is authorized, it follows that all other methods are prohibited, which is further supported by the other: Al Janssen's argument in *Constitutional Theology* that the "imposing conditions" of calling a special session are appropriate given the "daunting and expensive task" of gathering a special session (second edition, p. 229).

Publication and Printing of a 2020 Edition of the BCO

Since the 2020 General Synod was not in session to take final declarative action on classis-approved amendments to the Constitution or to second favorable action on amendments to the bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod, there were no substantive changes to the *BCO*. Therefore, the commission advised GSC staff that publication and printing of a 2020 edition did not seem necessary.

The next edition of the *BCO* will include a glossary that has already been available for many years on the RCA website. Howard Moths, a current member of the commission, originally authored the glossary in 2003. The commission updated the glossary and will continue to do so, including it in future printed editions. In so doing, the glossary is not intended to have any constitutional authority; rather, like the explanatory notes to the disciplinary procedures and the sections entitled "An Introduction to the *Book of Church Order*" and "How to Use the *Book of Church Order*" (also updated), the commission believes the glossary serves as a helpful tool for readers of the *BCO*. The glossary and the sections "An Introduction to the *Book of Church Order*" and "How to Use the *Book of Church Order*" are not included in the digital version of the *BCO*, but are available as separate downloadable items at www.rca.org/bco.

Scenario Planning for General Synod 2021

Over the past year, it became ever so clear that our polity, far from perfect (just as we all are), was certainly not written with a global pandemic in mind. The commission is profoundly grateful to the General Synod officers, the General Synod Council, and GSC staff for their tireless effort to effectively convene the stated session of General Synod in 2021 and for their creative and careful consideration of a wide range of details and decisions pertaining to the possible scenarios.

The commission advised that an electronic meeting of General Synod would not be permissible, because the bylaws of the General Synod specify that the rules of order shall be those set forth in *Robert's Rules of Order* (cf. BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 10 [2019 edition, p. 124]), and the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of Order* (12th edition, September 2020) continues to require that an organization's bylaws expressly permit electronic meetings (which the General Synod's do not). The commission further advised that a hybrid meeting of General Synod—with some delegates attending in person and others attending electronically from satellite locations—might be permissible under a specific set of circumstances, without offering comment on the advisability of such an option.

Given the significance of the decision regarding the 2021 General Synod meeting, the commission encouraged a broad conversation to listen and to build trust and agreement in the process, similar to how a consistory might “endeavor to learn the mind of the congregation” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 14], regarding calling a minister) or a classis committee might “endeavor to ascertain the will of the congregation” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4c [2019 edition, p. 41], regarding a petition to transfer denominations). That suggestion played a part in General Synod president EJ de Waard and vice president Phil Assink convening an advisory Zoom meeting with classis presidents (or other officer representing the classis) in February 2021, and that meeting served as the real-time experiment that resulted in the commission's proposal for a Committee on Emergencies.

Committee on Emergencies

We've all learned so much on so many fronts in light of the challenges we've faced because of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Understanding the obstacles we encountered as a denomination in the last year because of our inability to gather, the commission worked on a recommendation that would establish some emergency provisions going forward—but Lord, hear our prayer: be merciful to us such that we won't need to use them! In proposing a Committee on Emergencies, the commission focused on three guiding considerations: appropriate circumstances, composition of the committee, and specified but limited authority.

Appropriate Circumstances. What kind of emergencies qualify, and who may decide such an emergency exists to convene a meeting of the committee? The language proposed in the amendment is sufficiently broad to avoid detailing every possible type of emergency. Whenever a disaster or crisis would prevent the General Synod from meeting or substantially disrupt plans to hold a session at a particular place, it seems appropriate for such a committee to be convened. No specific advance notice is stated in the proposed amendment in order to allow the meeting to be called as soon as possible. For example, if a fire destroys the venue hosting the General Synod one week before the meeting, the Committee on Emergencies will need to meet right away to postpone the session. The broadness of the type of emergency and the lack of stated notice are balanced by the requirement of sufficient reason and notice to gain a quorum.

Composition of the Committee. Who should have the authority to act when the General Synod cannot meet because of an emergency? No group in the RCA presently has authority to postpone an annual meeting of the General Synod without relying on a pro-forma gathering and a particular set of procedural motions. It seems wise that the Committee on Emergencies would include General Synod officers, as they are elected by the assembly and are expected to provide leadership to the assembly. While the *BCO* names three officers of the General Synod: the president, the vice president, and the general secretary (*cf. BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 5 [2019 edition, pp. 70-71]), this group is too small to make major decisions.

How about the General Synod Council? The GSC acts “as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2019 edition, p. 71]). In many organizations, the executive committee would be the logical group to make decisions regarding the postponement of a meeting. While the GSC includes a representative from each of the regional synods, it does not include a representative from every classis.

Given that (1) the General Synod is primarily populated by delegates sent from the classes, (2) the process to adopt amendments to the RCA Constitution requires votes from several classes, but not from other assemblies, and (3) listening to historical precedence and contemporary feedback desiring classis input, the commission believes that a gathering of one officer from each of the classes is the best way to approximate a smaller gathering of the assembly. Although it would be possible to expand the membership to include an officer of each regional synod, the regional synods are likewise composed of delegates from the classes, which are already represented. This limitation also helps keep the size of the group manageable, especially for an electronic meeting.

Specified but Limited Authority. What authority should be granted to the Committee on Emergencies? While the group of classis presidents convened in February 2021 was advisory, to have purpose, the Committee on Emergencies should have some authority to take specified, but limited, actions. Postponing the stated session and setting the date and place for the postponed session (so that a pro forma meeting is not required) provides the essential starting point. Based on last year’s experience, the commission also believes the authority to take actions such as setting the General Synod assessment and approving the Commission on Nominations report would be helpful, subject to a higher voting threshold and ratification by the next session of the General Synod.

The commission prepared two recommendations to form and enable a Committee on Emergencies. The first is to form the Committee on Emergencies in the General Synod bylaws. The commission makes the following recommendation:

CO 21-3

To approve the following amendment to the *The Bylaws of the General Synod* by adding a new Article 10 to Chapter 3, Part I (2019 edition, at p. 124) and re-numbering the subsequent articles, for submission to the next General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined):

Article 10. Committee on Emergencies

Sec. 1. Purpose

A Committee on Emergencies shall be convened whenever necessary in response to a disaster or crisis that would prevent the General Synod from meeting in its stated session or disrupt plans to hold a session at a particular venue, such as a fire, natural disaster, or another sudden calamity.

Sec. 2. Membership

The membership of the committee shall consist of the following:

- a. The president, vice president, and the immediate past president of General Synod, *ex officio* and without vote.
- b. The president of each classis, or if unable to attend, the classis may designate its vice president or stated clerk.
- c. The general secretary of the General Synod, *ex officio* and without vote.

Sec. 3. Meetings

- a. The committee shall be convened by the president of General Synod, in the event of an emergency as described in Section 1. In the event of a disaster that makes his or her participation impossible, the basis of succession for convening shall be: (a) president, (b) vice president, (c) immediate past president of General Synod.
- b. Meetings may be held using electronic means as long as the meeting allows for simultaneous aural communication among all participating members.
- c. The presence of a majority of the classis representatives is required to constitute a quorum.
- d. This committee is empowered to postpone a session of the General Synod and schedule the time and place for the next session by a two-thirds majority vote of the classis representatives present and voting.
- e. By the vote of three quarters of the entire committee membership, this committee may also take any of the following actions: set the amount of the General Synod assessment, act on recommendations offered by the Commission on Nominations, or other actions that may be required for the General Synod to function.

- f. **The convener shall make a report to the next session of the General Synod of all meetings held and actions taken under this emergency provision. At the next session of the General Synod, all decisions of this committee must be reviewed and ratified to continue to have effect.**

The second recommendation enables the Committee on Emergencies in the Constitution. The commission had separately noted that the decision not to convene General Synod in June 2020 at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, unintentionally created a peculiar conundrum given the precarious language of the current *BCO* requirement that the “previous session” of the General Synod shall determine the time and place of the next session. At least in recent years, the practice has been that the GSC includes the time and place of the next session of the General Synod in its report, and no official action is taken by the assembly—in some reports, the details for the next two General Synods are reported (e.g., *MGS 2017*, p. 44); in others, the details are reported for only the following year (e.g., *MGS 2018*, p. 42). The commission believes this is reasonable but encourages the practice of reporting at least two years at a time.

Since the commission’s proposal to clarify the requirements for determining stated sessions of the General Synod amends the same section of the *BCO* in which the Committee on Emergencies should be enabled, the commission combined the proposed amendments and presents the following recommendation:

CO 21-4

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 4, Section 1 (2019 edition, p. 69) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Article 4. Sessions and Meetings of General Synod

Sec. 1. The General Synod shall meet no less frequently than annually at such time and place as shall have been determined ~~was either reported by the Executive Committee at its~~ a previous stated session or determined by the Committee on Emergencies. All meetings of the General Synod shall begin and end with prayer.

Process for Amending the RCA Constitution and General Synod Bylaws

During consideration of various scenarios for General Synod 2020 and 2021, the commission was asked to advise whether or not amendments to the Constitution and General Synod bylaws could be made at a special session of the General Synod. While the current language of the *BCO* is clear that amendments can only be adopted at a stated session, it is perhaps less clear whether the final declarative resolution on an amendment can only occur at a stated session or if it can occur at a special session. The commission advised that both adoption and final declarative resolution can only occur at stated sessions of the General Synod. The slight ambiguity was unintentionally introduced when this section was amended in 2018–2019, dividing what was previously one paragraph into three separate subsections and resulting in the lack of specificity in subsection c to the extent that it was read independent of subsection a. Therefore, the commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 21-5

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures”* (2019 edition, p. 75) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Sec. 2.

- a. Amendments to the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship shall be made only upon adoption by the General Synod at a stated ~~meeting~~session, with recommendation to the classes for approval.
- b. At least two-thirds of the classes shall approve a proposed amendment in order to secure its adoption. Only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted are eligible to vote on the recommendation for approval.
- c. If an amendment is approved by the classes, the General Synod, at its next stated session, ~~its discretion~~, may pass a final declarative resolution on the amendment at its discretion. When the declarative action has taken place, the amendment shall become effective.

During its review, the commission also noted that consideration of classis-approved amendments for final declarative resolution is not currently included as part of the required agenda of General Synod. Therefore, the commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 21-6

To approve the following amendment to the *Special Rules of Order of the General Synod* by adding a new subsection to Chapter 3, Part II, Article 1, Section 2 (2019 edition, pp. 125-126) and re-lettering the subsequent subsections, for submission to the next General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 2. Agenda of General Synod

- a. Disposition of Communications
- b. Final Declarative Resolutions on Classis-Approved Constitutional Amendments

Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (Formulary No. 3)

The commission proposed an amendment to the 2019 General Synod that amended the parenthetical instruction at the beginning of Formulary No. 3 to clarify that ordination and installation are not the only circumstances under which a minister may read the declaration. The amendment was adopted, and it has been approved by at least two-thirds of the classes. It was

brought to the commission's attention that the phrase as amended ("at the time of reception into the classis") continues to omit some circumstances under which a minister of Word and sacrament reads the declaration (e.g., when a minister is installed at another church within the same classis). The commission discussed the matter but concluded that no further amendments to the Formulary would be proposed at this time.

Discipline of a Member of a Local Church

This recommendation originally appeared in the commission's report to the 2020 General Synod. Discipline of a member of a local church is discussed in *BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1 (2019 edition, pp. 79-80). The section does not state that a charge must be filed to commence the disciplinary process beyond admonishment and rebuke. The commission concluded that the section should require a charge be filed in accordance with *BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 2 (2019 edition, p. 79), and, therefore, presents the following recommendation:

CO 21-7

To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1 (2019 edition, pp. 79-80) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 1. Discipline of a Member

All members of a local church are under its care and are subject to its government and discipline, as administered by its board of elders. The board of elders may, upon formal presentation and trying of a charge, suspend from the privileges of membership in the church a member who persistently rejects its admonitions or rebukes. If a member fails to show marks of repentance after suspension, the board of elders may, with permission of the classis, proceed to excommunication. The board of elders shall publicly notify the congregation of its intention to excommunicate, and later, after a hearing, of its final action. The board may omit such public notification, if such omission will not impair the purposes of discipline and will best serve the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Such omission shall require a two-thirds vote of the board of elders.

Commission on Theology Review of Doctrinally Substantive Matters

During the joint commission meetings in the fall of 2019, the CCO moderator had a discussion with the moderator of the Commission on Theology and agreed that the Commission on Theology should send a resource person to the advisory committees of the General Synod. Liz Brand (director of General Synod operations) has agreed to help facilitate this arrangement. If this arrangement does not appear to be effective, the commission may consider alternatives, such as recommending to the General Synod the creation of a separate advisory committee on theology.

Revisions to *The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament*

At its January 2020 meeting, the commission adopted revisions to the RCA section of the document *The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament* as established by *A Formula of Agreement*. Following adoption, the commission forwarded the revised document to the RCA's ecumenical associate for transmission to the other parties to *A Formula of Agreement*. Additionally, the revised document was uploaded to the stated clerks' private page hosted on the RCA website for use by the classes.

Consultations on Other Matters

In June 2021, the commission provided initial advisory responses to the following consultations received: (1) from the African American Black Council and the General Synod Council, regarding potential avenues to implement an anti-racism policy within our order; (2) from the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board, regarding a proposal to revise the role and responsibilities of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; and (3) from Western Theological Seminary, regarding the process required to approve amendments to its articles of incorporation and bylaws, and ancillary questions raised. In each case, the commission identified additional matters for clarification, respectfully requesting that the councils and boards further work to resolve the questions and seek conceptual approval from the General Synod before beginning detailed work on proposing specific amendments to the *BCO* where necessary.

Editorial Changes to the *Book of Church Order*

The commission agreed that the following editorial, non-substantive changes will be reflected in the next edition of the *BCO*:

1. Traditionally the formularies have used blanks to indicate places where information must be inserted, but the adopted new Formulary 17 instead uses brackets around a word or phrase to describe information that must be inserted. The commission agreed that all formularies should contain bracketed descriptions wherever language must be inserted and provided the updated versions to GSC Communication and Production Services staff.
2. The text of the *BCO* uses the term "Formulary" while the "References to the Minutes of General Synod" (which discusses formularies beginning at page 169 of the 2019 edition) uses the term "Formula." The commission discussed whether one of these two terms should be used consistently throughout the *BCO* (including such things as its related tables, indexes, and references), and agreed that the term "Formulary" should be used in the "References to the Minutes of General Synod."
3. The commission voted to delete an incorrect citation in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 5 regarding supersession of a consistory because of its close proximity to the section cited.
4. The commission agreed to eliminate from the guide captioned "How to Use the *Book of Church Order*" the reference to Faith Alive Christian Resources (and its related contact information) from the section describing how to acquire a copy of the book *Constitutional Theology* and the reference to the New York office from the section describing how to contact the commission.

5. The commission agreed to eliminate the word “the” from the phrase “candidate for the ministry” wherever it appears in the *BCO*. This will make the phrases consistent with the heading of *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11. Locations in the *BCO* affected by this editorial change are the Preamble; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 1 (2019 edition, p. 44); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 2 (2019 edition, pp. 44-45); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3 (2019 edition, p. 45); twice in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 1 (2019 edition, p. 46); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2a (2019 edition, pp. 46-47); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 3 (2019 edition, pp. 47-48); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4 (2019 edition, pp. 48-49); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 2 (2019 edition, p. 49); Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 3 (2019 edition, p. 49); Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 8 (2019 edition, p. 68); and Formulary No. 1 (2019 edition, p. 131).
6. In Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1b, the commission agreed to delete “(hereafter “governing body”).”
7. In Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1c, the commission replaced “and it” with “which.”
8. The commission agreed to capitalize “master of divinity” in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2b (2019 edition, p. 47) and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4b (2019 edition, p. 49), so that it is consistent as “Master of Divinity” everywhere it appears in the *BCO*.
9. The commission agreed to capitalize “certificate of fitness for ministry” in Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 7 (2019 edition, p. 73) and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 8 (2019 edition, p. 73), so that it is consistent as “Certificate of Fitness for Ministry” each of the 20 times it appears in the *BCO*.
10. If the amended Formulary No. 9 receives a favorable final declarative resolution from the 2021 General Synod, the two headings “Dismissal of a Minister” and “Receipt of a Minister” should be italicized before publication.

Elections and Appointments

The commission elected Joshua Scheid to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual term beginning July 1, 2021. Additionally, the commission appointed Howard Moths to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2021 General Synod.

Giving Thanks

The commission sincerely appreciates Philip De Koster, an attorney from Hull, Iowa, and Linda Gold, a minister from Fonda, New York, for their six years of faithful contribution to the work of the CCO and the ministry of the RCA. The commission is deeply grateful for Paul Karssen, staff to the commission, for his invaluable guidance and support.

Respectfully submitted,
Joshua Scheid, moderator

Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod.” The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5 [2019 edition, pp. 113-114]) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is our 55th report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council (GSC) and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history. The transformation commenced

- 3 years ago, when we installed Eddy Alemán as our general secretary, one of the first Latinos to lead a historic Protestant denomination in the United States;
- 11 years ago, when the General Synod adopted the Belhar Confession as a fourth Standard of Unity, making the Reformed Church in America the first American denomination to do so;
- 23 years ago, when we installed the first woman professor of theology, Carol Bechtel;
- 28 years ago, when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president, Beth E. Marcus;
- 33 years ago, when we elected the first African American president of General Synod, Wilbur Washington;
- 33 years ago, when we ordained the first woman of color, Bernita Babb;
- 43 years ago, when we expanded our polity’s definition of “persons”;
- 51 years ago, when Sonja Stewart began her teaching career at Western Theological Seminary, the first woman to earn a doctorate and become a full professor;
- 53 years ago, when we renewed our liturgies (and continue to do so today);
- 138 years ago, when the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions established *The Mission Gleaner* to “keep the women of the Church at home informed of the progress of the work on the field”;
- 151 years ago, when Mary Kidder founded Ferris Seminary for girls in Yokohama, Japan;
- 181 years ago, when the First Reformed Church was organized in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the home of Hart E. Waring, who came as a missionary from New York to form a “Reformed Protestant Dutch Church”;
- 206 years ago, when Rebecca Knox became the first woman to bequeath funds to New Brunswick Theological Seminary, benefiting indigent students;
- 208 years ago, when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since then;

- 247 years ago, when the Church in America wrote to the Classis of Amsterdam requesting a professor of theology, recommending the appointment of John Henry Livingston, their last student from America;
- 377 years ago, when Johannes Megapolensis, while serving as a missionary to the Mohawk and in the spirit of ecumenism, graciously befriended and assisted the French missionary to the Hurons, Father Isaac Jogues, who had been taken by the Mohawk;
- 393 years ago, when Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual congregation open to everyone;

and through countless other transformations that have occurred before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God's faithfulness and allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God's calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective which is not *just* a historical perspective, but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.

To do this work faithfully during a global pandemic, the commission met electronically (via Zoom) on Tuesday, June 30, 2020; Friday, October 23, 2020; Sunday, November 15, 2020; Friday, January 29, 2021; Friday, March 5, 2021; Friday, March 26, 2021; Friday, May 28, 2021; Wednesday, June 30, 2021; as well as communicating regularly via email and phone.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 53rd year, has recently produced the following books:

- *Walden's Poems (Historic Reprint Series)*, edited by Matthew Gasero
- *Called to Serve: Essays on RCA Global Mission*, edited by Charles E. Van Engen, Jean Van Engen, and Sally Tapley
- *The Church Remembers: Papers of the RCA Commission on History, 1977-2019*, edited by James Hart Brumm
- *Collecting Chronicles, Maintaining Tradition, and Preserving Acts of Disciples: Essays in Honor of Russell L. Gasero*

The following books will be officially introduced at this synod:

- *The Tongue of a Teacher: Essays in Honor of the Rev. Dr. Timothy Brown*, edited by Trygve Johnson
- *Shepherding a New Generation of Leaders: Essays in Honor of Cornelis G. Kors*, edited by Bradley Lewis

There is another book, already being used as a text in RCA history classes, which should be in final production as this synod meets: *A Reformed Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in 75 Documents*, edited by James Hart Brumm.

The commission, working with the RCA Archives and GSC Communication and Production Services, continues publishing the series under the Reformed Church Press imprint, which

allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has been serving as general editor of the series since July 1, 2018. As of June 2018, Donald J. Bruggink serves as general editor emeritus. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the *Congregational History* series.

The June 2000 *Minutes of the General Synod* reflect the adoption of revisions to the Commission on History's responsibilities as listed in the General Synod bylaws, which then received final approval at the June 2001 General Synod (*MGS 2000*, R-110, pp. 427-429; *MGS 2001*, R-8, p. 59). One of the commission's responsibilities is to actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America *through means it may find effective*. In addition, the commission shall inform the RCA of *the relevance of the denomination's history and traditions* to its programs, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church's history. We also provide instrumental advice to the General Synod concerning the denomination's archives.

Recently, your commission launched the *RCA 400* series in celebration of our upcoming 400th anniversary in 2028. Steven Pierce serves as the general editor, and Corstian Devos, Russell Gasero, and Matthew Gasero all serve on the *400* series team. The books in this series will help educate the church on how our Reformed past *informs* the present and *grows* us into the future. Many of the authors will draw from the deep well of our RCA archives and attempt to answer several questions: What is the Reformed Church in America? How is it distinctive from other Christian communities? Which beliefs, values, and practices stand at the heart of this communion? What challenges has it overcome, and how is it being challenged today? How is it structured and governed? What biblical principles undergird and vitalize its ministries? How can its rich heritage help it move into the future?

Books in the *RCA 400* series are already in production, and your commission looks forward to their release beginning this year.

Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the *Historical Series*, your commission works with the RCA digital archivist, Matthew Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee, formed of commission members, and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the archives. Matthew also serves as production editor for the *Historical Series* and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries.

We have had someone caring for our archives for over 43 years. The offices of the archives are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened in 1875. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the archives be not just a Dutch-American history resource, but a well of information for all of the cultural expressions that now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, the archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars

through careful records management; with over 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing needs of the archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the trustees of NBTS pledged an annual grant of up to \$10,000, to be matched by the GSC, for each of ten years, to expand the work of the archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the *Historical Series* Revolving Fund. In just three years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, video and audio tapes.
- Staff have been added to aid in the digitization projects.
- With new staff and equipment, documents from the Amsterdam Correspondence—some of the earliest records of the RCA—have been scanned for a major retranslation project; records from the Regional Synod of Canada recently moved to New Brunswick so that they may be kept in long-term storage and relieve space issues for the regional synod—more than 80 boxes of material were processed within two months; and a pilot project has begun to provide low-cost digitization of significant records to local congregations.
- Some of the costs of transferring records to underground storage have been underwritten.
- New displays in Sage Library have enhanced programs for both NBTS and the denomination and have helped publicize the *Historical Series*.

All of this has helped transform the scope of what the archives can do, making our history more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Advancement Office and the archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the *Historical Series* Revolving Fund, and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. While there are virtues in thrift, however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

Your commission has requested that the RCA Archives investigate the digitization of the *Magazine of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church* as a possible prelude to the full digitization of the *Christian Intelligencer*. The goal is to produce quality legible digital copies of both publications. Versions already exist of the *Christian Intelligencer*, but many of the microfilm pages have contrasting and lighting issues that make them virtually unusable. A part of our work would include digitizing the specific volumes that need to be enhanced. The RCA Archives will consider a partnership with the Reformed Church Center to procure a grant to fund the *Magazine of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church* project as well as the *Christian Intelligencer*

project. Your commission will also seek the help of the GSC to arrange for cooperation with the Reformed Church Center in order to handle the reception and distribution of grants.

In addition, your commission has requested that the RCA Archives procure Quark Express to prepare PDF versions of the *Church Herald*.

The Reformed Church in America owes Russell Gasero a debt of gratitude for his 42 years of faithful service as our denomination's archivist. On Friday, January 29, 2021, while meeting electronically (via Zoom), and at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic, your commission unanimously voted to make Russell Gasero archivist emeritus as well as an *ex officio* member to the Commission on History. The following resolution was read by James Hart Brumm:

WHEREAS, Russell Louis Gasero grew up in Steinway Reformed Church, Queens, New York, and received a bachelor of arts degree from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, in 1973, and worked in the Archives of the United Nations in New York City for five years, doing distinguished work in one of the world's elite archival programs, and

WHEREAS, in 1977, the Commission on History, seeking to preserve the heritage and properly manage the records of the Reformed Church in America which had been stored in the library of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America since it had removed to New Brunswick, New Jersey, some 160 years earlier, and which had never received professional attention, received the approval of the General Synod to begin a professionally managed archival program and then proceeded to recruit and hire Russell Gasero to be the first Archivist of the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS, in the ensuing 42 years, Russell Gasero has built the Archives of the Reformed Church in America from a collection of documents kept in closets at Gardner A. Sage Library into a comprehensive, fully accessible collection of documents, video media, and other artifacts, including over a one-half mile of paper records stored in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, collecting and preserving the acts of apostles who make up the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS, during that time, he earned a master's degree from the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1981, and has continuously partnered with denominational staff, classes, synods, and consistories to faithfully preserve and catalogue their records, saving the Reformed Church in America and its agencies hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses—and even saving the acronym "RCA" for us—through timely accession of needed records that were anywhere from months to centuries old, and saving congregations untold thousands of dollars through such storage, and

WHEREAS he has partnered with RCA colleges to create internship opportunities, partnered with denominational staff members to create volunteer service opportunities, and visited scores of congregations and church groups, expanding the awareness of the whole church in the preservation of its history, and distinguished himself in the membership and leadership of professional

groups and historical associations, including the Society of American Archivists, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, the American Association for State and Local History, the Dutch Cousins, and Beardslee Press, all helping to secure a bright future for professional archival work in the RCA and all of North America, and

WHEREAS he has served the Commission on History not only as consultant but as staff and as production editor for *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America*, helping make possible over 100 volumes in that series which enlighten and edify the entire church and scholars far beyond us and saving tens of thousands of dollars in that mission, and

WHEREAS he has worked with the faculty and administration of New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create a partnership with the Reformed Church Center, whereby scholarship is expanded, local congregations and classes are supported in their work, and a ten-year grant program has been established that is helping the Archives expand its work, digitizing records to make them more easily accessible well into the future and expanding its program at no expense to the assessment budget of the Reformed Church, and

WHEREAS he has attended more consecutive General Synods than any other person in the history of the Reformed Church in America, often driving countless items across the country to the meetings not only for the Office of Historical Services and the *Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* but also for other programs and agencies of the church, and bringing his wife, Maria, to many synod sessions to pitch in as volunteer labor, and

WHEREAS he has been a supportive presence to his staff colleagues for decades and has become the living institutional memory of the RCA,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Commission on History of the Reformed Church in America, meeting via Zoom on the 29th day of January in the year of our Lord 2021, gives thanks to God for the life and ministry of Russell Louis Gasero on the occasion of his required retirement and prays God's richest blessings on Russ and his wife, Maria, for the many years of their life ahead,

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Commission on History of the Reformed Church in America declares Russell Louis Gasero to be Archivist Emeritus of the Reformed Church in America.

Your commission remains grateful for Russell's faithfulness and diligence to our denomination's archives and will celebrate the continuation of this important ministry for decades to come. Since Russell's required departure, your commission has been involved in the plans for properly staffing the office.

For some context, the work of the archives is mandated by the General Synod in its Policy and Purposes statement. Since 1978, the Archives of the Reformed Church in America has grown tremendously, both in quantity of records and in scope of responsibilities. For the first three decades, it struggled with a single staff person as it increased in complexity and scope. In the

last decade, it was able to add an additional part-time staff person. Yet, the volume of materials and the scope of responsibilities increased rather than diminished. In the last year, the staff has been cut in half, and if we include the total hours committed by the staff, that cut is closer to eliminating two full-time staff.

Currently, Matthew Gasero serves as the denomination's digital archivist and was made to absorb most of the archivist's responsibilities. This is on top of his previous responsibilities as digital archivist. He has the full support of your commission and has done a tremendous job holding down the fort.

Being Informed by Past Transformations

In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes that "biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously."¹ History is so important to God, according to Buechner, that God initiated it, entered it, and has promised to one day "bring it to a serious close." In order to understand our past, which informs our present, the study of history becomes paramount. This is certainly true of Christian history as well as denominational history. The past affects the present, and ultimately the future, confirming the age-old wisdom that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."²

Your commission acknowledges that not everyone enjoys reading history. Depending on the subject, it can feel distant, tedious, and irrelevant. And yet, Christianity is a history-moored faith, instructing us and helping us gain perspective. Buechner, contrasting biblical faith with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, says, "history is not an absurdity to be endured or an illusion to be dispelled or an endlessly repeating cycle to be escaped. Instead it is for each of us a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere."³

While the "somewhere" has been debated over the centuries, Christian history points to God's unbending faithfulness and the reality that life has a direction—one where we are being led back to God, to our life's source, and ultimately to wholeness. Life and faith are rooted in the mystery of God's love, merging in surprising ways throughout history. What's needed are eyes that see and ears that hear. "We want," mused Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, "only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ."⁴

Without question, discerning just how God operates throughout all of human history is a difficult discipline. It requires honest humility since we "see in a mirror, dimly"⁵ and have only a glimpse into the spiritual realm. We wait with eager anticipation for the time when we will see and understand and know God fully. Until then, we recall those haunting words spoken through the

¹ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 38.

² George Santayana. *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner's, 1905), p. 284.

³ Buechner, p. 38. He adds, "True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people, including the one whose soul is at stake, are looking the other way."

⁴ Paul Tillich. *The New Being* (New York: Scribner's, 1955), p. 18.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV.

prophet long ago: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”⁶

Historically, ours is a faith that’s more interrogative and less doctrinaire.⁷ In the Reformed tradition, we’ve grown accustomed to dancing with our doubts, and we attempt to tackle those nagging existential questions that encompass a wide range of subjects. This work is always done best in community. Together we accomplish these things while also affirming those tenets that have traditionally united us as a Reformed Church, as the body of Christ in America:

- The wonder of creation;
- The humility of God in Jesus Christ;
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit;
- The miracle of forgiveness of sins;
- The gift of new life in communion;
- The call to the ministry of reconciliation;
- The promise of the consummation of God’s reign.⁸

We are confessional Protestants who adhere to a trinitarian theology, and since the Protestant Reformation, we have stressed the belief that salvation is by grace through faith alone. When someone comes to faith, it is God who initiates that saving work. In addition, our churches are, and have been, non-hierarchical, self-governing congregations. The decision-making power resides primarily in the local church, in various times and places of relative autonomy. Our common beliefs and shared practices far outweigh the things that seek to divide us.

Your commission is fully aware of what’s at stake as we consider our future as a Christian denomination. We are holding this tension with the rest of our brothers and sisters. The fracturing of the Reformed Church in America would be one more ecclesial tragedy. We remain hopeful—and pray—that it can be averted. After all, for 393 years, we have had a continuous ministerial presence in North America—148 years before the colonies gained independence from Great Britain. That is a remarkable fact. It means we remain the oldest operating Protestant ministry in this country, without any interruptions since 1628.

Our history wouldn’t even be possible without our willingness to tell it. We are people of a story, of an *experience* (Tillich), and we keep those cherished memories alive when we share our stories with others. The person who loses touch with their story is like the candle that has lost its wick, essentially losing purpose and significance. “Despite their individuality,” writes historian Ronald Wells, “Christians find their true identity firmly rooted in a collectivity: We are not alone in this life but members one of another. Our collective membership in *God’s* kingdom rests on a common affirmation of a story. Christians *are* Christians not solely because they made a ‘decision for Christ’ but because they became ‘members incorporate’ of Christ’s body.”⁹

We may have our differences, but those differences pale in comparison to what has united us over these many years. We overcame our quarrels during some very tense moments in our

⁶ Isaiah 55:8, NRSV.

⁷ Daniel L. Migliorie. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 2.

⁸ Migliorie, p. 3.

⁹ Ronald A. Wells. *History Through the Eyes of Faith: Western Civilization and the Kingdom of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 2.

denomination's history. While some have left for new adventures, others have stayed the course, keeping their promise to "walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."¹⁰ The same can be said of many faithful churches. They too have made a similar promise during the installation of elders and deacons to "encourage and pray for them, to labor together in obedience to the gospel for the unity, purity, and peace of the church, the welfare of the whole world, and the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹¹

Our differences need not tear us asunder. Sailing together as a fleet of ships ("classis") through turbulent waters is something we have a long history of doing. It's what we are called to do with humility and grace. Ronald Wells elucidates this point: "Knowing the 'author of truth' gives us an advantage in knowing truth over our secular neighbors, but it does not ensure that we know the truth, which surely exists in the mind of God but comes ambiguously to us. Once in a while we experience moments of clarity, and for these we are grateful. But, since the images remain blurred, we should practice the Christian virtue of humility in what we claim to know and to have 'right' in our historical perspectives."¹²

Because we are people of a story, and because history is critical to our survival, your commission has included papers that we hope are illuminating. The first paper is titled "Significant Conflicts in the Reformed Church in America: A Brief History." This work discloses our checkered past, identifying several key moments when the future of our church looked bleak. This paper has been adapted from Lynn Japinga's book *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994*, number 77 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). For a helpful overview of RCA history, please read chapter one. Also, for a discussion of the Synod of 1969, arguably one of the gloomiest times in our denomination's history, read chapter five.

With permission, we have included a portion of Joseph Small's paper, "One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church and Ecclesial Fragmentation." Small presented his paper to the community at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, on Monday, February 10, 2020. His work addresses the tension we hold between confessing our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church while at the same time living comfortably amid the rubble of divided churches.

Having served as director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship from 1988–2010, Small is now adjunct faculty at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary as well as the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington, and church relations consultant to the Presbyterian Foundation. He serves on the boards of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, the Institute for Church Renewal, and the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity. He served as co-chair of the second and third rounds of the international Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue, and he has participated regularly in international ecumenical consultations sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the Centre International Reformé. He has also authored several books, numerous monographs, book chapters, journal articles, study series, and theological papers.

¹⁰ *Book of Church Order*, Appendix: The Formularies, 3., 2019 edition, p. 132.

¹¹ *Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, p. 49.

¹² Wells, p. 3.

SIGNIFICANT CONFLICTS IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA:

A BRIEF HISTORY

One of the tasks of the Commission on History is to “offer a historical perspective on matters being presented to General Synod.” At this writing, we do not know what proposals will be presented to Synod, but there have been many meetings and a considerable amount of anxious conversation about the future of the RCA.

As a denomination, we share a remarkable 393 years of history. For almost four centuries, we have proclaimed the gospel, comforted the afflicted, and relieved the oppressed. Despite our relatively small size, we have had a significant impact in world missions and North American church life.

The RCA has had its conflicts, as all denominations do. Conflict is inevitable when passionate, committed people live and work closely together. They do not always agree on biblical and theological issues or how the faith is best lived out in the world. The RCA has generally functioned as a big tent where we share a common core identity while holding different opinions about infant baptism, the ordination of women, and preferred worship style.

At times in our history, conflict was severe enough that it appeared to threaten the sense of denominational unity and connection.

In the 1720s and 1730s, Theodorus Frelinghuysen, a Reformed pastor in New Jersey, created tension when he concluded that some of his parishioners were unconverted and that some Reformed Church ministers were arrogant and vain. He emphasized emotion, conversion, and piety, and called for a more rigorous and exclusive definition of what it meant to be a Christian. Some Reformed churches warmed to the idea of a more personal faith but rejected the judgment and exclusion.¹³

This debate took a slightly different shape several decades later. In the 1750s and 1760s, some ministers wanted more independence for the American church, while others wanted to preserve close ties with the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam. Months and even years could pass while the American churches waited for an opinion from Amsterdam. Some promising young men died at sea while traveling to or from the Netherlands for theological education. Independence for the American church seemed obvious to some, while others considered it defiant and reckless. The advocates of independence finally prevailed, in part because it was not realistic to continue the long-distance relationship.¹⁴

It is important to note that when colonists fought against the British in 1776, Reformed clergy and congregations were not all of one mind. Many supported the American cause, but perhaps a third of clergy and congregations were Tories who supported the British. They defended their

¹³ Donald J. Bruggink and Kim N. Baker, *By Grace Alone: Stories of the Reformed Church in America*, number 44 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 48-49.

¹⁴ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 51-56.

action with Scripture, claiming that they were being obedient to their rightful rulers, as the apostle Paul instructed in Romans 13.¹⁵

By 1847, the Reformed Church was thoroughly Americanized. Congregations may have taken pride in their ethnicity, but “Dutchness” would not ensure their survival. The denomination was ecumenical and cooperated with other denominations in missionary and benevolent societies.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, a revival had occurred in some Reformed churches, but their piety led to some tensions with the state church (*Hervormde Kerke*) and eventually to a separation known as the *Afscheiding*. In the late 1840s, several Dutch pastors brought church members to the United States. The Reformed Church gave them a warm welcome and financial aid, and eventually the newcomers joined forces with their Dutch sisters and brothers.¹⁶

This alliance did not last long before tensions appeared. Some of the new immigrants objected to the practice of singing hymns rather than only psalms and feared that this musical choice signified that the eastern churches were too Americanized and insufficiently separated from the world and other less spiritual denominations. These critics left the Reformed Church in 1857 and formed the Christian Reformed Church in North America.¹⁷

Three decades later, some of the recent Dutch immigrants in the Midwest raised another concern. Eastern churches had always allowed Freemasons to be members of their congregations. Freemasonry and Christianity were not considered mutually exclusive. The newer Dutch immigrants had experienced Freemasonry in Europe as more hostile to Christianity and they did not want Masons to be allowed as church members. The Reformed Church in America (as it was now called) allowed individual congregations to prohibit Masons from membership, but refused to legislate for the entire denomination. It was not the role of the General Synod to set membership policy. That was the responsibility of the minister and elders in the congregation. The decision caused an additional group of churches to leave the RCA and join the Christian Reformed Church in 1884.

The RCA has considered several mergers with other denominations: the Reformed Church in the United States (German Reformed) in the 1890s; the United Presbyterian Church in the 1940s; and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterian) in the 1960s. Each prompted years of complicated committee negotiations and caused significant debate. Advocates for union cited Jesus’s call for unity in John 17 and insisted that the small RCA could have a bigger impact if it was part of a larger denomination. Opponents of merger wanted to preserve the RCA’s identity and criticized the other denominations as lax in their doctrine and spirituality. During each merger debate, some people threatened to leave the denomination if they were forced to merge. A smaller number of merger advocates also threatened to leave if a merger did not happen. Each time, the RCA decided to preserve its distinctive identity. Few if any congregations left.

One strategy the RCA has *not* used in its history is the imposition of a single answer or position in response to conflict. General Synod did not state that Tories were wrong. It did not make a

¹⁵ John W. Beardslee, III, “The American Revolution,” in James W. Van Hoesen, ed., *Piety and Patriotism: Bicentennial Studies of the Reformed Church in America*, number 4 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 21-27.

¹⁶ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 131-133, 135-137.

¹⁷ Bruggink and Baker, pp. 138-139.

definitive statement about hymns versus psalms. It did not condemn Freemasonry but allowed congregations to decide whether Masons could be members. It allowed the ordination of women but did not force the practice upon resistant congregations.¹⁸

In 1948, the Particular (Regional) Synod of Chicago (now known as the Classis of Pleasant Prairie) asked General Synod for a definitive statement about dealing with divorced people.¹⁹ A number of people had entered into hasty marriages during World War II and later regretted them. Churches and pastors were anxious. Should divorced people be allowed to remarry? Should they be allowed to be church members?

A committee was appointed and reported to Synod in 1949. Their interpretation of RCA polity was that General Synod could not make a definitive statement on these difficult questions about divorce. Synod could make suggestions, but ultimately, the decisions about marriage and membership rested with the pastors and elders who knew the circumstances of the people involved. Synod could not interfere or make rules that must be followed uniformly.²⁰

The most conflicted time in the history of the RCA occurred at the meeting of General Synod in 1969. The proposed merger with the Southern Presbyterians had been defeated. A majority of classes (23-22) had voted for merger, but not the requisite two-thirds. Synod voted to stay in the National Council of Churches but postponed and effectively denied a recommendation to join the Consultation on Church Union. The denomination, like the nation, demonstrated sharp disagreement over the Vietnam War. A group of women marched through the Synod meeting carrying signs protesting their exclusion from the roles of deacon, elder, and minister. Finally, the RCA offices in New York City had been taken over by a group demanding reparations for African Americans. Tensions were high. Delegates were angry and frustrated. They did not trust or like one another.

On the second to last day of Synod, at a particularly tense time, Harold Schut, pastor in Scotia, New York, made a motion that a committee be formed to plan for the orderly dissolution of the RCA. He did it with tears in his eyes and with much regret. He did not want the church to continue fighting. His strategy called the whole church to account. Neither side would “win.” The RCA would cease to exist if it decided it could no longer be a church together.²¹

Over the next year, the committee wrestled with the painful reality of conflict, which was as present among them as in the denomination. In the end, they had not reached unity or agreement, but they recommended that the RCA continue to exist. Several other events helped to rebuild community and trust. It was not easy; the denomination had certainly not resolved all of its disagreements; and some of its short-term solutions eventually led to further conflict. But

¹⁸ See Donald J. Bruggink, “Extra-Canonical Tests for Church Membership and Ministry”, pp. 49-63 in Jacob E. Nyenhuis, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Rev. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty*, number 56 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁹ *MGS 1948*, p. 121.

²⁰ *MGS 1949*, pp. 196-198.

²¹ Lynn Japinga, *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994*, number 77 in *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 147-150.

the denomination decided that its shared history and theology was enough to hold it together even in the face of disagreements.²²

The most significant conflicts in the history of the RCA have centered on ecumenism, biblical interpretation, and the nature of the church. These are questions of identity and mission, sin and grace, individual and community, and mind, body, and soul. Often in these conflicts, some people describe them as church-dividing, or essential to the gospel. If the denomination doesn't get it right, the church will fail and die. These claims were made about the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam, hymns, Freemasons, the Vietnam War, and the role of women. Some people left the RCA, but each time, the denomination managed to work out its differences and continue to be a broad tent where people of different opinions were still welcomed. The differences seemed important at the time, and they were, but when we look back, we have a broader perspective, and we see that the church survived its differences and that God's grace preserved the church.

ONE HOLY CATHOLIC APOSTOLIC CHURCH AND ECCLESIAL FRAGMENTATION

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

"In general, the churches ... bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it" (John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*).

Protestant Christians live in a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance. We stand in worship and speak the Apostles' Creed, declaring our belief in the holy catholic church. Or, if we speak the older Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church. The words are unambiguous: *The church, one church*, just as we confess our faith in one God the Father Almighty, one Lord Jesus Christ, one Holy Spirit. What do we think we are doing?

As we affirm the creeds, we are surrounded by innumerable separated churches. Distinct ecclesial traditions are divided into discrete denominations, many of which continue to subdivide into more denominations. The disjunction between what we say we believe and what we see around us and casually accept as the way things are only makes sense if we segment the two: cognitive dissonance. "Indeed," says Ephraim Radner, "the most manifest mark of the divided Church appears to be its own insensibility to the symptoms of its condition."²³

Catholic and Orthodox Christians have a cognitive advantage over Protestants. Catholics believe that the one church subsists in the Catholic Church, while the Orthodox believe that autonomous Orthodox Churches compose the one church. We may dismiss their claims as ecclesiological fantasy, until we realize that we assert a similar, although weaker, theological attempt to overcome the divide between belief in the one church and acceptance of many separated churches. Our pleasant fiction is the "invisible church." "Yes," we say, "what is visible

²² Japinga, pp. 155-157.

²³ Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 277.

are myriad separated churches, but they are all united in an invisible church that transcends what we see. So,” we continue, “our creedal affirmations are about invisible unity that renders visible disunity less consequential. Not only that, our claim of invisible unity provides theological cover for our willingness to continue subdividing already divided churches.”

The Body Lies Bleeding

The genesis of our ecclesiological double mindedness is found in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation—which might more properly be called the Western Church Schism. The twelfth-century split between the Greek East and the Latin West was the Great Schism, but it had little effect on the consciousness of the medieval Catholic Church or its reformers. In the aftermath of 1517, however, it was the reformers who had to struggle with the reality that necessary reform was accompanied by division of the one church into multiple churches.

In the early years of reform, the theological task was to identify which ecclesial bodies were “true churches,” faithful to the gospel. Luther asked, “How can a poor confused person tell where such holy Christian people are to be found in the world?” He answered by setting out seven marks by which a true and faithful church could be recognized: possession of the Word of God, the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys (discipline), the ministry, prayer, and the cross.²⁴ Calvin set forth the heart of the matter in two marks: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered in accord with Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”²⁵

It is essential to realize that Calvin did not see the marks of Word and sacrament as strong borders protecting a small principality of pure churches. “We may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist,” he says, “even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.” As if this were not expansive enough, he goes on to say, “What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church.”²⁶ Calvin’s marks are not intended as a test to determine which churches are in and which are out, but rather as pointers to the core of any church’s faithful life, for it is in Word and sacrament that we know most clearly the real presence of Christ among us.

In our time of subdividing denominations and congregations, it is worth pondering Calvin’s observation that, “we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.” Calvin knew what we seem to have forgotten: “not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort,” he writes. “Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all ... [while] there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of the church.” Do you know which doctrines Calvin believed were necessary? The list is short: “God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and

²⁴ Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, second edition, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 366-375.

²⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.1.9., p. 1023.

²⁶ Calvin, 4.1.12., p. 1025.

the like.” Three essentials and an et cetera! Again, he was not providing a checklist to judge others. He was pointing us away from marginal matters toward the heart of the gospel.²⁷

Calvin wrote all of this in the final, 1559 edition of *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. By this point in the ongoing reform of the church, it was apparent that the pressing issue was not marks of the true church but division and hostility among the various reformation churches—each of which possessed the marks! Doctrinal disputes had not only separated Protestant churches from the Catholic church, but Lutherans from the Swiss Reformed, the Swiss Reformed among themselves, Lutherans and Reformed from Anabaptists and others, with the ambiguous English church in turmoil of its own.

Early in Calvin’s reforming work, he was confronted by a thoughtful Catholic critique of the reformers by Cardinal Sadoletto, including the charge that they “attempted to tear the spouse of Christ in pieces.” Sadoletto went on to ask, “since these men [the reformers] began how many sects have torn the Church?”²⁸ How many indeed. While Calvin dealt confidently with most of Sadoletto’s lengthy critique, he acknowledged that, “the most serious charge of all is that we have attempted to dismember the spouse of Christ.” Although Calvin denied that was the intent of the reformers, he admitted, “Were that true, both you [Sadoletto] and the whole world might regard us as past redemption.”²⁹

Despite his rejection of Sadoletto’s indictment, the passage of time forced Calvin to deal with evident division and discord among multiplying churches. In a letter responding to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s call for a council of all the reforming churches, Calvin writes, “This other thing is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, that the Churches are so divided that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute among us.” Then, in apparent acknowledgment of Sadoletto’s now 14-year-old critique, he concludes, “Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding.”³⁰

Neither Luther nor Calvin desired the division of the church. Calvin worked for Lutheran-Reformed reconciliation and for unity among the Swiss churches. He envisioned a universal council of the whole church, including Catholic bishops and representatives from the reformation churches. Remarkably, he was even open to the possibility that the pope would preside!³¹ When we ignore the distress that sixteenth-century divisions caused for the earliest reformers, going so far as to claim them as warrants for our division, we accede to the cognitive dissonance that places the church’s foundational creeds in a time capsule while accepting the church’s present disarray and ongoing ecclesial subdivision.

Even so, we sometimes feel pangs of discomfort when surveying the current ecclesial landscape. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) [PC(U.S.A.)] split four times in the twentieth century: the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the 1930s, the Presbyterian Church in America in

²⁷ Calvin, p. 1026.

²⁸ Jacopo Sadoletto, “Sadoletto’s Letter to the Genevans,” in *A Reformation Debate: John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto*, ed. John C. Olen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 40.

²⁹ John Calvin, “Reply to Sadolet,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p. 255.

³⁰ John Calvin, “Letter to Cranmer” (1552), in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pp. 5:347-48.

³¹ John Calvin, “Letter to the Reformed Churches of France” (1560), in Beveridge and Bonnet, *Tracts and Letters*, pp. 7:158-61.

the 1970s, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the 1980s, and the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians in the 1990s and beyond. American Lutherans, once divided by European ethnic origins, united only to re-divide along theological and ethical lines. Episcopalians have also broken up. The United Church of Christ and the Southern Baptist Convention have witnessed the departure of congregations for alternate affiliations.

Now the United Methodist Church is about to be the latest entrant in the ongoing parade of fractured churches. The plan to split into (at least) two denominations is termed, “restructuring through separation” and “reconciliation through division.” The plan also provides that one part of the newly divided church will retain the name *United Methodist Church*! Cognitive dissonance sometimes slides into Orwellian delusion.

Invisible Church?

We confess our belief in one holy catholic apostolic church at the same time we live comfortably amid the rubble of divided churches. But we sidestep the obvious incongruity by imagining two churches—an invisible church that remains one and a visible church that is divided. What we can see is not one, while what we cannot see is one. In the recent PC(U.S.A.) split, the visible/invisible distinction made it possible for those who wished to leave, and those who were happy to see them go, to assert that they were not dividing the indivisible invisible church, but only dividing a humanly constructed denomination.

Where did this invisible/visible distinction come from? From an odd alteration of the classic view that all the faithful throughout time and space are united in the communion of saints. When we confess the Apostles’ Creed, voicing our belief in “the holy catholic church” and “the communion of saints,” we are not saying the same thing twice. The holy catholic church is the mundane gathering of ordinary people around Word and sacrament that we see, hear, taste, feel, and smell. The communion of saints is the great cloud of witnesses from Abraham to squirming infants at the baptismal font. The holy catholic church is the church we know. The communion of saints is known only to God; to us it is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

In this classic understanding, there is no opposition between the communion of saints and the visible church. The opposition is between what Augustine called the City of God on the one hand and the earthly city on the other. “Most glorious is the City of God,” writes Augustine, “whether in this passing age, where she dwells as a pilgrim among the ungodly, or in the security of that eternal home in which she now patiently awaits until righteousness shall return unto judgment.”³² The City of God is not distinguished from the visible church, but from the earthly city which “glories in itself” while the heavenly city “[glories] in the Lord.”³³ But, says Augustine, “In this wicked world, and in these evil days ... many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are as it were collected in the net of the gospel, and in this world, as in a sea, both swim together without separation.”³⁴

Calvin notes that Scripture speaks of the church in two ways, sometimes signifying all the living and dead who are in the presence of God and sometimes referring to all currently living people

³² Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans., R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book I, Preface, p. 3.

³³ Augustine, XIV.28., p. 632.

³⁴ Augustine, XVIII.49., p. 896.

who profess the one God. Since those who are in God's presence are known only to God, Calvin promptly turns his attention to the only church that is humanly knowable, the visible church. Calvin writes, "Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eye of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called 'church' in respect to men."³⁵

Before leaving the fiction of the invisible church, two more things should be said. First, an invisible church is also a mute church. What cannot be seen cannot be heard because it has no voice—no witness to bear to God's continuing presence in the world, no call of Christ to discipleship, no groaning of the Holy Spirit to animate our prayers. It simply hovers above us as an amorphous ideal in contrast to the messy appearance and confusing utterances of the church we live in. An invisible church is also an inert church. It does not feed the hungry, welcome strangers, care for the sick, and visit prisoners. Its purported faithfulness is unseen and unheard inactivity.

The second thing to be said is that the fiction of the invisible church is only possible because we have denied our essential continuity with God's people Israel and our continuing kinship with God's people the Jews. The widespread view that the church has replaced Israel, that Christians have replaced Jews as the people of God, that God has transferred covenant faithfulness from "Old Testament Israel" to "New Testament Church," reduces Israel to a negative prelude to the positive existence of the church. (It has also made it possible for the church to engage in centuries of theological abuse of the Jews, punctuated by intolerance, demonization, ghettos, pogroms, and, perhaps inevitably, the Holocaust. The current rise in anti-Jewish rhetoric and action is grim testimony to this enduring reality.)

In the face of Israel's chronic infidelity (related to us by Israel herself), the church has created a portrait of its invisible perfections to conceal its own chronic infidelity. This has enabled churches to replace repentance with renewal, confession with restructuring, fidelity with rationality, and hope with planning. Flawed, earthy Israel is superseded by an ideal heavenly church, of which the thousands of separated earthly churches are but pale shadows. In our better moments, we understand the damage we have caused the Jews, yet we remain unaware of the damage we cause the church. Our ecclesiology—our doctrine of the church—is flawed, marked by theological idealization or sociological deconstruction.

Communion

The church known in Scripture is a tangible reality as the people of God, the body of Christ, the communion of the Holy Spirit. Yet, despite Jesus's prayer and Paul's pleading, the church is not one as Jesus and the Father are one; the church does not have the same mind and the same love. We are divided without the backstop of invisible unity. How are we to make sense of this? Only through honest, serious, sustained theological thinking about what it means to be one holy catholic apostolic church at the same time that we are a divided, conformed, fractional, domesticated church.

The initial step toward the unity of the church is to stop subdividing the church. Slicing and dicing existing denominations is a sad, hopeless reversion to Babel. Every faction in every denomination should vow to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). While unlikely, it can and must begin sometime, somewhere, as a witness to the truth of

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.7., p.1022.

the gospel. The place to begin thinking about the unity of the church is to recognize that the gathered congregation is the basic form of church, ... but not a sufficient form of church. Gathered around Word and sacrament, the congregation is the one holy catholic apostolic church, but not of itself alone—as if it were a solitary, self-sufficient ecclesia. The gathered congregation *is* the one holy catholic apostolic church *only* in its essential communion with its Lord and therefore in its communion with other gathered congregations.

“Communion” is the fundamental English translation of the Greek *κοινωνία*. Unfortunately, persons who rely on translations of the New Testament are unaware that *koinonia* is rendered in English seven different ways: *communion*, *fellowship*, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, *contribution*, and *taking part*. This conceals the fact that Scripture uses one rich word to display the character of relationships in the church—from Eucharistic union with Christ through reconciling differences to sharing money. Ecclesial *koinonia* is deep, intimate abiding communion with the Triune God; communion in faith, hope, and love; communion in sacraments; communion in the truth of the gospel; communion in faithful living; communion in the reconciliation of differences; communion in patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability. Communion—community—communication—is, says Oliver O’Donovan, “to hold something as common, to make it a common possession, to treat it as ‘ours’ rather than ‘yours’ or ‘mine’ ... to form a community, a ‘we’.”³⁶

“We-ness” is at the heart of *koinonia*: ending partition, ceasing detachment, overcoming distance, dwelling in mutuality. In our time, the substance and aim of *koinonia* is deep, intimate, abiding relationships within and among congregations, denominations, and global families of churches. “We-ness” is not uniformity. Barry Ensign-George makes the important ecumenical point that diversity lives within the call for the church to be one; variety “is not accidental to God’s purposes and thus not irrelevant to what the church properly *is*.”³⁷ While we are all familiar with Paul’s articulation of this dynamic in his letters to churches in Corinth, Rome, Colossae, and Ephesus, we rarely acknowledge their bearing on inter-denominational and inter-congregational realities.

At their best, all denominations and their congregations embrace diversities of race, culture, class, gender, and age. But there is more. As Ensign-George says, “The Christian faith generates something like a field of possible embodiments of that faith,” and this “requires choosing among multiple possibilities.”³⁸ Various denominations embody distinctive patterns of theological insight, liturgical practice, missional engagement, and governance. Ensign-George’s insight is that such distinctive patterns are *possible embodiments engendered by Christian faith*. Denominational distinctives do not necessarily draw lines between truth and error, nor are they mere idiosyncrasies to be politely tolerated. Denominational *koinonia* means deep, intimate, abiding “we-ness” that moves beyond “yours and mine” to “ours.”

Commitment to the visible unity of the church is not the calling of ecumenical experts. It is the calling of every congregation and every pastor. It is sometimes easy to forget that most of Paul’s letters were addressed to specific congregations: “Paul ... to the church of God that is in Corinth,” “Paul ... to the Churches of Galatia,” “Paul ... to the church of the Thessalonians.” When he begs congregations in Ephesus, he also begs all of the congregations represented

³⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 242.

³⁷ Barry A. Ensign-George, *Between Congregation and Church: Denomination and Christian Life Together* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), p. 204.

³⁸ Ensign-George, p. 165.

here to live a life worthy of our calling, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Why? Because there is one body, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (Ephesians 4:1-6).

“You have seen the house built, you have seen it adorned
By one who came in the night, it is now dedicated to GOD.
It is now a visible church, one more light set on a hill
In a world confused and dark and disturbed by portents of fear.
And what shall we say of the future? Is one church all we can build?
Or shall the Visible Church go on to conquer the World?”

-T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from 'The Rock'*

Respectfully submitted,
Steven D. Pierce, moderator

Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Reformed Church in America's (RCA) Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) has eight members, one representing each of the regional synods. Regional synods are required to nominate laypersons and ministers in alternating six-year cycles in order to ensure that the commission's membership includes at least three laypersons and three ministers. A broad knowledge of and background in the structure, government, and function of the RCA is required of all members and legal training and experience is required of lay members, as mandated by the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 6 [2019 edition, p. 114]).

The responsibilities of the CJB are to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it in the RCA's *Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (BCO, Chapter 2 [2019 edition, p. 77])*.

Since the submission of its report to the 2020 General Synod, no charge, notice of intent to complain, or notice of intent to appeal has been referred to the CJB. Accordingly, the CJB has conducted no meetings since the submission of its report to the 2020 General Synod other than one conference call to elect a moderator and secretary for the period from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022.

The General Synod did not meet in 2020, and therefore the commission's report to the 2020 General Synod will not appear in any minutes. The CJB considers it important that a complete and proper record of its actions be maintained, even if it does not involve any formal action by the General Synod. Consequently, the CJB repeats here what it said in its report to the 2020 General Synod.

The Office of the General Synod received one judicial matter shortly before the 2019 meeting of the General Synod. It was an appeal filed on April 8, 2019. It was referred to the CJB for review, recommendation, and report to the 2019 General Synod. The CJB informed the 2019 General Synod that there was insufficient time for the CJB to complete its work on the appeal prior to the 2019 General Synod meeting, and that the CJB would complete its work on the appeal in time for written report (and recommendation, if applicable) to the 2020 General Synod.

The CJB met electronically on July 18, 2019, and February 17, 2020. The purpose of the first meeting was to conduct work on the appeal discussed in this report. The purpose of the second meeting was to approve the 2020 report, elect a moderator, vice moderator, and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2020, and to appoint a corresponding delegate to the 2020 General Synod.

Appeal by Phillip and Diane Forner from Action by the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Phillip and Diane Forner ("Forners") filed with the office of the General Synod an appeal from an action taken by the Overtures and Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes ("Regional Synod"). The Forners' notice of intent to appeal was filed with an officer of the Regional Synod within the 20-day time frame required under *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 1 (2019 edition, p. 94). The appeal and reasons therefore were filed with the General Synod (the higher judicatory) within 20 days of filing the notice of intent to appeal (April 8, 2019) as required by *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 2 (2019 edition, p. 94). The appeal was then referred to the CJB. The CJB received the record of the case on April 13, 2019. The CJB met via conference call on July 18, 2019, to consider the case.

Upon first review, the members of the CJB ensured that the notice of intent to appeal and reasons therefore were a) filed timely and b) filed with the correct parties (as required by *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Sections 1 and 2 [2019 edition, p. 94]). These provisions were appropriately followed. The CJB also ensured that the record of the case was submitted by the lower judicatory and that the record was in order. The members confirmed receipt and review of these documents.

On October 29, 2018, the Classis of Zeeland (Zeeland Classis) decided to not undertake an intentional process of reconciliation between the Forners, Spring Valley Church, and Zeeland Classis. The Forners “appealed” the decision of Zeeland Classis to the next higher judicatory, the Regional Synod. (Discussed below, the Regional Synod determined this to be a complaint, not an appeal). On February 21, 2019, the Regional Synod reviewed the complaint and held that the complaint is to be dismissed without a hearing as frivolous, dilatory, and clearly without merit. This is the decision the Forners now appeal.

By way of background, the complaint made by the Forners that “Zeeland Classis failed to undertake an intentional process of reconciliation between the Forners, Spring Valley Church [SVC], and Zeeland Classis” stems from a prior complaint and adjudicatory proceeding where there was the following two-part determination by the Zeeland Classis (on May 16, 2017):

1. Zeeland Classis will respectfully request aid from, within her bounds, an established RCA church whose Board of Elders would be willing to receive the Forners’s membership and offer pastoral care until such time as reconciliation between SVC and the Forners can be realized, or the Forners find another church home.
2. Zeeland Classis will undertake an intentional process of reconciliation between the Forners, SVC, and Zeeland Classis to assist in the reestablishment of trust between all parties.

Following this determination of the Zeeland Classis on a prior complaint, the Forners filed an appeal. The appeal specifically challenged the first determination of the Zeeland Classis. The Forners exhausted the appeal process contained in the *BCO* to the appeal of the first determination above (which included a hearing and determination by the CJB). Following that exhaustion of appeal, the Forners contacted the Zeeland Classis to inquire about the second determination above—the intentional process of reconciliation. In response, the Zeeland Classis indicated that by appealing the May 16, 2017, determination of the Zeeland Classis in the prior complaint, the Forners had chosen the appeal route, opting out of the process of reconciliation. The Zeeland Classis stated “what could be litigated through the appeals process has been adjudicated.” The classis further specified to the Forners their status within the classis and made recommendations regarding individuals whom the Forners could meet with.

The Zeeland Classis decision of October 29, 2018 (to not undertake the process of reconciliation), was “appealed” by the Forners to the Overtures and Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod. The Regional Synod determined that the email sent by the Forners following the Zeeland Classis decision was a complaint and not an appeal, since an appeal is a transfer to a higher judicatory on which a judgment had been rendered at the lower judicatory. The Regional Synod considered this a complaint (and not an appeal) because the Zeeland Classis did not render a judgment below as there was no specific complaint below. The Regional Synod determined that the email complaining that the Zeeland Classis could not undertake the intentional reconciliation

process with the Forners was an initial complaint about the classis (which would appropriately be filed with the applicable regional synod).

In reviewing the complaint, the Overtures and Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod found no evidence that any action or decision of the Zeeland Classis violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the RCA or other regulations of the church (which is how complaints are defined in the *BCO*, Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 1 [2019 edition, p. 89]). Therefore, there were no grounds for the complaint, and the complaint was dismissed as “frivolous, dilatory, and clearly without merit.”

It is that determination of the Regional Synod, dismissing the complaint against the Zeeland Classis, that the Forners now appeal. The CJB has reviewed the record below, along with the appeal and reasons therefore, submitted by the Forners.

Pursuant to *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2019 edition, p. 95), “[i]f the appeal is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the committee may dismiss the appeal without a hearing.”

In reviewing whether the appeal is frivolous, dilatory, and without merit, the CJB reviewed the grounds for appeal. *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 (2019 edition, p. 93) provides very specific grounds for appeal: irregularity in the proceedings of the lower judicatory, refusal of reasonable indulgence to a party on trial, receiving improper, or declining to receive proper, evidence, rendering a decision before all the testimony is taken, bias or prejudice in the case, and manifest injustice in the judgment. The CJB also noted that deference is to be given to the lower judicatory on appeal and that the higher judicatory “shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole,” (*BCO*, Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 11 [2019 edition, p. 95]).

Based upon these factors, the CJB determined that this appeal is frivolous and clearly without merit. The reasons therefore submitted by the Forners do not cite any of the specific grounds for appeal as required by *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 (2019 edition, p. 93). Furthermore, upon review of the entire record, the CJB did not find any instance which would amount to one of the stated grounds for appeal. Specifically,

- No irregularities in the proceedings below.
- There was no trial, so no issues with respect to not providing reasonable indulgence.
- There does not appear to be an instance where any piece of evidence was declined to be a part of the record and no evidence included is improper.
- There was no testimony taken, so no concern regarding a decision being made prior to hearing the testimony and evidence.
- In the lengthy record, which contains many opportunities for the Forners to make their case, there appears no instances of bias or prejudice. The lower judicatories acted in good faith, always responding to the complaint and appeals and supporting the right to process such, so no bias or prejudice is noted.
- Based upon the evidence below, and deference given to the lower judicatory, there is substantial evidence to support the Regional Synod determination; therefore, no manifest injustice occurred.

Therefore, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to find the appeal of the Forners to be frivolous and clearly without merit, and the CJB then dismissed the appeal without a hearing, per *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2019 edition, p. 95).

Respectfully submitted,
Russell Paarlberg
Moderator, General Synod Commission on Judicial Business

The General Synod receives this report for information only.

Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations (CoN) typically presents its report and accompanying recommendations annually to General Synod in June. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, stated sessions of General Synod were not held in June of 2020 or 2021. So that the CoN could fulfill its responsibility to nominate individuals to fill openings and vacancies on the various commissions, agencies, and boards for terms beginning July 1, it asked the General Synod Council (GSC) to approve its 2020 and 2021 annual reports and accompanying slate of nominees *ad interim* as specified in the *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 110]). The GSC did so on June 9, 2020, and June 22, 2021. In addition, the GSC approved a few *ad interim* appointments at its October 18–19, 2019; October 23–24, 2020; and March 23–24, 2021, meetings, upon request of the receiving body. By definition, *ad interim* appointees are eligible to serve until the next regular session of General Synod, at which time the CoN typically recommends to the General Synod that it elect the appointee for the remainder of the term identified. In some cases, terms expired or members resigned before General Synod could meet to elect them. Therefore, the slate of nominees that the CoN is recommending to General Synod for election has been reduced from the slate approved *ad interim* by the GSC.

During the 2019–2020 annual cycle, the Commission on Nominations convened in person on October 17–18, 2019, and January 21, 2020, and by Zoom video conference on February 19, March 4, April 1, and April 22. Two final electronic votes were held by email on May 15 and May 20. During the 2020–2021 annual cycle, the Commission on Nominations met by Zoom video conference on November 17, 2020, and January 5, January 19, February 9, March 9, April 6, and April 27, 2021. Three final electronic votes were held by email on May 17, June 3, and June 8. This report to the October 2021 General Synod was approved by electronic vote on July 29, 2021.

Throughout each year, members of the commission actively sought qualified candidates, solicited completed profiles, and vetted those who were interested in serving on a commission, agency, or board of the General Synod. In this way, the commission sought to fulfill its responsibilities as stated in the bylaws of the General Synod—namely, “in consultation with the general secretary, [the commission] shall search the denomination for suitable nominees. In making nominations it shall consider the geographic location, occupation, and record of previous service to the denomination of persons suggested by classes, regional synods, and other sources. It shall consider this and other pertinent data in light of each commission’s or agency’s responsibilities, membership needs, suggested nominees, and place and schedule of meetings” (*Book of Church Order [BCO]*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8c2 [2019 edition, p. 116]). The commission also worked in cooperation with the boards of trustees of the Reformed Church in America–related institutions to fill openings and vacancies on their respective boards as directed by the various governing documents of those institutions.

The commission seeks to nominate individuals for service on commissions, agencies, and boards on the basis of their spiritual gifts, interests, heart (or passion), abilities, personality, experience, and special leadership abilities, and when possible, seeks to involve young adult members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (so they can be nurtured and encouraged to serve the RCA in a variety of ways in the future). Through its efforts, the Commission on Nominations has proactively fulfilled its responsibility to “search the denomination” and believes those nominated have traits that make them well-suited for the work of the positions to which

they are being nominated. The commission is pleased to report once again that it has, to the best of its ability, fulfilled its responsibility for ensuring that the requirements of the *BCO* are upheld.

When the number of qualified candidates from which to choose increases, the commission's work is enhanced, and the work of the General Synod's commissions, agencies, and boards is carried out more effectively. Consequently, the commission encourages anyone interested in serving to submit a completed profile by emailing it to Angela Worthley, staff to the commission, at nominations@rca.org. A blank profile and brief descriptions of each commission, agency, and board can be found at www.rca.org/nominations.

Ad Interim Appointments

The GSC appointed the following nominees *ad interim* at its meetings held between the June 2019 and October 2021 General Synods. (Classes that include a beginning and ending year begin on July 1 and end on June 30. Classes that are noted by an ending year only conclude June 30. An asterisk in front of the name indicates that the new term will be the individual's final term. The *BCO* requires regional synod and/or racial/ethnic council nomination for various RCA bodies. These nominees are indicated by the regional synod or racial/ethnic council acronym in parentheses followed by a # sign.)

Nominees appointed *ad interim* on October 18, 2019 (GSC 19-41)

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—Michigan

Class ending in 2020

Doorlag, Rev. Jack

*Murphy, Nelson

*Schnelker, Jason

Struyk, Douglas

Class ending in 2021

Chapman, Dana

Condis, Ralph

Class ending in 2022

Laswell, Joseph

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)

Class ending in 2021

Johnson, Kristen (WTS Theological Agent designee)

Nominees appointed *ad interim* on June 9, 2020 (GSC 20-29)

General Synod Council (GSC)

Class of 2020–2024

*Chahine, Michelle

*Cousins, Devonna

*Moses, Sheila (RSNY)#

*Van Es, Kimberly

*Van Oort, Harris (RSH)#

*Varga, Patricia

Commission on Christian Action (CCA)

Class of 2020–2023

Banks, Rev. Beryl
*Ennis, Rev. Mark
Prince, Bradley
*Smith, Reginald (Ecumenical observer—Reformed)
*Winchell, Kim (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE)

Class of 2020–2023

Koerselman, Rebecca
*Van Beek, Pamela

Commission on Christian Unity (CCU)

Class ending in 2021

Buettner, Rev. Dale

Class of 2020–2023

Elenbaas, Anthony (Ecumenical observer—another denomination)
*Field, Rev. Donna
Jackson, Carol (Kitt)
Lampen, Rev. Jeffery

Commission on Christian Worship (CCW)

Class ending in 2022

Granlund, Steven

Class of 2020–2023

Alvarado, Geimy
*Gieser, Dirk

Commission on Church Order (CCO)

Class of 2020–2023

*Scheid, Joshua
*Van Regenmorter, Jennifer

Commission on History (CoH)

Class of 2020–2023

Devos, Rev. Corstian
*Pierce, Rev. Steven

Commission on Judicial Business (CJB)

Class of 2020–2023

*Breen, Rev. Stephen (RSH)#
*Van Houten, Rev. Kendra (RSNY)#

Commission on Nominations (CoN)

Class of 2020–2023

Bilbrew, Rev. Wanzette (Ann) (AABC)#
*Enjady, Rainey
*Mutch, Carol (RSMAt)#

Schramm, Dean (RSMAM)#

Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)

Class ending in 2021

Vacancy (CHM)#

Class ending in 2022

Larsen, Mike

Class of 2020–2023

*Denny, June

Na, Rev. Young

Pyle, Rev. Nathan

Commission on Theology (CoT)

Class of 2020–2023

Baart, Aaron (Ecumenical observer—other Reformed bodies)

Bouma-Prediger, Steven

*Citlau, Rev. Ronald

Lunn, John

*Russell, Rev. William (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)

Commission for Women (CfW)

Class ending in 2021

Reid, Claudette

Class ending in 2022

Dickie, Jane

Class of 2020–2023

Dekker, Rev. Florence

Morgan, Mary

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—New York

Class ending in 2022

Barnes, Lynn

Class of 2020–2023

Cumings, Timothy

*Doorlag, Rev. Jack

*Struyk, Douglas

Though both of this year's openings were in the Class of 2023, the Board of Benefits Services wished to even out its class rotation by placing one of the new directors in the Class of 2022.

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—Michigan

Class ending in 2021

Chapman, Dana

Condis, Ralph

Class ending in 2022

Barnes, Lynn

Laswell, Joseph

Class of 2020–2023

Cumings, Timothy

*Doorlag, Rev. Jack

*Struyk, Douglas

Church Growth Fund (CGF) Board

Class of 2020–2023

Bos, Rev. Michael

*Kouba, Nicole

Schneiderman, George

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA)

Class of 2020–2023

*DeVriend, Rev. Dustin

*Nelson, Rev. Frances

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)

Class of 2021

Johnson, Kristen (WTS Theological Agent designee)

Class of 2020–2023

Dunlap, Rev. Gregory (NBTS Theological Agent designee)

Gillett, Rev. Daniel

Pierce, Rev. Chad

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) Board of Trustees

Class of 2020–2023

*Choi, David

*Crawford, Brittnee (RSNY)

Cruz, Samuel

Kaltwasser, Cambria

*Kapteyn, Rev. John (RSC)

McGinty, Felicia

*Paarlberg, Russell (RSMAM)

*Slaughter, Ronald

Vis, Rev. Anthony (RSH)

*Zimmerman, Dean

Western Theological Seminary (WTS) Board of Trustees

Class of 2020–2023

Gilbert, Percy

Johnson, Fred

Tiénou, Tite

*Vriesman, Rev. Brian

Wierda, Emilie Prince

Vacancy (RSMAM)

Appointed Carl Boersma to serve as *ad interim* moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2020–2021 term.

Nominees appointed *ad interim* on October 23, 2020 (GSC 20-37)

Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)
Class ending in 2021

Elivo Lopez, Rev. Rolfi (CHM)#

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)
Class ending in 2021

Serrano, Lorena

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) Board of Trustees
Class ending in 2022

McCarty, Therese

Western Theological Seminary (WTS) Board of Trustees
Class ending in 2023

Izenbart, Rev. David (RSMAM)
Snyder, Beth

Nominees appointed *ad interim* on October 23, 2020 (GSC 20-38)

Hope College Board of Trustees
Class of 2020–2023

Alemán, Rev. Eddy
Pitsenberger, Rev. Mike
Sutton, Eugene

Nominee appointed *ad interim* on March 23, 2021 (GSC 21-05)

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)
Class ending in 2021

Camacho, Israel

Nominees appointed *ad interim* on June 22, 2021 (GSC 21-19)

General Synod Council (GSC)
Class of 2021–2025

*Davis, Susan
*Lohre, Kathryn (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)
*Meyer-Veen, Rev. Michael
*Nichols, Rev. Eric (RSMAt)#
*Roller, Rev. Neale (RSMAM)#
*Spyksma, Glenn
*Vande Voort, Lee

Commission on Christian Action (CCA)

Class ending in 2023

Stephenson, Rev. Mark (*interim*, to be replaced by new CRCNA Director of Race Relations and Social Justice when hired without further action by GSC appointment or by General Synod to elect the new person) (Ecumenical observer—Reformed)

Class of 2021–2024

Ennis, Rev. Leah
Smith, Rev. Dianna
*Van Kooten Laughead, Cameron

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE)

Class ending in 2022

Balk, Rev. Ellen

Class of 2021–2024

*Swart, Rev. Mark
VanderWaal, Rev. Bradley
White, Jason

Commission on Christian Unity (CCU)

Class ending in 2023

Veldt, Rev. Mark

Class of 2021–2024

Buettner, Rev. Dale
Busker, Rev. Nathan
*Corro, Rev. Carlos

Commission on Christian Worship (CCW)

Class ending in 2022

Grimm, Rev. Cory

Class of 2021–2024

*Frens, Rev. Kent
*Van Beek, Rev. Troy

Commission on Church Order (CCO)

Class of 2021–2024

Andrew, Brian
Jacobsen, Rev. Christopher

Commission on History (CoH)

Class of 2021–2024

Meeter, Rev. Daniel
Shepler, Rev. Douglas

Commission on Judicial Business (CJB)

Class of 2021–2024

Brooks, Rev. Brion (RSMAM)#
Visser, Carl (RSC)#
Vacancy (RSMAt)#

Commission on Nominations (CoN)

Class of 2021–2024

*Byun, Rev. Ock Kee (CPAAM)#
Garreton, Rev. Jose (RSC)#
Sealy, Rev. Patricia (RSNY)#
Vermeer, Evan (RSH)#

Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)

Class ending in 2022

James, Earl

Class of 2021–2024

Elivo Lopez, Rev. Rolfi (CHM)#
Merino, Janice
*Spooner, Rev. Kelvin (AABC)#

Commission on Theology (CoT)

Class ending in 2022

Church, William Ruggles

Class ending in 2023

*Estes, Rev. Elizabeth

Class of 2021–2024

*Else, Rev. Travis
McCreary, Rev. Micah (RCA seminary faculty)
Whittington, Robert

Commission for Women (CfW)

Class of 2021–2024

*Blankenship, Rev. Melisa
Reid, Claudette
Bakelaar, Rev. Philip

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—New York

Class of 2021–2024

*Chapman, Dana
*Condis, Ralph

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—Michigan

Class of 2021–2024

*Chapman, Dana
*Condis, Ralph

Church Growth Fund (CGF) Board

Class of 2021–2024

Putnam, Anne
Silberstein, Karl

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA)

Class of 2021–2024

*Christiansen, Rev. Scott

*Lin, San-Yi Shirley

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)
Class of 2021–2024

Camacho, Israel
*Johnson, Kristen
*Taitt, Rev. Cora

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) Board of Trustees
Class of 2021–2024

*Dunlap, Rev. Gregory (RSMAt)
*Kingdom Grier, Rev. Denise (RSGL)
Morris, Michael (RSFW)
Rohrer, Rev. Ming-Chen Grace
Testa, Rev. Elizabeth

Western Theological Seminary (WTS) Board of Trustees
Class of 2021–2024

*Godwin-Stremmer, Rev. Andrea
Haworth, Matthew
Highstreet, Alden (RSFW)
Hillegonds, Timothy
Spoelhof, Steve
*Taitt, Rev. Cora (RSNY)
Vermeer, Evan (RSH)

Appointed Carol Mutch to serve as *ad interim* moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2021–2022 term.

Election for Remainder of Terms Identified

The Commission on Nominations recommends to General Synod that it elect the following appointees for the remainder of the terms identified. (Classes that include a beginning and ending year begin on July 1 and end on June 30. Classes that are noted by an ending year only conclude June 30. An asterisk in front of the name indicates that the new term will be the individual's final term. The BCO requires regional synod and/or racial/ethnic council nomination for various RCA bodies. These nominees are indicated by the regional synod or racial/ethnic council acronym in parentheses followed by a # sign.)

General Synod Council (GSC)
Class of 2020–2024

*Chahine, Michelle
*Cousins, Devonna
*Moses, Sheila (RSNY)#
*Van Es, Kimberly
*Van Oort, Harris (RSH)#
*Varga, Patricia

Class of 2021–2025

*Davis, Susan
*Lohre, Kathryn (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)

- *Meyer-Veen, Rev. Michael
- *Nichols, Rev. Eric (RSMAt)#
- *Roller, Rev. Neale (RSMAM)#
- *Spyksma, Glenn
- *Vande Voort, Lee

Commission on Christian Action (CCA)

Class ending in 2023

Stephenson, Rev. Mark (*interim*, to be replaced by new CRCNA Director of Race Relations and Social Justice when hired without further action by GSC appointment or by General Synod to elect the new person) (Ecumenical observer—Reformed)

Class of 2020–2023

- *Ennis, Rev. Mark
- Prince, Bradley
- *Winchell, Kim (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)

Class of 2021–2024

- Ennis, Rev. Leah
- Smith, Rev. Dianna
- *Van Kooten Laughead, Cameron

Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE)

Class ending in 2022

Balk, Rev. Ellen

Class of 2020–2023

- Koerselman, Rebecca
- *Van Beek, Pamela

Class of 2021–2024

- *Swart, Rev. Mark
- VanderWaal, Rev. Bradley
- White, Jason

Commission on Christian Unity (CCU)

Class ending in 2023

Veldt, Rev. Mark

Class of 2020–2023

- Elenbaas, Anthony (Ecumenical observer—another denomination)
- Jackson, Carol (Kitt)
- Lampen, Rev. Jeffery

Class of 2021–2024

- Buettner, Rev. Dale
- Busker, Rev. Nathan
- *Corro, Rev. Carlos

Commission on Christian Worship (CCW)

Class ending in 2022

- Granlund, Steven
- Grimm, Rev. Cory

Class of 2020–2023

Alvarado, Geimy

*Gieser, Dirk
Class of 2021–2024
*Frens, Rev. Kent
*Van Beek, Rev. Troy

Commission on Church Order (CCO)
Class of 2020–2023
*Scheid, Rev. Joshua
*Van Regenmorter, Jennifer
Class of 2021–2024
Andrew, Brian
Jacobsen, Rev. Christopher

Commission on History (CoH)
Class of 2020–2023
Devos, Rev. Corstian
*Pierce, Rev. Steven
Class of 2021–2024
Meeter, Rev. Daniel
Shepler, Rev. Douglas

Commission on Judicial Business (CJB)
Class of 2020–2023
*Breen, Rev. Stephen (RSH)#
*Van Houten, Rev. Kendra (RSNY)#
Class of 2021–2024
Brooks, Rev. Brion (RSMAM)#
Visser, Carl (RSC)#
Vacancy (RSMAt)#

Commission on Nominations (CoN)
Class of 2020–2023
*Enjady, Rainey
*Mutch, Carol (RSMAt)#
Schramm, Dean (RSMAM)#
Class of 2021–2024
*Byun, Rev. Ock Kee (CPAAM)#
Garreton, Rev. Jose (RSC)#
Sealy, Rev. Patricia (RSNY)#

Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)
Class ending in 2022
James, Earl
Class of 2020–2023
*Denny, June
Na, Rev. Young
Pyle, Rev. Nathan
Class of 2021–2024
Elivo Lopez, Rev. Rolfi (CHM)#

Merino, Janice
*Spooner, Rev. Kelvin (AABC)#

Commission on Theology (CoT)

Class ending in 2022

Church, William Ruggles

Class ending in 2023

*Estes, Rev. Elizabeth

Class of 2020–2023

Baart, Aaron (Ecumenical observer—other Reformed bodies)

Bouma-Prediger, Steven

Lunn, John

*Russell, Rev. William (Ecumenical observer—ELCA)

Class of 2021–2024

McCreary, Rev. Micah (RCA seminary faculty)

Whittington, Robert

Commission for Women (CfW)

Class ending in 2022

Dickie, Jane

Class of 2020–2023

Dekker, Rev. Florence

Morgan, Mary

Class of 2021–2024

*Blankenship, Rev. Melisa

Reid, Claudette

Bakelaar, Rev. Philip

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—New York

Class ending in 2022

Barnes, Lynn

Class of 2020–2023

Cumings, Timothy

*Doorlag, Rev. Jack

*Struyk, Douglas

Class of 2021–2024

*Chapman, Dana

*Condis, Ralph

Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—Michigan

Class ending in 2022

Barnes, Lynn

Laswell, Joseph

Class of 2020–2023

Cumings, Timothy

*Doorlag, Rev. Jack

*Struyk, Douglas

Class of 2021–2024

*Chapman, Dana

*Condis, Ralph

Church Growth Fund (CGF) Board
Class of 2020–2023

Bos, Rev. Michael
*Kouba, Nicole
Schneiderman, George

Class of 2021–2024

Putnam, Anne
Silberstein, Karl

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA)

Class of 2020–2023

*DeVriend, Rev. Dustin
*Nelson, Rev. Frances

Class of 2021–2024

*Christiansen, Rev. Scott
*Lin, San-Yi Shirley

Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB)

Class of 2020–2023

Dunlap, Rev. Gregory (NBTS Theological Agent designee)
Gillett, Rev. Daniel
Pierce, Rev. Chad

Class of 2021–2024

Camacho, Israel
*Johnson, Kristen
*Taitt, Rev. Cora

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) Board of Trustees

Class ending in 2022

McCarty, Therese

Class of 2020–2023

*Choi, David
*Crawford, Brittnee (RSNY)
Cruz, Samuel
Kaltwasser, Cambria
*Kapteyn, Rev. John (RSC)
McGinty, Felicia
*Paarlberg, Russell (RSMAM)
*Slaughter, Ronald
Vis, Rev. Anthony (RSH)
*Zimmerman, Dean

Class of 2021–2024

*Dunlap, Rev. Gregory (RSMAt)
*Kingdom Grier, Rev. Denise (RSGL)
Morris, Michael (RSFW)
Rohrer, Rev. Ming-Chen Grace
Testa, Rev. Elizabeth

Western Theological Seminary (WTS) Board of Trustees

Class ending in 2023

Izenbart, Rev. David (RSMAM)

Snyder, Beth

Class of 2020–2023

Gilbert, Percy

Johnson, Fred

Tiénou, Tite

*Vriesman, Rev. Brian

Wierda, Emilie Prince

Vacancy (RSMAM)

Class of 2021–2024

*Godwin-Stremmler, Rev. Andrea

Haworth, Matthew

Highstreet, Alden (RSFW)

Hillegonds, Timothy

Spoelhof, Steve

*Taitt, Rev. Cora (RSNY)

Vermeer, Evan (RSH)

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To elect the above-named appointees, who were appointed *ad interim* by the General Synod Council, to serve as members of the General Synod commissions, agencies, and boards, and the boards of trustees of RCA-related educational institutions indicated, for the remainder of the terms identified; and further,

To affirm the General Synod Council's June 9, 2020 *ad interim* appointment of Rev. Carl Boersma to serve as moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2020–2021 term; and further,

To elect Carol Mutch, who was appointed by the General Synod Council on June 22, 2021, to serve as *ad interim* moderator of the Commission on Nominations, to continue to serve as moderator for the remainder of the term ending in 2022.

Nominees for College Boards of Trustees

The GSC does not have the authority to appoint members *ad interim* to the Central College, Hope College, or Northwestern College Boards of Trustees. Therefore, the CoN did not include them in its June 2020 or June 2021 annual reports that it asked GSC to approve *ad interim*.

The GSC received a letter dated September 16, 2020, from Hope College, asking that Rev. Mike Pitsenberger, Rev. Eddy Alemán, and Eugene Sutton be affirmed as members of its Board of Trustees at the GSC's October meeting. The GSC, at its October 23–24, 2020, meeting, took action to appoint the trustees *ad interim* and further, to seek ratification of the action at the next regular session of General Synod (GSC 20-38). The GSC will ask General Synod to ratify that action.

The Commission on Nominations recommends to General Synod that it elect the following trustees for the terms identified.

Central College Board of Trustees

Class of 2020–2021

Mathonnet-VanderWell, Rev. Sophie
Sikkink, Steve
Vogel, Judi

Class of 2021–2022

Mathonnet-VanderWell, Rev. Sophie
Sikkink, Steve
Vogel, Judi

Hope College Board of Trustees

Class of 2020–2023

Alemán, Rev. Eddy
Pitsenberger, Rev. Mike
Sutton, Eugene

Class of 2021–2025

*Hart, Rev. Nathan

Northwestern College Board of Trustees

Class ending in 2024

*Brouwer, Rev. Robert
*Henrich, Julie

Class ending in 2025

*Van Heuvelen, Wayne

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To affirm the election of the above-named Central College nominees, to serve as General Synod members of the Central College Board of Trustees, for the terms identified; and further,

To elect the above-named Hope College (a) Class of 2020–2023 nominees who were appointed *ad interim* by the General Synod Council on October 23, 2020, upon the request of Hope College, for the remainder of the term identified, and (b) Class of 2021–2025 nominee, to serve as trustees of the Hope College Board of Trustees; and further,

To approve the election of the above-named Northwestern College nominees, to serve as General Synod trustees of the Northwestern College Board of Trustees, for the terms identified.

Appreciation

The terms of Commission on Nominations members James Steward II and Cary Winn concluded on June 30, 2020, and the terms of members Carl Boersma, Micheal Edwards, and Robert Montgomery concluded on June 30, 2021. The commission wishes to thank these

members for their service. We are grateful for their prayers, insight, and contribution to the commission's ministry.

The Commission on Nominations acknowledges with deep gratitude Laura Tarbous, our former staff support person, whose work concluded on September 30, 2020. Her dedication to the work of the commission was wholehearted, and she provided tireless attention to detail and diligent service in so many ways. We are grateful for her ministry, serving both our commission and the denomination for many years.

We also thank Angela Worthley, current staff support, for her enthusiasm, positive attitude, quick learning curve, and good nature in adding our numerous responsibilities to her workload, and we are pleased to have her on our team.

The commission wishes to express special words of appreciation to Carl Boersma for the seven years he served on the commission, as well as five years as moderator. During that time, he instituted several significant changes to streamline and improve the selection process. He led us with grace, expressing deep appreciation throughout our time together for the work of commission members to a degree none of us had ever experienced before. Collegiality and congeniality were the hallmarks of his leadership. Carl Boersma's character, warmth, and commitment are invaluable gifts to the RCA. We are grateful for the journey we have taken with him.

Respectfully submitted,
Carl Boersma, 2019–2021 moderator
Carol L. Mutch, 2020–2021 vice moderator and 2021–2022 moderator

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ...” (Revelation 7:9).

In 2009, General Synod adopted the statement: **“To declare that racism is a sin because it is an offense to God”** (R-70). This statement is even more important today given the racial reckoning happening in North America. As a people of both word and deed, we seek to align our work as a church with our words. It is in this vein that the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) offers the following report.

Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2019 edition, p. 115):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America's progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Members of CORE are June Denny, Rolfi Elivo Lopez, Stephen Kim (secretary), Young Na, Nathan Pyle (vice moderator), and Kelvin Spooner (moderator). Earl James and Janice Merino became commissioners as of July 1, 2021. Alina Coipel faithfully serves as RCA support staff to the commission.

The commission met via Zoom on June 9, July 14, October 13, and November 10, 2020, and January 7, February 8, April 27, June 8, and July 13, 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 has forced CORE, the racial/ethnic councils, and the RCA to pause from how ministry is usually conducted, and, for CORE, time was spent in reflection, discussing where the denomination is, where the denomination has come from, and where the denomination needs to go in terms of its commitment to strive for a multicultural future freed from racism. Some of the questions and observations brought up were: Is the RCA really committed to being a denomination freed from racism? How can CORE better hold the RCA accountable to its commitment? How might the relationship between CORE and the racial/ethnic councils improve? There is no full-time RCA staff position specifically designed to address and promote racial justice in the RCA. When will that happen? There is a substantial communication gap between CORE and the racial/ethnic councils due, in part, to the RCA organizational structure that has CORE and the councils reporting to different entities in the RCA even though their issues and concerns are similar. These are just some of the questions

and observations raised as CORE reflected on its role in the denomination, and they will be addressed as CORE moves forward.

CORE has met with the general secretary and the Commission on Church Order to discuss the current structure between CORE, the racial/ethnic councils, General Synod, and the General Synod Council (GSC). All agree that the current structure is confusing and inefficient. Considering the possible restructuring of the RCA at the conclusion of Vision 2020, now is an opportune time to explore rectifying this issue. CORE is beginning this work in collaboration with the Commission on Church Order and the racial/ethnic councils. In the meantime, the general secretary, racial/ethnic council coordinators and presidents, and the moderator of CORE meet bi-monthly to increase communication and collaboration.

On August 26, 2021, there will be a joint meeting of the three racial/ethnic councils and Native American and First Nations members. This virtual gathering is open to all constituents, not just council members. They are meeting to worship, pray, and build relationships. The theme of the event is One Voice.

A shepherding team has been formed with Native American Indigenous 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 coordinator of NAIM reports that the shepherding team is moving forward, and they are well into discussions of re-forming the NAIM Council and hope to have it firmly reestablished officially as the fourth racial/ethnic council in the RCA by the end of 2021.

The General Synod Council has approved an ends policy on Multiracial Future, which reads, "The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multicultural and multicultural future freed from racism, engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism." CORE commends this statement but views it as extremely broad. Tangible efforts and measurable outcomes at all levels, but especially at the local and classis level, must be developed and implemented for this policy to be manifested throughout the denomination. CORE is concerned that the resources and time necessary to adequately address this policy are minimal, at best.

The new coordinator of the African American Black Council, Peter Watts, was recently given an additional position of supervisor of Advocacy and Race Relations. The job description reads, "The General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America is committed to living into a multiracial and multicultural future freed from racism. The supervisor will provide visionary, strategic, and innovative leadership to the work of the African American Black Council (AABC) and the race relations and advocacy efforts of the RCA by encouraging and assisting RCA leaders and churches to focus on systemic causes of injustice to dismantle racism." A total of ten hours were added to Watts's schedule for this new assignment. CORE believes that ten hours is not close to the time required to do this important work. CORE will be monitoring the progress of this new position.

During the pandemic, the tragic murder of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement took place, which was a catalyst to peaceful demonstrations in cities across the United States and the globe for racial justice and police reform. In the RCA, led by Liz Testa, coordinator of Women's Transformation and Leadership, a coalition of concerned saints from various local

churches, commissions, offices, and assemblies have come together to hold bi-weekly dismantling racism prayer gatherings. In addition, out of this tragedy, Denise Kingdom Grier has developed the 1 Corinthians 13 Project. The RCA website describes it thus: “At its heart, racism is a discipleship issue. The 1 Corinthians 13 Project is rooted in discipleship. What are the ways that we need to reckon with our own failure to love others? How do we fall short of Christ’s love as a community? Racism is ultimately a failure of love. Founded by RCA minister Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier, this project shows the church a more excellent way that is grounded in Scripture.” There is also a Bible study available attached to this project.

There has been a rise in hate crimes toward people of Asian descent, due, in part, to the United States’ prior presidential administration. The past administration’s divisive language caused some people to be emboldened in their hate and ignorance, and they acted on it. In April of last year, the Commission on Christian Action and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity released a joint statement, “A Call To Stand With Asians and Against Racism,” condemning the micro-aggressions against people of Asian descent. In March of 2021, several Asian women were killed in a mass shooting in Atlanta. This caused an outcry for many in the RCA, and, in May, the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission for Women, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries, and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity released a joint statement, “Commissions Call the Reformed Church in America To Stand With The Asian American and Pacific Islander Community,” in a renewed effort to stop the hate.

If anyone in the RCA carries hate in their heart because of someone’s race, ethnicity, nationality, or for any other reason, CORE encourages you to search your hearts and submit to the words found in 1 John 4:19-21 (NIV): **“We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”**

Conclusion

The Reformed Church in America, with its Dutch roots, has come a long way regarding its attitude and actions toward people of color: African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latin, and First Nations/American Indian. The people whom the Reformed Church in America once viewed as “mission projects” now hold important positions throughout the denomination’s assemblies, commissions, agencies, and educational institutions. Another “glass ceiling” was shattered when Micheal Edwards recently became the first African American in the history of the RCA to hold the position of regional synod executive minister as he serves in the Regional Synod of New York. CORE commends the progress that has been made over years. In its long history of almost 400 years, the RCA has evolved positively.

However, there remains a long way to go. There are many pockets in the RCA where the word “diversity” is foreign in their context. Not all the commissions have representatives of color. Many continue to struggle and wrestle with female leadership. And many are not ready to have honest discussions on race relations in America and in the RCA. CORE believes that until the dominant culture is willing to confront their historical past, then moving forward freed from racism cannot be attained. Nevertheless, CORE is encouraged that many in the denomination are willing to face their past to move forward. CORE will faithfully continue to advise, advocate,

recommend policies, monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA's progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Finally, CORE extends the warmest thank you to Karla Camacho, who served two full terms on this commission: may God continue to guide you in the next chapter of your ministry. Karla often spoke about the difficulties of having safe spaces to share concerns around race. CORE prays it can be, and will be, a safe space for anyone who feels oppressed, discriminated against, wronged, or mistreated by a brother or sister in Christ because of race, ethnicity, or nationality. CORE is open to hear your story and address it accordingly. Please keep CORE and all ministries of the RCA in your prayers.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Kelvin A. Spooner, moderator

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met digitally on October 1, October 6, and October 8, 2020, as well as on January 13 and January 21, 2021.

COT is honored to serve the church through its theological reflection and humbled by such responsibility and trust. The commission seeks to fulfill its tasks with integrity and faithfulness and prays that its work would be fruitful for the church. The commission's primary task this year was assigned by General Synod 2019. The commission also took part in other work related to its charter as a commission.

Referral Regarding Postmodernism and the Church

In response to the Report of the President at General Synod 2019, ONB 19-5 was adopted, instructing the Commission on Theology, "in consultation with the Commission on History and the professorate, to prepare or recommend a study on postmodernism and its history, beliefs, and relationship to Christianity as a resource for churches to understand the world we live in and to help devise ways to reach people for Christ who are living under this prevailing philosophy, for report to General Synod 2021." In October 2019, the Commission on Theology met with members of the Commission on History and the professorate to discuss postmodernism and the church, and it engaged in conversation with past president James Nakahihara to hear more about the proposals in his report. COT is grateful for the contributions and perspectives shared in all of those conversations.

In 2020 and 2021, COT met to discuss the complexities and challenges of postmodernism, its deep effects on our culture and the church, as well as where it should be resisted and where it provides new opportunities for the witness of the church. To this end, the commission has written "Christians in a Culture of Suspicion: Reflections on Living Faithfully in a Postmodern Age" as a resource for the church in navigating the challenging waters of postmodernism. The full text of the paper, a brief bibliography on postmodernism, and the commission's recommendation are included below.

Ongoing Work

The commission received a request from RCA missionary JJ TenClay to participate in her work related to a theology of migration. Individual members of the commission have committed to participate in the project, and the commission is discerning the best ways for engaging with the project.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquires of theological significance from members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and it continues to trust that its work serves the church in its mission and gives glory to its head, Jesus Christ.

Acknowledgments

The commission offers thanks to Ron Citlau, pastor of Calvary Church in Orland Park, Illinois; Elizabeth Estes, pastor of Readington Reformed Church in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey; Kristen Johnson, dean and vice president of academic affairs at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and Lauralyn Vasquez, group life pastor of Rancho Community Church in Temecula, California, for their faithful and fruitful service. Their appointments to the Commission

on Theology are ending, and the commission is sincerely and deeply grateful for their gifts, their good humor, and their generous and significant contributions to life of the church, especially the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Referral from General Synod 2019

ONB 19-5

To instruct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on History and the professorate, to prepare or recommend a study on postmodernism and its history, beliefs, and relationship to Christianity as a resource for churches to understand the world we live in and to help devise ways to reach people for Christ who are living under this prevailing philosophy, for report to General Synod 2021. (Adopted)

Reasons:

1. Given the rise of the “Nones” (the rapid decline of those who report having no particular religious affiliation) and the impact this reality is having on RCA churches, we agree with the president that deeper understanding of this phenomenon and its relationship to the rise of postmodernism could provide much-needed insight into the ways we are engaging the world as a church.
2. While many noteworthy and helpful resources (books, articles, etc.) on postmodernism are available already, having these resources vetted and curated through the lens and expertise of RCA General Synod professors and the Commissions on Theology and History would offer something uniquely suited to our context (*MGS 2019*, p. 130).

CHRISTIANS IN A CULTURE OF SUSPICION: REFLECTIONS ON LIVING FAITHFULLY IN A POSTMODERN AGE

I. Signs of Our Time

“Trust Looms as Casualty of a Truth Twisting Era” shouts a newspaper headline one day prior to the November 3, 2020, United States election.¹ The author, Peter Baker, observes: “The nightmarish scenario of widespread doubt and denial of the legitimacy of the election would cap a period in American history when truth itself has seemed at stake.” Baker continues: “Indeed the very idea of truth is increasingly a fungible commodity in a political environment that seems to reward the loudest voices, not the most honest.” Truth as a fungible commodity. Truth as a wax nose anyone can bend any way they like.

Conservative columnist Bret Stephens argues that in recent years, the main damage has been the corrosion of social trust—“the most important element in any successful society.”² In contrast, Stephens quotes former U. S. Secretary of State George Shultz who argues: “Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room, whatever room that was—the family room, the schoolroom, the locker room, the office room, the government room or the military room—

¹ “Trust Looms as Casualty of a Truth Twisting Era,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 2, 2020), 1.

² “Donald Trump and the Damage Done,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 15, 2020), A26.

good things happened. Everything else is details.”³ Stephens observes that Donald Trump “has detonated a bomb under the epistemological foundations of a civilization that is increasingly unable to distinguish between facts and falsehoods, evidence and fantasy.”⁴ The common mantra now is: “That which you can get away with, is true.” Is it an accident that this is a succinct re-statement of postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty’s summary of postmodern epistemology, namely, that truth is “what our peers, *ceteris paribus* [all other things equal] will let us get away with saying”?⁵

But suspicion of claims to truth is not limited to politics. Two different news outlets give conflicting reports on whether the new coronavirus vaccine is effective and safe. Both cite medical professionals to support their claims. You thought the news was supposed to be fair and reliable, and yet there seems to be much evidence of bias and partiality. Which news sources can we trust to tell us the truth? And what about science? The chief scientist at the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is fired by a political appointee for requiring new employees to sign an integrity statement in which they promise not to alter the results of scientific research for political purposes.⁶ Can we trust scientists to tell us the truth?

Fake news? Alternative facts? Competing truth claims? Who or what can we trust? What is true? Indeed, is anything true?

Such are the tumultuous times in which we live. Suspicion seems to cast a long shadow on everything we claim to know these days. Pilate’s question to Jesus lingers long: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Is that an honest question in a legitimate search for what is really real? Or is it a cynical comment in a sardonic attempt to find a phantom truth that does not really exist?

What does this mean for the church? How do we, followers of Jesus, navigate this world of suspicion and mistrust? How do we properly interpret the Bible, understand with insight our own traditions, evaluate the reliability of our reasoning, or honestly evaluate the veracity of our own experiences?⁷ All of these questions prompt a closer look at what is called postmodernism.

³ Shultz’s claims about the importance of trust are verified by research that shows that in high-trust countries people tend to flourish, while in low-trust countries they do not. For example, research done by the Pew Research Center show a positive correlation between high social trust and low crime and corruption; see www.pewresearch.org/global/2008/04/15/where-trust-is-high-crime-and-corruption-are-low

⁴ “Donald Trump and the Damage Done,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 15, 2020), A26.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176.

⁶ “President’s Bid to Undermine Science Agency,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 28, 2020), 1.

⁷ These four sources of theology—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—constitute what is called the Wesleyan quadrilateral, named after John Wesley. Like most Protestants, we in the Dutch Reformed tradition rely especially on the Bible as a source of knowledge about God and the human condition, e.g., articles 3–7 of the Belgic Confession. But Holy Scripture does not interpret itself; we finite and fallible humans must do the hard work of interpreting Scripture; and, if we are honest, we must admit that tradition, reason, and experience shape our readings.

II. Postmodernism: An Overview

What exactly is postmodernism? Answering this question presumes some understanding of modernism, so first a (very) brief discussion of the era that postmodernism is striving to eclipse.⁸ What constitutes the “modern period in history” is notoriously difficult to pin down,⁹ with various proposed beginning and ending dates, but for our purposes here, it runs roughly from 1492 (Columbus) to 1974 (Watergate)—from foundations laid in the Renaissance and the Reformation to the major construction project of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment to an apogee in twentieth-century global capitalism.¹⁰ The creators of modernism include Francis Bacon, Jeremy Bentham, Rene Descartes, Galileo Galilei, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, John Locke, Isaac Newton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Baruch Spinoza, and Voltaire. Its goals are objective science, universal morality and law, autonomous art, free-market economics, non-autocratic politics, and a secular culture liberated from all religion. Its major theme is human autonomy: that the human would be self (*autos*) legislating (*nomos*) or a law unto himself.¹¹ Never-ending progress is a key mark of modernism.¹²

According to its proponents, the distinguishing traits of modernism include industrialization, urbanization, the growth of capitalism, the rise of the nation state, the expansion of representative democracies, the development of natural science, and the increasing efficacy of technology. According to its opponents, the distinguishing traits are the European colonization of the non-European world, pervasive social injustices such as racism and sexism, massive global inequities, the hegemony of church over state, blind faith in technology, and the increasing ecological degradation of our home planet. The foundational beliefs of modernism include ontological realism, epistemological objectivism, anthropocentric individualism, and unfettered capitalism. In other words, we believe we can know an objectively real world with great certainty via the scientific method so that by using increasingly powerful technology in a world of infinite resources, we can live freely as individuals.

While modernism came to dominate the intellectual, socioeconomic, and political worlds of Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was not without its

⁸ There is an important distinction to be made between postmodernism as an intellectual movement and postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon. Jamie Smith makes this point especially well: “Derrida’s deconstruction and Foucault’s genealogy of power are examples of postmodernism; adolescent absorption in virtual reality and the triumph of the mall as temple are examples of postmodernity. Although there is a trickle-down effect between philosophical currents of postmodernism and cultural phenomena related to postmodernity, much that is associated with cultural postmodernity is, in fact, the fruit of modernity. In other words, cultural phenomena tend to not (yet?) reflect the radical implications of postmodernism.” See James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 20.

⁹ This discussion of the history of modernism focuses on Europe and North America. Other cultures have their own histories, with their own integrity, though they often intersect in various ways with this history.

¹⁰ For more on the history of modernity (and postmodernity), see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) and Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹¹ The “himself” here is intentional, since this history is his-story, the story of a sexist and patriarchal culture usually told from that point of view. For more on this, see, for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹² See, for example, Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

critics—the most famous being Karl Marx, Friederich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. These “masters of suspicion,” as philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously named them,¹³ are the precursors of postmodernism, each in their own way calling into question various assumptions of modernity.

For Karl Marx, societies and their economies are structured to privilege some and oppress others. The wealthy rule by virtue of the power their wealth affords to organize society and form culture to their advantage. Indeed, Marx explains knowledge in terms of socio-economic class. Whoever has money defines what is true. But this results in grave injustices. The upshot is that we should be suspicious of truth claims and how they are used to justify the socio-economic-political status quo, since hidden behind claims to truth are various forms of injustice.

Nietzsche’s fundamental claim is that knowledge can be explained in terms of power. Whoever wields power defines what is true, always to their advantage. Power in its many forms—economic (the market), social (class status), religious (priestly or pastoral authority)—drives every society. And though some people work hard to hide their power plays, not only from others but from themselves, other people unashamedly celebrate their use of power. The upshot is that we should be suspicious of any and all truth claims because they are used to keep us under the control of those in power.

The third member of Ricoeur’s triad of “masters of suspicion,” Sigmund Freud, claims that knowledge can be explained by examining the psychological roots and developmental dynamics of a person’s life. While we think we are rational beings who make decisions based on reason, in reality, we are driven by subterranean forces beyond our ken—desires beneath our conscious awareness that come to the surface only rarely, perhaps with the help of a trained psychotherapist. The upshot is we should be suspicious of truth claims because, while we believe such claims correspond to the world in which we live, they all too often veil hidden wounds and unacknowledged psychological needs.

In sum, these critics call into question some of the assumptions of modernism and lay the groundwork for the postmodern thinkers who follow. The most well-known (famous or infamous, depending on your perspective) of these postmodern voices are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. Their claims will be explored in more detail in the next section, but here, in brief, are their main ideas.

Derrida is the *enfant terrible* among the French philosophers who have attempted to deconstruct the taken-for-granted constructions of modernism. Known as the father of deconstructionism, Derrida’s most famous claim is “There is nothing outside the text.” With this claim—often misunderstood—Derrida means to say that language, and hence the interpretation of language, is an inescapable feature of being human. Smith puts it well: “When Derrida claims that there is nothing outside the text, he means there is no reality that is not always already interpreted through the mediating lens of language. Textuality, for Derrida, is linked to interpretation.”¹⁴ Thus, to say that there is nothing outside the text does not mean “that everything is a book, or that we live within a giant, all-encompassing book, but rather that everything must be interpreted in order to be experienced.”¹⁵ We naively think we simply read a text, when in fact we interpret any and every text, usually without realizing what we are doing and unaware of our assumptions

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

¹⁵ Smith, *Who’s Afraid*, 39.

in reading and interpreting. Indeed, this is true for any experience, not just the reading of texts. Our knowledge of the world is always mediated by our previous experience, so all knowledge involves interpretation.

Foucault's most well-known aphorism, following the lead of Nietzsche, is that "power is knowledge." He does not mean that power and knowledge are identical, but that what counts as knowledge is not, contrary to the claim of modernism, neutrally determined. There is no human knowledge not shaped by power relationships. Smith succinctly states Foucault's main claim: "At the root of our most cherished and central institutions—hospitals, schools, businesses, and, yes, prisons—is a network of power relations. The same is true of our most celebrated ideals; at root, Foucault claims, knowledge and justice reduce to power."¹⁶ Foucault the epistemological genealogist traces the lineage of what we call truth back to its secret prejudices. Or, to use an archeological metaphor, Foucault "digs beneath the surface of what goes around as objective truth to show the machinations of power at work below the surface."¹⁷ Thus, modernism's claims to scientific objectivity are false, our commonly accepted beliefs in moral truth are fabricated, and the Enlightenment belief in perpetual progress is a fiction.

Lyotard is most famous for his statement that postmodernism is "incredulity toward metanarratives."¹⁸ The French term translated "metanarratives" is *gran recites*, or literally "big stories." In other words, postmodernism has to do with suspicion about the overarching narratives we tell about ourselves and the world. So "metanarrative" means "meganarrative"—the stories that make grand claims about the whole world, hence are totalizing in the scope of their claims. However, Lyotard means more than this. The most important identifying trait of metanarratives is that they claim to legitimate themselves by appeal to universal reason. Smith makes this point especially clear:

What is at stake for Lyotard is not the scope of these narratives but the nature of the claims they make. Put another way, the problem isn't the stories they tell but the way they tell them (and to a degree, why they tell them). For Lyotard metanarratives ... are stories that not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this) but also claim to be able to legitimate the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason.¹⁹

In other words, the contrast for Lyotard is not between big stories and little stories, but between stories that appeal to supposedly universal and autonomous reason and stories that do not. His point is that many of the projects of modernism, while claiming to be free of all narrative, themselves rely on narrative to legitimate their claims to truth. Appeal to founding stories is inescapable, so we should be suspicious of any endeavor—science or philosophy, for example—that does not acknowledge its dependence on some particular story.

Rorty is famous for his assertion, mentioned above, that truth is "what our peers, *ceteris paribus*, will let us get away with saying." To support this claim, Rorty levels a critique of the correspondence theory of truth, i.e., the belief that a statement is true if and only if what it claims corresponds to reality. For example, the claim "There is a pine tree in the yard" is true if and only if there is, in fact, a pine tree in the yard. According to Rorty, the mind is a modern

¹⁶ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 85.

¹⁷ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 86.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

¹⁹ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 64-65.

invention of Descartes and Locke and thus human knowledge is not a collection of representations in our mind of the outside world. Knowledge has to do with “the social justification of belief, and thus, we have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”²⁰ We are persons without minds; hence, there is no human mind that functions as the mirror of nature, with truth being the accuracy of such mirroring. Truth is not contact with reality but merely “what it is good for us to believe.”²¹ Truth is redefined as socially warranted assertability. Truth is simply what your friends will let you get away with saying.

In sum, all of these postmodern thinkers criticize the epistemology of modernism. There is no such thing as “objective” truth. All claims to truth are necessarily subjective and from some perspective. Furthermore, truth claims are camouflaged attempts to exert power over others. It is easy to see why postmodernism fosters a culture where people are suspicious of claims to truth, believing they are really desires, ambitions, and projections masquerading as truth, hidden even to those who make such claims.

III. Postmodernism: A Deeper Dive

Note: Portions of sections III and IV are drawn from “Yearning for Home: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in a Postmodern Age,” by Steven Bouma-Prediger, published in Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought, edited by Merold Westphal; they are used with permission from the publisher.

Given this background summary, let’s dive a bit deeper, especially by focusing on ideas about knowledge and truth (epistemology) and views of what it means to be human (anthropology). There are two common elements of postmodernism: epistemological constructivism and psycho-social anomie.

A. Epistemological Constructivism and the Suspicion of Truth

The first common belief is that all truth claims or claims about reality are constructions of the human mind. To use the expression made popular by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, reality is “a social construction.”²² Or, to quote Trudy the Bag Lady in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, reality is “a collective hunch.”²³ All knowledge comes from and is inevitably shaped by the particular perspective(s) of the knowers.²⁴ This perspectivism, in the minds of many, necessarily leads to a strong version of epistemic relativism, illustrated in Rorty’s claim that “truth is what our peers will let us get away with saying.” Since all claims to truth are social constructions, truth is simply an honorific term used

²⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 170.

²¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 176.

²² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966).

²³ Jane Wagner, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 18.

²⁴ This has been a truism for the German hermeneutical tradition for some time. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), § 32, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), second part, § 2. For an insightful discussion of these issues, see Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

to describe our best guess at the way things are, or, in Rorty's more pragmatist reading, simply a term to describe what works.²⁵

Related to this epistemological constructivism is a pervasive suspicion that all claims to truth—indeed all narratives—are nothing more than disguised attempts to control and dominate other people. Perhaps influenced by Marx, Nietzsche, and/or Freud, or, more likely, driven to suspicion by devious advertising, corrupt politics, and scandalous religion, many people today distrust all theories, stories, worldviews—at least insofar as they imply any universal claim to truth—as simply the will to power of a particular, historically situated person, community, or institution.

This hermeneutics of suspicion, as hinted at above, is powerfully presented by Friedrich Nietzsche. For example, in his assertion that “linguistic legislation” properly describes our “enigmatic urge for truth,” Nietzsche claims that truth is merely that which conforms to conventions, and thus to be truthful is simply to use the customary metaphors. Given that language cannot adequately express reality, for Nietzsche, truth is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people.” Hence, “truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are,” so to be truthful necessarily involves “the obligation to lie according to fixed conventions.” Even without explicit agreement with Nietzsche's more famous claims about the human will to power, suspicion of seemingly firm customs is called for.²⁶

This Nietzschean suspicion can be found in the more recent work of Michel Foucault. Labeled a genealogist because he digs to disclose the buried roots in the tree of knowledge, Foucault relentlessly displays “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” in the history of the West, arguing that “humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.”²⁷ Whether in sexual mores, the penal system, or the organization of knowledge, the various social practices of modern Western civilization are nothing more than the will to power. Put in other terms, each society has its “regime of truth” which legitimates certain beliefs and practices, and in so doing inevitably sanctions the domination of those on the margins.²⁸ Hence, for Foucault, “everything is dangerous.”²⁹ Anything can be (mis)used to do violence to the other. And so, to borrow the language of Merold Westphal, to a hermeneutics of finitude must be added a hermeneutics of faultedness, in which sin becomes an epistemological category.³⁰ Our claims to truth are not only shaped by our perspectives but also distorted by our sin. Hence, we have a double rationale for suspicion.

²⁵ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), chap. 9.

²⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie,” in *Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 44-47. For a lucid explanation of the kind of postmodern suspicion informed by Nietzsche's understanding of the will to power, see Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), chaps. 35-36.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 85.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” *Foucault Reader*, 343.

³⁰ Merold Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990); and “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution,” in

The deconstructive scalpel cuts even deeper, however, for it is not just claims to truth that are called into question, but also certain assumptions about meaning, namely, that meaning is (or ever can be) fixed. In other words, there is a kind of semantic homelessness underlying the above-mentioned epistemic homelessness, as Derrida makes clear. For example, in his early essay, "Différance," Derrida argues that because words are "irreducibly polysemic," there is an ineradicable undecidability to meaning.³¹ Over against Descartes, Derrida argues there is no "Eden of originary presence"—no time when meaning was pure and true, absent all human construction. And in contrast to Hegel, Derrida argues there is no "Eschaton of organic totality"—no time when meaning will reach its final completion. Hence, meaning is always on the way and never at home. We are all homeless hermeneuts yearning for a homeland of meaning that never was and never will be.³²

As Middleton and Walsh cogently argue, epistemic and semantic perspectivism wedded to a hermeneutics of suspicion is acidic to any stable sense of truth for two reasons. First, the recognition that one's own meaning-giving worldview is arbitrary can easily produce anomie.

Since it is precisely the function of a social construction of reality to shield us from the abyss of meaninglessness by providing us with a "sacred canopy" of meaning and order, the realization that this canopy is humanly constructed (not an inevitable given) leaves us with a sense of vertigo, unprotected before the abyss.³³

In other words, "becoming aware of our worldview as a *worldview*, of its particularity, subjectivity, and limitations, can have a profoundly anomic effect."³⁴ Claims to truth lose their authority in a world absent any sense of meaningful order.

Second, the acknowledgment that one's sacred canopy is violent elicits a sense of complicity and guilt. As Middleton and Walsh put it: "If reality is socially constructed, then we have to admit that we have participated (whether actively or by acquiescence) in the construction of what is often a nightmare."³⁵ As many African Americans will readily and powerfully attest, the sacred dream of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" has been for them a brutal nightmare.³⁶ As many women will easily and tearfully declare, the dominant androcentric sacred canopy still disempowers and often abuses them.³⁷ And, to take only one more of many possible examples, we members of the so-called "developed nations" are only recently, if at all, waking up to the ecological nightmare no longer merely looming on the horizon but frighteningly real for those with the eyes to see.³⁸ The disorienting deconstructive therapy of postmodernism, if taken seriously, is, as Middleton and Walsh put it, "profoundly painful."³⁹

Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

³¹ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8-9.

³² Derrida, "Différance," 20. As Caputo states: "the hermeneut is an exile longing for the native land" (*Radical Hermeneutics*, 117).

³³ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 36.

³⁴ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

³⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

³⁶ See, for example, Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Random House, 1994).

³⁷ See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

³⁸ See, for example, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

³⁹ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

B. Socio-Psychological Anomie and the Nomadic Self

Mention of pain leads to the second characteristic of postmodernism, namely, the experience of self as nomad. As many perceptive culture watchers have noted, in the absence of traditional means of identity formation and given assumptions about the social construction of reality (including the self), part of the postmodern condition is that people find that they are multiple selves on an endless quest for a stable identity. The rootlessness of the nomadic self produces socio-psychological anomie. For example, Walter Truett Anderson claims that we often feel like refugees because we have been “deeply dispossessed” of “old bases of personal and social identity,” and so he finds extensive evidence of what he calls the three A’s: alienation, anxiety, and anomie.⁴⁰ Albert Borgmann speaks of this phenomenon as “the expatriate quality of public life,” whereby “we live in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action.”⁴¹ And Paul Wachtel perceptively notes that the changing views of Faust (from villain to hero) support the claim that restlessness and rootlessness have become modern virtues. As Wachtel observes:

The rift in community and continuity that so characterizes our lives and the tendency to throw things away—whether possessions, relationships, or ties to a particular place or community—account in substantial measure for why we are so preoccupied with our “identities.” In the modern world we must make an identity for ourselves; we do not inherit one.⁴²

Unlike the heroic self-construction characteristic of modernity, the selves under construction in the postmodern age have an identity crisis. As Anthony Thiselton succinctly puts it, “postmodernism implies a *shattering of innocent confidence in the capacity of the self to control its own destiny*.”⁴³ Given the violence perpetuated on human and non-human alike by the modern culture of heroic individualism, confidence in our ability to control the world is waning.⁴⁴ For example, in our attempts to master ourselves, we find ourselves caught in dilemma after dilemma. In our schemes to manage “human resources,” we dehumanize our sisters and brothers. In our efforts to subdue nature, we degrade a world whose wounds cry out for healing. As Middleton and Walsh assert, the “anthropological self-assuredness” of modernity is “difficult to sustain in a postmodern world.”⁴⁵

In addition, many people today suffer from what could be called “the Zelig syndrome.” Faced with the daunting challenge of creating oneself ever anew—of constructing a self in a world largely devoid of familiar rules or normative guideposts—they stumble to achieve some semblance of a self. Like the main character in Woody Allen’s “Zelig”—who literally changed shape and identity depending on his personal circumstances—postmodern nomads

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Reality*, pp. 36-37. See also Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), chaps. 3, 6.

⁴¹ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

⁴² Wachtel, *Poverty*, 93-94, 99.

⁴³ Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 11.

⁴⁴ Not all agree with this claim. Some champion what could be called cybernetic global optimism. The pillars of this worldview include unquestioned faith in science and technology to deliver us from our current and future dilemmas, supreme belief in human agency not bound by limits either internal or external, and unbounded confidence in a McWorld culture of shopping malls and online markets.

Cybernetic global optimism, in other words, is another (souped up) version of modernism.

⁴⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 49.

metamorphosize, chameleon-like, into a nearly endless string of identities to conform to the latest fashion or to cope with the unceasing flux. The postmodern self, in short, is an “infinitely malleable self” who takes on the constructed identities proffered by the carnival of contemporary culture.⁴⁶

Of contemporary philosophers, Richard Rorty perhaps most clearly champions this postmodern self. For Rorty, “getting the facts right ... is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus of coping with the world.”⁴⁷ This “edifying philosophy,” as Rorty describes it, is characterized by “the poetic activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines.”⁴⁸ The mark of truly good philosophy is that it be interesting; thus, the philosopher should be “the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages” who is “the vanguard of the species.”⁴⁹ Indeed, for Rorty, a kind of postmodern redemption is possible only through the project of self-creation exemplified in the work of the poet and in the creation of a “poeticized culture,” where the goal is “the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.”⁵⁰ This making of a self is an endless process in which we “redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past, in those terms [the terms of past heroes like Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche] and compare the results with alternative redescrptions which use the vocabularies of alternative figures,” thereby hoping “by this continual redescription to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.”⁵¹ Such is the postmodern vision of the human: the plastic self always on the prowl.

But is this vision of human flourishing even possible, and, if possible, is it advisable or exemplary? There are a number of reasons to think not. First, a nomadic self always under construction is not easily able to make commitments or enter into lasting relationships, since such relationships necessarily require some relatively stable self to do the relating.⁵² As Middleton and Walsh perceptively put it in reference to a marriage ceremony: “Who would the *I* be in the *I do*?”⁵³ The postmodern view of the human person as a series of multiple selves offers precious few psychological resources for making and keeping authentic and satisfying commitments. Because we are a plethora of selves, we do not know who we are; and because we do not know who we are, we are unable to decide what to do. How can we ever be a coherent moral agent if our “selves” are constantly in flux? A reading of the world as the endless play of domination combined with this view of the self as nomad makes it easy to understand why some people insist that the most prudent course of action to take in making one’s way in the world (to use an image from a student) is to be an M-1 tank: become impervious to all attempts by others to befriend you and steamroll over anyone who dares to stand in your way. The pain and isolation in such a self-image are painfully clear.

Second, the sense of anomie is not only internal but external. The undecidability characteristic of the nomadic self is also seen as an inextricable feature of the socially constructed world. So,

⁴⁶ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 52.

⁴⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 359.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360; cf. 364-65, 370, 389.

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9, 20.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, 53-54.

⁵¹ Rorty, *Contingency*, 80.

⁵² See, for example, Lewis Smedes, *Caring and Commitment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), chap. 5, and Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), chap. 2.

⁵³ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 57.

for example, in the face of moral undecidability and the perceived absence of any moral standards which exist independently of the (all too human) will to power, there appear to be no norms for action. Hence, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued persuasively, morality is seen merely as an expression of individual preferences.⁵⁴ How often have you heard some version of this: "Doing [fill in the blank] may be wrong for you, but that doesn't make it wrong for me"? In sum, as Middleton and Walsh conclude: "deconstructive patterns of thinking may have therapeutically served us well by uncovering our biases, interests, assumptions and reifications, but they leave us in a normless universe."⁵⁵ In yet other words, in a culture where "neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain," and identities "are constantly subject to mutation," there is little or no sense of order to be found.⁵⁶

This sense of anomie is both caused by and contributes to our deafness to the groaning earth. Our home planet is being rendered inhospitable, and we its inhabitants made to feel not at home on the only home planet available to us. Global warming, holes in the ozone layer, toxic wastes, oil spills, acid rain, drinking water contamination, overflowing landfills, topsoil erosion, species extinction, destruction of the rain forests, leakage of nuclear waste, lead poisoning, desertification, smog. Such is merely a partial litany of the despoliation of our earthly home.⁵⁷

Of the cast of postmodern thinkers, Martin Heidegger is most helpful in shedding light on this issue.⁵⁸ For example, in his discussion of modernity as an expression of the unconditional will to power, Heidegger explains how our objectification of the earth is, in fact, an assault on the earth: "The earth can show itself only as the object of assault, an assault that, in human willing, establishes itself as unconditional objectification. Nature appears everywhere ... as the object of technology."⁵⁹ In other words, modern Western culture is so suffused with a technological habit-of-being that everything is seen as an object to be used in the service of our own individual or collective human will. All things are viewed as valuable only as a means to our human ends. But, avers Heidegger, "what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object."⁶⁰ There is so much more to reality than our objectifying attitude can ever know. As Hamlet insists to Horatio: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Elsewhere, Heidegger points to this enthrallment of technique when he decries the "circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption" which so characterizes our technologized culture. Unlike the birch tree or the honey bee, which never overstep their possibilities, our way of living includes a "technology that devours the earth" in "exhaustion and consumption" and thus

⁵⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 60.

⁵⁶ Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

⁵⁷ If our own non-scientific observations need any confirmation, there are plenty of highly trained earth watchers speaking out about the current state of the planet. For example, see any recent *State of the World*, published by the Worldwatch Institute.

⁵⁸ Most of the other postmodern thinkers implicitly, if not explicitly, endorse the dominant anthropocentrism and utilitarianism that underwrites the ecologically destructive modern Western worldview. As Borgmann accurately observes: "The postmodern theorists ... have failed to see their own anthropocentrism" (*Crossing*, 117).

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 100.

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977), 228.

transgresses the proper limits of the earth.⁶¹ In other words, we postmodern nomads are all too often deaf to the groanings of the earth and its creatures—a deafness rendering our earthly home increasingly uninhabitable. These insights emphasize the need to learn how the world works and, in so doing, develop the requisite skills and virtues to fulfill our calling to be earthkeepers.⁶²

In summary, at the heart of postmodernism is suspicion of all stories, generated by various forms of epistemic constructivism, and a nomadic sense of the self, fostered by a kind of socio-psychological anomie. Both contribute to our deafness to our non-human neighbors, which has in large measure produced the growing ecological crisis.

IV. Postmodernism: Critique and Response

Let's take stock. If in modernism, metanarratives are taken as true and benign, in postmodernism, metanarratives are seen as socially constructed and inherently violent. Is it possible to acknowledge the dangers of metanarratives and yet affirm a non-violent story of God's love affair with the cosmos?⁶³ If in modernism there is complacency and naiveté, in postmodernism there is cynicism and suspicion. Is it possible to move beyond both complacency and cynicism to a second naiveté of humble yet robust faith refined by honest questioning?⁶⁴

If in modernism, human finitude is falsely believed to be overcome and we humans declared de facto divine, in postmodernism, human finitude is rightly seen to be ineradicable, but the judgment wrongly rendered is that there is no God. Is it possible to acknowledge our inescapable finitude as humans, but in so doing to rejoice that though we are not divine, God is?⁶⁵ If in modernism, we have the rationally superior individual self, in postmodernism, we have the socially constructed, historically conditioned self. Is it possible to speak cogently of the person-in-relation, gifted and called by God, neither the measure of all things nor the prisoner of all things?⁶⁶

If in modernism, God is either a projection or perhaps real but on holiday, in postmodernism God is either dead or real but unknowable. Is it possible to affirm a trinitarian God who is a source of overflowing love, known preeminently in the humble carpenter from Nazareth whose *raison d'être* was to suffer with?⁶⁷ If in modernism, we believe utopia is just around the corner and coming our way fast, in postmodernism, we know that utopia is literally "no place," and thus have doubts about any good future. Is it possible to speak coherently of and bear witness to

⁶¹ Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics," *The End of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 107, 109.

⁶² For an explication of ecological virtues, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

⁶³ To learn more about this, see Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, chap. 5.

⁶⁴ For more on a second naiveté, see Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 349, 351.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see Merold Westphal, "Postmodernism and Religious Reflection," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 38, no. 3 (December 1995): 135.

⁶⁶ To explore this approach, see James Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

⁶⁷ For one powerful articulation of this way of doing theology, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), chaps. 2, 5.

God's good future of shalom, with the clear-eyed recognition that this future—God's will done on earth as it is in heaven—is both present and yet not fully realized?⁶⁸

In short, in a culture of incredulity toward metanarratives, of rootlessness and isolation, of deafness to the groaning of creation, is it possible that the Christian gospel could speak words of healing and shalom? And most importantly, can the Christian community—the church—redemptively address the hopes and fears of suspicious postmodern nomads living on an increasingly inhospitable earth?

These questions contextualize the challenge of both criticizing and learning from postmodernism. They also point to various fruitful ways of articulating an authentic version of Christian faith that addresses the legitimate concerns of postmodernism. At the heart of the gospel is the message that we humans are home-seeking pilgrims who will by God's grace find a home where our yearning hearts find rest.⁶⁹ In this narrative, creation is a place of grace, as surely as our Creator and Redeemer is a God of unfathomable love. The Christian story, in other words, is a grand story of redemptive homecoming that is at the same time a call to grateful homemaking. What follows are some key theological affirmations in light of the challenges posed by postmodernism.

A. *Stories of Suffering and Texts of Trust*

There are a number of ways to address the deeply held suspicion of stories and texts at the heart of postmodernism. One way is to honestly acknowledge how stories often perpetuate systems of injustice and violence. Another is to call attention to stories new and old that narrate a world of justice and love. In either case, a perceptive analysis of culturally founding stories builds trust—that most needed coin of the realm.

For example, Middleton and Walsh point out two features of the biblical metanarrative that “incline the Christian story toward delegitimizing and subverting violent, totalizing uses of the story by those who claim to live it out.” First, there is “a radical sensitivity to suffering that pervades the biblical narrative from the exodus to the cross.” Indeed, sensitivity to suffering is a major theme throughout the entire biblical story. The God of the Bible hears the cries of those who suffer and responds with acts of care. The second feature “consists in the rooting of the story in God's overarching creational intent that delegitimizes any narrow, partisan use of the story.”⁷⁰ Through the election of the Jews as a particular people, God intends that all people would be blessed, thus subverting any nationalistic or ethnocentric reading of that story. Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God includes Gentiles and prostitutes and tax collectors, thus ruling out the exclusion of those seen to be unclean or unworthy. The God of the Bible is a God of justice and love for all. Indeed, as Romans 8 reminds us, the biblical story is about the redemption of all creation. In other words, each of these characteristics of the biblical metanarrative offer an internal critique of any readings of the Bible that attempt to justify injustice or narrow the inclusive reach of redemptive love. As Middleton and Walsh put it: “Far from promoting violence, the story the Scriptures tell contains the resources to shatter totalizing readings, to convert the

⁶⁸ For more on this, see Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, chaps. 8, 9.

⁶⁹ The classic reference here is Augustine, *Confessions*, book I, where Augustine confesses that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.

⁷⁰ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 87.

reader, to align us with God's purposes of shalom, compassion, and justice."⁷¹ In short, properly understood, the Bible does not legitimate oppression or sanction injustice.

In similar fashion, Jamie Smith shows how the French postmodern philosophers can actually help the church be more honest, more self-aware, more passionate about justice, and more caring to those in need. For example, taking Derrida seriously would force us to acknowledge that all readings are interpretations and thus encourage us to be humble about our claims to have our readings right. No more asserting, "You interpret, while I merely read" when arguing over different understandings of Genesis 2 or Ephesians 5. Furthermore, taking an interest in marginalized voices would cultivate "a concern for justice by being concerned about the dominant, status quo interpretations that silence those who see differently."⁷² Taking Lyotard seriously would force us to admit that autonomous reason is a myth and thus all knowledge is implicitly if not explicitly rooted in a faith commitment of some kind. Hence, all academic disciplines (philosophy, sociology, biology, etc.) are on a level playing field, none disqualified because of "religious bias." If there is no such thing as a neutral secular public square, then "postmodernity should signal new openings and opportunities for Christian witness in the broad marketplace of ideas."⁷³ Taking Foucault seriously would force us to become more aware of how we are formed by the worldviews of our culture, e.g., how materialism forms us into consumers par excellence. Such newfound awareness should encourage us to engage in "counterformation" by the use of "counterdisciplines that form us into the kind of people God calls us to be."⁷⁴

In an age of cynicism and suspicion—when all is seen as a covert bid for power by competing self-interests—the only truly credible witness will be flesh-and-blood non-manipulative regard for the other. So, in response to the postmodern presumption that all Christian claims to truth (indeed, all actions by Christians) are but disguised attempts to control and dominate, Anthony Thiselton insightfully points to twentieth-century German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, since it was Bonhoeffer who, by example as well as by word, powerfully railed against cheap grace and testified to the way of the cross. As Thiselton puts it, "It is as if Bonhoeffer said to Nietzsche from his Nazi prison: 'But not all Christians are as you suggest.'"⁷⁵ So, Thiselton concludes, "A love in which a self genuinely *gives* itself to the Other *in the interests of the Other* dissolves the acids of suspicion and deception."⁷⁶ Other exemplars come to mind, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Martin Luther King Jr., but for the church to dissolve the acids of suspicion and exhibit the kind of integrity that builds trust, it will take more than a few famous people to walk the way of the cross.

The Christian message of reconciliation (with God, with others, with ourselves, with our non-human neighbors) rides on the shoulders of those of us who, like Bonhoeffer, resist the temptation to use God and others for our own advancement. In other words, the claim that all metanarratives are violent will be shown to be false only if and when we Christians embody the non-violent metanarrative of the cruciform Christ. Perhaps we ought to take more seriously a bit of advice attributed to the Franciscans: "Preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words."

⁷¹ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 107.

⁷² Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 56.

⁷³ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 73.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 106.

⁷⁵ Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 23. The locus classicus for Bonhoeffer's treatment of "cheap grace" is *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), chap. 1.

⁷⁶ Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 160.

Talk is cheap. Actions are what matter. Suspicion can be overcome only by trust built over time. Only if we followers of Jesus walk our talk about loving God and serving our neighbors will the creeds we profess, the sermons we preach, the Bible verses we recite and the words we say be taken seriously by those around us.

B. Gracious Creator and Creation as Gift

Central to the Christian faith is the claim that creation is the sheer gift of a gracious creator. God did not have to create any world at all, and God was not obligated or forced to create this particular world. Creation need not be. It is, rather, a gracious act of a loving God. For example, neither a Platonic cosmogony, in which the creator is externally limited by recalcitrant matter, nor a neo-Platonic cosmogony, in which a principle of plenitude necessitates that God create, adequately describes the nature of creation or creator. Creation exists only because of God's gracious decision.⁷⁷

God is not only an agent able to freely intend and effect action—unconstrained by anything except the divine nature itself—but, more importantly, God is the epitome of self-giving love. As Middleton and Walsh assert:

God's love is not only at the root of the divine decision to create the world (answering the question *why* God created) but also describes the most fundamental character of reality (*what* God created). Creation is wrought by the extravagant generosity of God's love.⁷⁸

Indeed, the Christian confession of God as triune affirms that God is a perichoretic family of love—a community of mutually indwelling love characterized by overflowing generosity.⁷⁹ This strikingly unusual understanding of God—of both divine power and divine love—is well stated by Langdon Gilkey:

To the amazement of all, the disciples and enemies of Christ alike, the divine power reveals itself in precisely that which is most vulnerable and powerless: self-giving love. Truly here was one of the most radical transformations of values in all historical experience: not the avoidance of suffering, but its willing acceptance in love, became the deepest clue to divinity.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ For more on this idea of decision, as one of “The Seven D’s of Creation,” see Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Creation as the Home of God: The Doctrine of Creation in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 1 (April 1997).

⁷⁸ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, 49.

⁷⁹ For more on a social or interpersonal theory of the Trinity, see Cornelius Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, eds. Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

⁸⁰ Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 217. See also “Creation, Being, and Non-Being,” in *God and Creation*, eds. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 233, where Gilkey states that it is no surprise that most theologians in the twentieth century have questioned the priority of the definition of God as Absolute Being and have, rather, “empathized with Moltmann’s effort to understand the divine nature also in terms of the divine suffering present in and revealed through the crucifixion.” For an eloquent expression of the truth that suffering love is the deepest clue to divinity, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

Or as Jean-Luc Marion affirms, “a properly Christian name of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ ... is agape.” Given this name, predication “must yield to praise,” for, as Marion reminds us, “Love is not spoken, in the end it is made.”⁸¹

These theological affirmations, as Gilkey and Marion note, find their source in the Bible—in stories about Jesus (Matthew 5-7, Mark 10, Luke 10, John 10-11); in summaries of Jesus’s teaching in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28) and the New Commandment (John 13:34-35); and in any number of Paul’s commentaries on the words and deeds of Jesus (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Galatians 5, Ephesians 2-4, Philippians 2-4, Colossians 3). Perhaps 1 John 4:21 captures the central behavioral implication most clearly: “The commandment we have from him [Jesus] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” These biblical texts that we know intellectually call out to be lived in our everyday lives. Only the living, breathing, incarnated embodiment of this vision of love for all, rooted in God’s love for us, will soften and dismantle postmodern suspicion.

By affirming that creation is crafted and redeemed by a trustworthy God of extravagant grace, the confession of creation as gift both bursts the bubble of modernism, which rests comfortably in the supposed security of its violence-producing stories and also casts the light of suspicion onto postmodern suspicion itself. If in modernism, there is overweening presumptuousness regarding claims to truth and in postmodernism, there is unremitting suspicion of all claims to truth, an affirmation of creation as the gift of that love that fires the sun (Genesis 1) and freely tented among us (John 1) renders it possible to wed trust and suspicion and forge a way of knowing that looks the sharp and bent edges of reality full in the face but nevertheless recognizes the world as real and understands that we can truly know it, if only in parts.⁸²

The theme of creation as gift also addresses the postmodern view of the self as malleable and homeless nomad for two reasons. First, the phenomenology of gift and giftedness suggests that when given a gift, the appropriate response is gratitude to the giver and care for the gift. In other words, the experience of gracious provision readily and rightly evokes a response of gratitude and care. Christians from the Reformed tradition ought to find this analysis familiar, since gratitude is one of the theological themes emphasized within that tradition. For example, commenting on the most loved of the Reformed confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, with its triadic structure of guilt/grace/gratitude, Henry Stob affirms: “What drives the Christian to love and obedience is thankfulness. This gives to the moral life a characteristic note of joy. Appreciative of God’s mercy, thankful for his unspeakable gift, happy in his gracious conferments, the Christian seeks with might and main to show forth his praises and to do his will.”⁸³ Creation as gift thus implies an identity: we humans are *homo gratus*. More exactly, we are grateful caretakers of God’s gift of creation. We find our identity not in endless Zelig-like permutations but in responding to God’s bountiful and gracious provisions with humble gratitude and joyful care. We care for God’s creatures because it is a fitting response to God’s providential care for us. We are grateful because God is gracious. Grace begets gratitude, and gratitude begets care.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82.

⁸² For more details, see the books by Middleton and Walsh, Smith, and Westphal in the bibliography.

⁸³ Henry Stob, *Ethical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 78; see also Allen Verhey, *Living the Heidelberg* (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1986), chaps. 8-9.

⁸⁴ For more on this, see Steve Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), chap. 7.

Second, we express that gratitude and exercise that care on this blue-green earth. We are not rootless and homeless, for this is our home. As the Genesis creation narrative states, we are earth creatures ('*adâm*') made from the earth ('*adâmâh*'). We are humans from the humus and thus kin with all other creatures. We are not independent, isolated, autonomous selves, but rather persons-in-community, including our biotic community. We know who we are not only because we know where we are but also because we know with whom we are. As Joseph Sittler clearly states: "I am constituted by my relationships [within the human world] ... But I am also constituted by my encounters with the nonhuman world."⁸⁵ And so, declares Sittler, "I am stuck with God, stuck with my neighbor, and stuck with nature (the 'garden'), within which and out of the stuff of which I am made."⁸⁶ We humans are thoroughly relational, bound up not only with God and not only with other humans but also with the plants, animals, oceans, and mountains of this exquisitely complex and beautiful planet.

In short, we are persons-in-relation at home on planet earth, called to respond to God's provisioning grace with gratitude and care. This confession of creation as gift and of humans as embedded caretakers challenges the modern self-image of the human as autonomous, rational individual and also calls into question the postmodern image of humanity as hopelessly isolated and unstable. If in modernism, we have the heroic self and in postmodernism, we find the resigned self, this acknowledgment of creation as gift makes it possible to see each of us humans as responsive and responsible creatures gratefully loving God and faithfully serving our neighbors in need.

This affirmation of creation as gift also speaks to our deafness regarding the earth's creatures and our despoliation of creation. For the giftedness of creation, as the Bible reminds us, includes the conviction that all creatures exist to praise God. For example, Psalm 148 calls upon all created things to praise God: angels and the hosts of heaven, sun and moon, fire and hail, snow and frost, hills and mountains, fruit trees and wild animals, women and men. All creatures are invited to sing a symphony of praise to the God of unsurpassing glory.⁸⁷ Albert Borgmann refers to this speaking non-human other as "eloquent reality."⁸⁸ Creation is eloquent, if only we have the ears to hear. In affirming creation as gift, we are called to confess the ways we have muffled the voices of our non-human neighbors, and we are challenged to listen for the groaning of creation so that we might work for its redemptive flourishing.

Creation as gift implies not only that creation is eloquent, but also that non-human creatures are valuable regardless of their usefulness to us. God has created and continues to create and sustain beings whose value extends beyond human utility. Psalm 104, for example, speaks of a world in which all creatures (wild asses, cedars of Lebanon, storks, marmots, young lions) are valuable not only because of their usefulness to humans—some are useful, indeed essential, to us—but because they are valuable to each other. The cedars are valuable as habitats for birds to nest, and the mountains are valuable as places of refuge for the wild goats. Most importantly, they are valuable simply because God made them.⁸⁹ Christian theology has no room for

⁸⁵ Joseph Sittler, "The Sittler Speeches," in *The Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook 1977-78*, ed. Phil Schroeder (Valparaiso: Valparaiso University Press, 1978), 45.

⁸⁶ Joseph Sittler, "Evangelism and the Care of the Earth" in *Preaching in the Witnessing Community*, ed. Herman Stuempfle (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 102.

⁸⁷ See also Isaiah chaps. 42-44, 55 and Psalms 96 and 98.

⁸⁸ Borgmann, *Crossing*, 117-119.

⁸⁹ Reformed folk have good reason to feel at home with this affirmation since John Calvin speaks of creation as "this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles"—

anthropocentric utilitarianism that finds non-human creation valuable only insofar as it serves human needs.

In sum, the affirmation that creation is eloquent and valuable above and beyond human usefulness repudiates both the modern view of “nature” as a mere resource to be pillaged and the postmodern view of “Nature” as quasi-divine. If modernism advocates an unbridled anthropocentrism, and postmodernism posits an unfeasible biocentrism, then confession of a gracious God and creation as gift invites us to embrace a theocentric worldview that espouses both the eloquence and value of creation and the goodness and grace of its creator.

C. Good and Evil

One of the distinguishing features of Christian theology is the belief that creation is essentially good. The fall is contingent, not necessary. Evil is a perversion of God’s intentions for creation—an adventitious quality rather than an essential property. Evil is all too real, but it is an alien intruder that has no legitimate place in God’s good creation. Evil is not intrinsic to creation; it is, rather, a defect. Neither a Manichean cosmology, in which evil is seen as a cosmic principle or power equal to good, nor a Babylonian cosmogony, in which creation is the product of a violent battle, accurately conveys the way things are. In the biblical view, God wages no war in creating, but rather peacefully speaks creation into existence. As Middleton and Walsh perceptively note:

Rather than beginning with a conflict amongst the gods, the Scriptures begin with the effortless, joyous calling forth of creation by a sovereign Creator who enters into a relationship of intimacy with his creatures. Therefore, creatureliness qua creatureliness is good.... This means that a biblical worldview will grant no ontological standing or priority to evil or violence. Indeed, violence is seen, in this worldview, as an illegitimate alien intruder into God’s good creation. In contrast to an ontology of violence, then, the Scriptures begin with of an ontology of peace.⁹⁰

God is overflowing goodness. Creation is very good. Evil is not part of the plan. Peace (shalom) is primordial.

These claims are extremely significant given the postmodern suspicion of all stories as necessarily violent and manipulative. Over against the postmodern belief that violence is primordial and hence ineradicable, the claim that there is a good God who sustains a broken but fundamentally good creation is good news indeed. That evil is not woven into the warp and woof of reality—that evil is real but not ontologically necessary—is gospel. As Pedro Trigo puts it: “God creates out of free will, out of love. God creates out of the divine word of benediction. What exists, then, is blessed, good, primordially good, only good, transcendently good: not only good in principle, for the creative word of blessing resounds everlastingly.”⁹¹ Because this is so, we can move “from ambivalent experience to faith in goodness.”⁹² Primordial goodness implies a God of grace. But what exactly is grace? Lewis Smedes’s description is unparalleled:

valuable for its own sake as well as for its provisions to humans. See *Institutes*, 2.6.1, and 3.10.2; cf. 1.6.2, and 1.14.20. For an excellent exposition of Calvin’s view of nature, see Susan Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

⁹⁰ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 153.

⁹¹ Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 87.

⁹² Trigo, *Creation and History*. This quotation is the title of chapter 3.

Grace does not make everything right. Grace's trick is to show us that it is right for us to live; that it is truly good, wonderful even, for us to be breathing and feeling at the same time that everything clustering around us is wholly wretched. ... Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts, join in the primeval chorus against its outrageous unfairness, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God's good earth.⁹³

Suspicion is often necessary, but it need not be the only posture. Grace allows us to believe, even in the midst of tragedy, that it is good to be alive on God's good earth.

In sum, evil is all too real but is a surd that has a beginning but no origin in God's good world. Hence, we reject as naive any modern notion of human perfectibility while also refusing to accept the postmodern presumption that violence will always have the last word. If in modernism, there is creation without the fall (and thus little need for redemption) and in postmodernism, there is the fall without creation (and hence little hope of redemption), believing that creation is the good gift of a gracious God makes it possible to hold creation and fall together (with redemption) in a grand story that tells how the Maker of heaven and earth willingly absorbs evil in order to bend a warped world back to its intended harmony while prodding it forward to its ultimate destiny.

This motif of creation as good also speaks to postmodern self-understanding. An implication of the goodness of creation is that finitude is good. In particular, human finitude is good, not something from which we must escape. We have, however, a deep desire to avoid looking our finitude, especially our mortality, straight in the face, for to acknowledge the temporally limited nature of our existence raises the question of whether death is the end of life or whether there is Someone who is sufficiently able and willing to preserve our life beyond biological death and in whom we can rest despite our fear and anxiety.⁹⁴ Not surprisingly, the Bible speaks often of human finitude. For example, Psalm 8 refers to humans as having been created a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor, but also reminds us that we humans are mortal and hence finite.⁹⁵

But we are not just finite; we are faulted. Though often confused, the two are not the same. Finitude is a good feature of human existence. It is simply how God made us—a feature of our humanity to joyfully accept. Faultedness, however, is not God's intention. The brokenness we know in ourselves and see around us is something we acknowledge with regret and seek, with God's grace, to overcome. This feature of human existence is also powerfully depicted in the Bible. For example, in Genesis 3, we learn that Adam and Eve desired to transcend their creaturely finitude and become like God in knowing good and evil. They fail to trust in God and thus experience alienation. Their relationship with God is broken, they become estranged from

⁹³ Lewis Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 3.

⁹⁴ For a powerful analysis of the human tendency to deny mortality and in so doing create and perpetuate evil, see Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) and *Escape from Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

⁹⁵ The finitude of humanity is also powerfully portrayed in the book of Job. In the deluge of questions put by God from the whirlwind (Job 38-41), Job is forcibly reminded of his finitude. Job has not commanded the morning or entered the storehouses of the snow or provided prey for the ravens. He does not know when the mountain goats give birth or who let the wild asses go free. That the hawk soars and the eagle mounts up is not Job's doing. Job's power and knowledge are finite. He is a creature, not Creator.

each other, they lose touch with their own true self, and they are out of joint with the earth. In all these ways they, and we, are alienated. Our lives are tainted with a contagion called sin. The Bible confirms what we know in our hearts: the world is not the way it is supposed to be.⁹⁶

In sum, the Christian understanding of good and evil unmasks the pretensions of modernity, which would like us to believe in the godlike capabilities of human power (technology) and ingenuity (creativity), and also makes us aware of our need for *nomos* when facing the abyss of postmodern anomie. Because we acknowledge that we are finite and faulted creatures, we ought to put our claims to truth forward with genuine modesty and self-critical honesty, knowing that we can trust in the God whose grace hounds our guilt and whose love embraces us when facing our own mortality.

Finally, belief that creation is good means not only that goodness is more primordial than evil and that finitude is good, but also that difference is built into creation itself and harmony need not be purchased at the price of dominating the other. For example, the Genesis 1 creation story speaks of a great diversity of creatures. Through God's "let there be," the earth brings forth living creatures of every kind: birds, fish, animals both domestic and wild, flying and creeping things, even sea monsters. God sees this plethora of creatures and declares it to be good. Indeed, God sees everything created (not just humans) and declares that it is very good. Creation is a diverse place of beauty and blessing and delight. Because of God's wise creative work, the different kinds of creatures fit together into a harmonious whole. But Middleton and Walsh remind us: "This [ontology of peace] is not, however, the peace of an imposed homogeneity. That would be violence all over again. Rather, the biblical worldview perceives in the world a wonderful variety of different *kinds* of creatures living together in fundamental harmony."⁹⁷ As any biology course will confirm, the world contains what sometimes is taken to be evidence of violence: predation, parasites, and pathogens. But notwithstanding nature red in tooth and claw, biology and theology concur in affirming that creation is a place where diversity is a fundamental feature of health.

Furthermore, God calls us to serve and protect the garden which is the earth (Genesis 2:15). We are to offer hospitality to the other—including the non-human other—in a way that gives evidence of genuine openness, receptivity, and attentiveness.⁹⁸ Rather than seeking to dominate, we are to exercise the kind of loving care that befits us as God's image-bearing representatives.⁹⁹ Care, not wanton disregard or ignorant misuse, should characterize our way of life.¹⁰⁰ And, as many attest, we need the wild otherness of the natural world to foster our own

⁹⁶ Two books that illuminate the phenomenon of sin with great insight are Ted Peters, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) and Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁹⁷ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 154.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁹⁹ See, for example, Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). See also *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care*, eds. David Warners and Matthew Heun (Grand Rapids: Calvin Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ For example, in *Caring for Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) Max Oelschlaeger argues that care should be the centerpiece of an "ecumenical approach to the environmental crisis."

sense of humility and joy.¹⁰¹ In other words, our serving and protecting the earth and its creatures is fostered by spending time in places where our own need for control is diminished and our sense of dependence is magnified.

In summary, the basic Christian beliefs about good and evil affirm that while evil is very real, in the end, love wins. These basic beliefs also affirm that difference is good so harmony need not be attained by jailing those people who don't conform or banishing those ideas that are different. These fundamental Christian affirmations offer a critique of both the hubris of the modern project of technological control and the hopelessness of the postmodern belief that finds difference inimical to any form of authentic community. Believing that creation is good prompts not despair but the kind of joyful keeping of creation that is fitting of creatures grateful for God's gracious provisions.

V. Faithful Witnesses in a Tumultuous Time

Flux, rootlessness, and suspicion permeate our lives. Who can be trusted? What is trustworthy? Is anything true? Is truth a casualty of our contemporary culture? Does anyone feel at home? Does a profound homelessness pervade Western modern/postmodern culture?

We are all of us pilgrims and wayfarers. But the stories we tell of our earthly pilgrimages are not all the same. Many today describe their sojourn as one of perpetual homelessness. Suspicious of all claims to truth, restless and anxious about the future, fearfully aware that we are despoiling our earthly home, many people feel awirl in the postmodern world. The home they knew is at best a happy memory, and the home they dream is a chimera. These postmodern nomads find themselves longing for some place to rest. They long for a dwelling place where they belong, where they are loved, where they are safe, sound, and secure.

We Christians, too, yearn for home. We, too, are pilgrims. But our tale of home seeking is a story about a sojourning people at home in creation because of a good God who gifts us for the journey and who comes in person to comfort us. We, like our forebearers, walk by faith and not by sight. But the day is coming when God's glory will fill heaven and earth, all tears save those of joy will disappear, and our mourning will turn to dancing. We will experience a heaven-on-earth homecoming of comfort and belonging and delight. Shalom will prevail and our yearning hearts will find their home in the heart of God—a God who makes a home among mortals. Such a story is truly good news in these troubling times.

But this good news of healing and wholeness will be believed and adopted by people anxiously adrift in the flux, degradation, and suspicion of the postmodern world only if we the church bear witness to this gospel in our everyday lives. Our faith tradition has what is needed to redemptively address the hopes and fears of our postmodern age, but our beliefs about guilt, grace, and gratitude will be embraced by others only if we the church put these beliefs into practice.

May the God who made us and redeems us also empower us to embody this good news in all we do. To God be the glory. Amen.

¹⁰¹ Many classic wilderness writers make this claim, e.g., Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. For a more recent defense, see Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 4.

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To commend “Christians in a Culture of Suspicion: Reflections on Living Faithfully in a Postmodern Age” as a resource for congregations in engaging and responding to postmodernism; and further,

to instruct the general secretary to distribute and make available “Christians in a Culture of Suspicion: Reflections on Living Faithfully in a Postmodern Age” as a resource for congregations in engaging and responding to postmodernism.

Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women is committed to the work of advocacy for all women in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Honoring the gifts of women strengthens the church and invites the full participation of all of God's people in ministry. The Commission for Women seeks to raise awareness, to provide opportunities for women in the church, to provide information so that women can participate in the leadership and life of the church, to work toward systemic changes in the church for the full inclusion of women, and to collaborate and celebrate with other RCA bodies on issues concerning women.

The Commission for Women discussed several topics at its meetings this year. We discussed the specific issues women deal with when they're experiencing domestic violence. We talked about resources for women and the churches that are supporting them, and how to make sure churches are aware of the issues that may be silently present in their congregations.

We also discussed whether to propose a Sunday where a more deliberate awareness of sexual assault and domestic violence would be highlighted. We also spent time discussing how we can support women who are discerning their vocation, who are still in seminary, or who are looking for a first call. Some tangential conversations were around whole regions that are not as welcoming to women's ordination, how to support women in those areas, and the use of gender neutral language in official documents as a way of continuing to normalize the fact that pastors are both male and female.

We thank God for the opportunity to serve the RCA.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Melisa Blankenship on behalf of the Commission for Women

Report of the Professorate

The office of General Synod professor involves representing “the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for ministry,” as well as exercising “the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1 [2019 edition, p. 72]). We fulfill this office both individually and collectively. Elected and installed by the General Synod, we remain amenable to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, striving at all times and in all ways to fulfill our calling faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully. This is the professorate’s eighth annual report to the General Synod.

There are presently six General Synod professors: Jaeseung Cha from New Brunswick Theological Seminary; Carol Bechtel, Timothy Brown, and James Brownson from Western Theological Seminary; and Chad Pierce and Cornelis Kors from the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA). Each professor was nominated by a theological agent of the General Synod and then elected by the General Synod to exercise a substantial and continuing role in preparing candidates for ministry in the RCA under the authority of their nominating agency.

The General Synod professorate is represented on the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) and continues to be in dialogue with that group about matters pertaining to the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM). We are also represented on the committees of the MFCA that recommend the granting of the CFM to students at non-RCA seminaries and candidates pursuing the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) to ordination. We set and evaluate the written examinations for the AAR candidates.

The General Synod professors mourn the untimely loss of two of our previous coworkers and office bearers. Allan Janssen and Gregg Mast both played a significant role in the preparation of candidates for ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA. We extend our sympathy to Colleen and Vicki as well as their broader families. We are thankful for Al and Gregg’s love for God and God’s church. We wait with hopeful anticipation of the resurrection of the dead, when all will be made new.

As a body and as individuals we mark with sadness and appreciation the retirements of our friends and colleagues, Tim Brown and Cornelis Kors. Brown has served Western Theological Seminary faithfully both as its president and as the Henry Bast Professor of Preaching. Kors served the MFCA as its director. Together, they lived into their calling of shaping generations of pastors and teachers “to preach and teach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God” (from the Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, *BCO* Formulary No. 3 [2019 edition, p. 133]). We pray that God will continue to bless them and “prosper the work of [his] hands” (Psalm 90:17).

Conclusion

In all of our work, we continue to explore new possibilities for our collective role. We are grateful for having been charged with this call and are deeply sensible of our responsibility to the church. We solicit your prayers and your advice, and we are committed to engaging conversation at all levels of the RCA’s life and work.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce, Moderator, General Synod professorate,
together with the entire professorate, including Carol Bechtel, Timothy Brown, James Brownson,
Jaeseung Cha, and Cornelis Kors.

Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The 2018 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) acted “to constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board ... to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future” (*MGS 2018*, RF 18-1, p. 86). As part of that same action, the 2018 General Synod described one of the purposes of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) as “serv[ing] the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs” (p. 86).

The Future of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

As noted in the 2019 report to General Synod, the PFOB has been discussing potential changes both to the nature of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and to the process by which it is granted to qualified candidates. This discussion stemmed from a request of at least one of the agents to remove this responsibility from their purview. Problems that have arisen include, but are not limited to, what defines a candidate as “fit,” inconsistencies among the three agents in granting the certificate, and the reality that, given the nature of theological education today with more online learning, a feeling from some that the educational institutions might not be in the best position to determine fitness.

Additionally, the decision by the General Synod Council (GSC) to defund the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), or at least have the agency operate using its reserves, created new issues and opportunities to examine how the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry was granted to candidates from Western Theological Seminary (WTS), New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NTBS), non-RCA seminaries, and those in the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) process. The PFOB was tasked by the GSC with proposing a path forward.

The PFOB met extensively over the past year and thought through a variety of proposals. We submit this informal proposal for feedback from the church and plan to bring a formal recommendation, pending changes based upon dialogue with the broader church, to the 2022 General Synod. The following is a summary of our current proposal.

Proposal

To re-form the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency with the following purposes:

1. To grant the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to all candidates pursuing ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America from both RCA and non-RCA seminaries.
2. To grant the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to all candidates pursuing ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America through the Approved Alternate Route.

Process

Candidates from any seminary would petition classes, through their consistories, for entrance into the ordination process. All candidates who are approved by their classes will have their applications sent to and accepted by the MFCA. All candidates will then be given a psychological evaluation. The results of that evaluation may, with permission, be sent to a representative of the seminary and/or classis.

a. Candidates Attending an RCA Seminary

Candidates attending and receiving their MDiv degrees (RCA focus) from either NBTS or WTS and whose psychological evaluations are deemed acceptable by the certification committee of the MFCA will be granted the CFM by the MFCA board.

b. Candidates Attending a non-RCA Seminary

Candidates attending and receiving their MDiv degrees from a non-RCA seminary will be forwarded to the certification committee of the MFCA for the duration of the 24-month process. Upon acceptance, in addition to the psychological evaluation, each candidate will be given a proposed course of study needed to assure that the Standards for Theological Education are met. These courses (RCA Standards, Polity, History, Mission, Worship, as well as Greek and Hebrew) will be offered by NBTS and WTS. Candidates must take their assigned courses at an RCA seminary, which can be taken for either audit or credit as the candidates desire. The MFCA will no longer offer courses.

All candidates in this process will go through a mid-certification review. Coursework, psychological evaluations, and an interview will all be reviewed. After this review, candidates will be invited to a) continue in the process toward receiving their Certificate of Fitness for Ministry after their requirements are met, b) return for a final interview if there are any major points of concern that need to be addressed, or c) be removed from the process.

Candidates who receive their MDiv (or academic equivalent) and are recommended by the MFCA Certification Committee will be granted the Certification of Fitness for Ministry by the MFCA board.

Assessment for Theological Education

In order to fulfill its mandate to assist the GSC in setting the budget and division of the Assessment for Theological Education, the PFOB has made the following recommendations to the GSC (see the GSC finance report for the final assessment proposal). These recommendations are based on the understanding that Western Theological Seminary is proposing bylaws changes to this General Synod that, if approved, would mean that Western would no longer get a share of the RCA Theological Education assessment.

Scenario 1 (WTS bylaw changes are approved and assessments are no longer allocated to WTS)

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$4.00 per member.

The PFOB is recommending that the 2022 theological education assessment be allocated in the following manner:

- \$20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split:
 - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the two agents for theological education (MFCA and NBTS).
 - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (MFCA and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Scenario 2 (WTS bylaw changes are NOT approved)

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$6.12 per-member.

The PFOB is recommending that the 2022 theological education assessment be allocated in the following manner:

- \$20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split:
 - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, MFCA, and NBTS).
 - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (WTS, MFCA, and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Classis Best Practices

As part of its charge to engage classes regarding best practices for caring for candidates under care, the PFOB will continue to maintain and promote the website www.candidate-care.org. Bart Strong will continue to oversee this website. It continues to be used by many classes to better care for and examine candidates for minister of Word and sacrament.

The PFOB is grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve the church in this area of leadership preparation and care.

Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

For years, General Synod has exercised oversight of ministerial formation through its two seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA). Like the RCA seminaries, the MFCA has possessed a deep commitment to developing faithful, educated, and Reformed leaders. Its purpose is the preparation of men and women for the ministries of Christ and his church, most specifically those called to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

From its inception 23 years ago, the MFCA has been tasked with and has embraced a mandate to expand opportunities for RCA ordination to groups not previously served. This is clearly stated in the MFCA Board of Trustees' mission statement:

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) exists to strengthen the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry to specific groups of candidates and working cooperatively with partners inside and outside the RCA to broaden opportunities for diverse ministerial formation.

As of July 2021, there were 60 candidates enrolled in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process; 11 (5.6 percent) of these are pursuing the Certificate of Fitness through the Approved Alternate Route (AAR), which did not exist until MFCA was officially established in 1999.

Over 28 percent (28.3 percent) of the candidates are female, with two enrolled in the AAR and 15 enrolled in Reformed Candidates' Supervision and Care (RCSC).

Thirty-five percent of the total candidates represent racial/ethnic minorities.

Budgets and Finances

In March 2020, the MFCA Board of Trustees was informed that the General Synod Council (GSC), in deliberating the budgets for 2021, decided to dissolve the agency and eliminate MFCA (and present recommendations to the General Synod in order to effect this) and cease its assessment funding for 2021. The MFCA Board of Trustees expressed its disappointment to the general secretary and requested that it be allowed to operate as long as possible from the reserves it had built up over the years, so current candidates could complete the process of seeking the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM). The request was granted, and the decision was made to continue to operate using the reserve funds. The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) is working on a proposal for the General Synod regarding the future of MFCA and the CFM, but some aspects of that proposal are still being worked out, so it will not be brought to the 2021 General Synod. For further information, see the report of the PFOB.

Beginning in January 2021, the budget was cut in a number of ways. MFCA transitioned to one certification committee serving the candidates in both the AAR and RCSC programs instead of having two separate committees. The board and the certification committee both met via Zoom. All MFCA courses are being offered via distance learning, including RCA Worship and Seminar for Pastoral Formation.

With the retirement of the executive director, Cornelis Kors, in July 2020 and with the news of the MFCA being dissolved, the board hired an interim executive director, David Schutt, on a

part-time basis. The travel budget of the executive director was nearly eliminated, and the MFCA staff have utilized Zoom to meet one-on-one with candidates. Staff have offered group Zoom meetings to stay connected with candidates and answer questions.

Certificates of Fitness Awarded

The Board of Trustees awarded fourteen Certificates of Fitness for Ministry in 2020, ten through the RCSC process and four through the AAR process.

Reformed Candidates Supervision and Care (RCSC)

Tim David Grade	Classis of Rocky Mountains
Shawn R. Johnson	Classis of Southwest Michigan
James R. Daniel Kirk	Classis of the City
Benjamin J. Martin	Classis of Delaware-Raritan
Susan Avery Mulholland	Classis of New Brunswick
Carl Joseph Pascual	Classis of the City
Christopher David Thompson	Classis of Great Lakes City
Donald Patrick Van Antwerpen	Classis of New Brunswick
Laura Kay Wessels	Classis of Illinois
Mark Richard Westerfield	Classis of Passaic Valley

Approved Alternate Route (AAR)

Richard Alejandro Caballero	Classis of Southwest
Anthony Joseph Ciaccio	Classis of Orange
Susan Lynn Rand Grade	Classis of Rocky Mountains
Brandon James Morrow	Classis of East Sioux

The Board of Trustees awarded twenty-four Certificates of Fitness for Ministry in 2021, eighteen through the RCSC process and six through the AAR process.

Reformed Candidates Supervision & Care (RCSC)

William Gerard Barlow	Classis of Queens
Jonathan L. Bassett	Classis of the City
Jonathan Amos Caley	Classis of New Brunswick
Susan H. Converse	Classis of Nassau-Suffolk
James Kenton Earley	Classis of Minnesota
Jesse Henkle	Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Grant William Hoekstra	Classis of Minnesota
Shen Chyung (Joseph) Jou	Classis of British Columbia
Yunna Kim	Classis of Delaware-Raritan
Hui Fung (Kelvin) Kong	Classis of Queens
Benjamin Jin Yong Lee	Classis of Greater Palisades
Chih-Ying Pearl Liao	Classis of Queens
Brogan Allen Mohlenkamp	Classis of Dakota
Zachary Kim Pearce	Classis of Orange
Riana Richelle Shaw Robinson	Classis of the City
Keith Michael Sietstra	Classis of West Sioux

Toby O'Brien Thomack
Frederick Henry Wezeman

Classis of Wisconsin
Classis of Chicago

Approved Alternate Route (AAR)

Kelli Lynn Glasgo
Chao-Jui Huang
Eric Lester Mitchell
Kevin Paul Platte
Nicholas A. Rama
Akiko Fujita Van Antwerpen

Classis of West Sioux
Classis of Queens
Classis of the City
Classis of Southwest Michigan
Classis of Mid-Hudson
Classis of New Brunswick

Alternate Means and Petitions

1) *Reduction in 24-Month Requirement:* The Classis of New Brunswick request, on behalf of Donald Patrick Van Antwerpen, to reduce the length of enrollment was approved by the MFCA Board of Trustees at its June 2019 meeting. The board was able to identify a sufficient period of supervised ministry experience to substitute for deficiencies, thus determining the candidate is qualified to earn the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3 [2019 edition, p. 45]).

2) *Alternate Means for the Hebrew Biblical Language:* The Classis of Mid-Hudson request, on behalf of Richard Downey, to substitute ten years of utilizing Logos Bible Study tools, extensive use of vocabulary resources, along with reading a number of related texts, was approved by the board (*BCO*, Chapter I, Part II, Article 12, Section 3 [2019 edition, pp. 47-48]).

Other Transitions

Before learning of the GSC decision to dissolve the agency, the executive director, Cornelis Kors, submitted his resignation in order to retire. The board accepted his resignation and celebrates his 29 years of service. The board declared Kors "Executive Director Emeritus." This took effect at his retirement.

TE 21-1

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Cornelis G. Kors, who was ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America in 1991 and served in a variety of ways throughout his years of ministry; and

WHEREAS Dr. Kors has served as the director of the Theological Education Agency (TEA), the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency (MFCA), and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), leading ministerial formation into a new era in its short and distinguished history; and

WHEREAS Dr. Kors served Fuller Theological Seminary as ecclesiastical faculty since 1991; and

WHEREAS he has served the Reformed Church in America as a General Synod professor since 2013; and

WHEREAS during his tenure, almost 600 people have embarked into gospel ministry after earning the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM); and

WHEREAS Dr. Kors has taught courses and served as dean of the agency's program, working in close relationship with faculty and certification committees; and

WHEREAS he has served the Reformed Church in America faithfully on its boards, committees, and commissions alongside the presidents and faculty of the RCA seminaries; and

WHEREAS under Dr. Kors's leadership, numerous innovative movements and practices were implemented in the formation and credentialing of ministerial candidates, including the Approved Alternate Route; and

WHEREAS he has worked diligently at reducing costs for candidates in the CFM process; and

WHEREAS Dr. Kors has streamlined the CFM process, developing RCA courses, many offered exclusively online; and

WHEREAS he has been not only a faithful and supportive mentor to candidates, traveling hundreds of thousands of miles, but also a friend whose care and concern have touched those who have walked with him in the CFM process:

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, in its 214th regular session, meeting October 14–19, 2021, in Tucson, Arizona, expresses its deepest gratitude to Dr. Kors for his service to the agency and its church, and offers its prayers for a fulfilling retirement along with his wife, Jane.

AND BE IT RESOLVED that Dr. Cornelis G. Kors be declared a General Synod professor emeritus as of October 19, 2021.

Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Lament, Liminality, and Lessons Learned

Lament

Lament is defined as a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. We joyfully lament because lament does not allow us to revert to easy answers for unabated suffering. The New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) community and the Reformed Church in America (RCA) family mourn and lament the losses of Allan J. Janssen and Gregg Mast.

Allan J. Janssen, PhD, an affiliate professor emeritus at NBTS and General Synod professor emeritus of the RCA, died of complications from the COVID-19 virus on April 3, 2020, at St. Peter's Medical Center in Albany, New York. A longer memorial can be found at www.nbts.edu/dr-allan-janssen-march-31-1948-april-3-2020.

Gregg A. Mast, PhD, president emeritus of NBTS and General Synod professor emeritus of the RCA, died on April 27, 2020, at Albany Medical Center Hospital in Albany, New York, after being ill with the COVID-19 virus for several weeks. A longer memorial can be found at www.nbts.edu/memori-am-gregg-alan-mast.

The impact of Dr. Janssen's and Dr. Mast's contributions and legacies will be felt in our community for generations.

Liminality

Because of COVID-19, we began the 2020–2021 academic year in what is called “liminal space” or threshold space. In Latin, *limen* means a threshold, a starting line in a race, or a beginning place. Liminal space is a very good phrase for times such as this, when events and places open us up to the sacred (Richard Rohr). In the New Testament, the phrase “when time came to a fullness” was used to capture the liminal space created by Jesus's birth or God's incarnation. In 2020–2021, our world entered liminal space as our past, present, and future came together in our current climate and moment. In our liminal space, we experienced our “right here” torn apart from our “over there.”

We grieved the tragic gap between our world as we knew it and something new and unknown. We grieved for humanity and nature as we simultaneously grappled with our previous lives, current losses, and the resilient spiritual new appearances being birthed.

We grieved the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We grieved the 146 million cases worldwide and the more than 500,000 in the United States. In addition to Dr. Janssen and Dr. Mast, we grieved the death of distinguished alumni Rufus “Bumpy” McClendon (April 9, 2020) and the recent losses of family members and other loved ones in our community.

We grieved the estimated 18 million people and families who were impacted by sudden unemployment in the United States. We grieved the racial and social unrest that unfolded across the nation, including lawlessness, police violence, oppression, systematic racism and discrimination, gender oppression and violence, domestic terrorism, divisiveness, shadow conspiracies, classism, pathology, homophobia, and the plurality and polarization of thought and

action. We continue to seek an antidote to the chaos as we reflect on our changing realities during this liminal season.

Lessons Learned

We responded to the onset of COVID-19 by striving to serve and support our seminary students as fully as possible. Classes quickly moved online, and we applaud the faculty for the thoughtful and excellent manner in which instruction shifted to the virtual environment. We are grateful to our faculty and students who have gracefully navigated the transition to full-time online learning. The seminary continues to work with seminarians to make sure they can access classes and to ensure their well-being. We developed institutional outreach to each of the seminarians and secured three emergency CARES grants to support our efforts:

- \$300,000 for student scholarships and compensation for lost tuition and rental income
- \$12,000 for basic student needs (e.g., food, housing, transit, medical, childcare)
- \$12,000 for the institution to offset income lost from renting our facilities

We also created the Student Emergency Fund and raised \$23,500 to help students who faced unexpected consequences due to COVID-19. We are grateful for your funds and prayers that continue to support our students during these challenging times!

During the COVID-19 shutdown, our finance department, led by chief financial officer Ken Termott, worked diligently to secure a PPP loan in the amount of \$531,900 to help cover expenses that continued, despite lost income due to the pandemic. Mr. Termott then followed PPP guidelines and submitted an application to the Small Business Administration (SBA) to have the total loan forgiven. We are pleased to report that we have received a letter from the SBA stating the total loan has been forgiven.

Additionally, to respond to the evolving needs of the academic community, the Gardner A. Sage Library: (1) re-envisioned its staff priorities and added a digital services librarian; (2) joined the Digital Theological Library, a cooperative effort among theological libraries to build a shared digital collection beyond what any individual library could afford to own; and (3) began to digitize the NBTS Archives for inclusion in the Internet Archive, a partnership with the Theological Commons of Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

Admissions quickly shifted outreach efforts online, with successful informational sessions and continued work to secure new students for the 2020–2021 academic year. Our staff continued to reach out to potential students and inform them that we were open for business and accepting applications for enrollment.

Our faculty held virtual office hours, and our dean and president held weekly listening sessions. You can access all videos at www.youtube.com/nbtheo/videos and are encouraged to share them widely.

Our alumni organization continues to develop. This effort is currently being put forth and funded by alumni and will be alumni-led. There are very active and enthusiastic members on the steering committee, and alumni have been invited to send messages to the class of 2021. A celebration honoring our alumni will be held on May 21, 2021. Alumni from the classes of 2016,

2011, 2006, 2001, 1996, 1991, 1986, 1981, 1976, 1971, 1966, 1961, 1956, 1951, 1946, and 1941 will be the focus of this celebration.

We replicated our graduation activities from 2020. That is, we offered a virtual graduation celebration for our graduates on May 22, 2021, at 11:00 a.m. We are honored to have Cynthia Hale as our commencement speaker. Barbara Felker is the recipient of the President's Service Award. We held our in-person conferring ceremonies for our graduates on May 29, 2021. Our board of trustees participated or was represented in all of the graduation ceremonies.

Accomplishments of 2020–2021

The In Trust Center's Wise Stewards Initiative—NBTS Board of Trustees Participation

As institutional leaders grapple with the long-term impact of the global pandemic on theological schools, efforts to maximize the potential of governing boards has taken on even greater urgency. Faced with unprecedented challenges and fast-emerging opportunities, presidents and board chairs are seeking help that is institutionally relevant, affordable, and specific to the strengths and expertise of their boards.

The In Trust Center's Wise Stewards Initiative meets all three criteria and more.

The curriculum, resources, and format of the project are designed by experienced educators, administrators, and consultants—all of whom have firsthand knowledge of graduate theological education—especially for leadership teams of theological schools. With funding from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, participation is within financial reach of every school.

The Wise Stewards Initiative utilizes a cohort-based learning model that includes assessments, resources, faculty coach-led presentations, and peer learning opportunities with governance teams from other schools. Cohorts are comprised of up to ten theological schools.

Objectives:

- Creating space for innovation, leading change, and maximizing board potential
- Reimagining governance as a force for change
- Strengthening the president/board partnership in support of institutional renewal
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities of boards of theological schools

Advancement and Marketing

For many across our community, this year has proven to be one in which creativity overcame the challenges of the pandemic. We are grateful for your prayers, generosity, and support, which extended beyond our campus to all seminarians, as we train current and future seminarians to think critically, act justly, and lead faithfully.

With your support, our "A Light in God's Cities Campaign" ended in receipts and pledges of \$2.1 million. We also thank our advancement team for dedicated efforts that yielded a 61 percent increase in gifts and donations. This is an encouragement to continue our efforts to meet and surpass the goal of budgeting for a surplus. We are grateful for your kindness and your assistance, which will empower us to continue guiding current and future seminarians to think critically, act justly, and lead faithfully, as they pursue meaningful lives and careers.

With regard to marketing, as of this reporting, our three very brief YouTube commercials have been viewed 14,779, 33,804, and 50,130 times respectively.

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIldox7120A
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNFIOTW-_Ys
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfGCKQDI7Q0

There also have been many more views on our tactics running on the Facebook platform, particularly ads with still images and our 27-second commercial, which can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/431292324>. All of this has resulted in 182,850 impressions thus far. In terms of exposure, the campaigns have been very successful and have generally performed above industry average key performance indicators. We pray that this online interest in our program will result in applications, acceptances, and enrollments.

NBTS's Reformed Church Center

2019 marked the 20th anniversary of the NBTS Reformed Church Center. In 1999, the NBTS Board of Trustees approved the creation of The Center for Reformed Church Studies, proposed by John Coakley to give expression to the RCA presence in the life and witness of NBTS, with a mission to:

- Instill in RCA students at the seminary a strong sense of belonging to the RCA.
- Use the resources of the seminary, an academic community where free inquiry and disciplined analysis are deeply valued, to reflect critically and prophetically on the RCA's living traditions and its pressing concerns (adapted from the charter of the Reformed Church Center).

Over the last 20 years, the Reformed Church Center has held more than 100 conferences, workshops, and classes, and has hosted dozens of research fellows and other visiting scholars. Every year, the Reformed Church Center grants three fellowships: the Albert A. Smith Fellowship in Reformed Church History, the Alvin J. Poppen and John R. Young Fellowship in Reformed Worship, and the Hazel B. Gnade Fellowship in RCA Women's Studies.

The Reformed Church Center also has helped "to form ministers who are knowledgeable and committed to the RCA," as it says in the charter, by supporting students and the classes that superintend them in their ministry process. We are grateful to those who have served as directors over the years, including John Coakley, assisted initially by Susan Hasner and then Joanne Noel; Barbara Fillette; and James Hart Brumm, who has served as director since 2014.

The Reformed Church Center continued its service to the RCA in this twentieth anniversary year with a variety of programs:

- A series of short colloquies that will look at Reformed theological education in the twenty-first century. Richard Mouw, former president of Fuller Seminary, will be the first presenter in this series.
- Three Saturday events that will help the RCA reflect on the Vision 2020 Team final report in advance of the next General Synod.
- Fellowship presentations that will explore missions, the changing worship landscape, and the role of Black women volunteers in the RCA in the 1970s and 1980s.
- An exploration of race and the role of slavery in the founding of NBTS.
- A livestream conversation with John L. Bell, internationally renowned worship leader, who will join us live from Glasgow to talk about liturgy and justice.

NBTS and Partners' SHELTER Project Secures Luce Grant in Response to Pandemic

Thanks to generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, NBTS, in partnership with the Reformed Church of Highland Park Affordable Housing Corporation (RCHP-AHC) and Rutgers University-New Brunswick, has launched a project to address the issue of housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This new initiative offers a rapid response to a pressing question for some of the most vulnerable people in the wider community: In an age of pandemic, what does it mean to shelter in place when you have no shelter?

Through its Theology Program and its commitment to supporting its partners' responses to COVID-19, the Luce Foundation awarded \$150,000 to NBTS for the immediate launch of the SHELTER project (shelternj.org). Seventy-five percent of the awarded funds will be directed to RCHP-AHC to rapidly secure housing and provide ongoing wrap-around services for families and individuals whose housing and other basic needs, such as the purchasing of food and medicine, have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals and families are experiencing challenges related to undocumented or immigration status; recent release from parole or incarceration; HIV and other medical needs; or other human service needs that have made them especially vulnerable during the COVID crisis.

By fostering community partnerships and directing funds to support the urgent responses of service providers doing the work of social justice, this project advances the seminary's explicit commitment to promote justice in society. Although the current emergency is all too immediate, when the pandemic fades, "shelter" will still be an elusive goal for many; therefore, the aim of our partnership is to create a long-term relationship not only with RCHP-AHC but also with the individuals and families who are receiving services. Seth Kaper-Dale, executive director of RCHP-AHC, has expressed excitement for "the potential of this project to help a pandemic be not a moment for further rejection and isolation, but rather a moment where we stop, listen, and participate in creating 'home' for already susceptible populations."

Led by Nathan Jérémie-Brink, Feakes Assistant Professor of the History of Global Christianity at NBTS; Colin Jager, director of the Center for Cultural Analysis and professor of English at Rutgers; Kristin O'Brassill-Kulfan, coordinator and instructor of Public History at Rutgers; and producing director Dan Swern of coLAB Arts, "this project reflects NBTS's commitment to 'act justly' in our response to this pandemic, and to foster partnerships that promote critical thinking about the complex economic, socio-psychological, and racial factors that leave people without homes."

We applaud the Luce Foundation's emergency response funding and the SHELTER project's "amazing group of researchers, professors, pastors, and community activists committed to provide persons impacted by COVID-19 with safe spaces and needed resources for recovery and survival."

NBTS Wins Grant to Engage Science in Curriculum, and with Theology and Race

This year, as one of nine seminaries granted funding by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to begin integrating science into their core curricula, NBTS presented a program of four courses (Analyzing and Confronting the Systems of Privilege, Contextualized Ministry and Public Faith, and History of Global Christianity I and II) and a major campus event exploring the theme "Naming the Past to Claim a Better Future: COVID-19, Pseudo-Science and Pseudo-Theology."

This innovative Science for Seminaries project is organized by the AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER) Program in partnership with the Association of Theological Schools. It reflects the deep commitment of NBTS to dismantle various forms of oppression, sexism, classism, and racism. This project provided an outstanding opportunity for the NBTS community to deepen our commitment as an anti-racist institution by exploring the ways science and theology intersect to not only create systems and structures that foster injustice and various forms of oppression, but also to liberate and promote the well-being of all city residents and the wider society.

NBTS vice president and academic dean Beth Tanner, who is also the Rev. Dr. Norman and Mrs. Mary Kansfield Professor of Old Testament Studies, and Janice McLean-Farrell, Dirk Romeyn Assistant Professor of Metro-Urban Ministry, are leading the project. It kicked off for the entire NBTS faculty at the beginning of the school year with a discussion of Terrance Keet's *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought became Racial Science* and includes workshops with science and theology experts in pedagogy, sociology, and nanoengineering. Invited experts will provide lectures, discussion exercises, hands-on syllabi preparation, and assistance in planning a field trip excursion to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

In the spring, we redesigned our anti-racism workshop and made it into an online two-day workshop titled "Analyzing the Systems of Privilege." The workshop was taught by Janice McLean-Farrell, PhD (Theology); Nathan Jérémie-Brink, PhD (History); Beth LaNeel Tanner, PhD (Hebrew), and Micah L. McCreary, PhD (Psychology). The workshop was designed to aid us in recognizing and naming the powers and privileges in our culture that advantage some and disadvantage others. During the workshop, we discussed some of the power and privilege issues at the forefront of concern, but we pray you will always look for the ways some are lifted on the backs of others and work for justice in our world.

Following the workshop, we taught the course "Analyzing the Systems of Privilege" focused on providing seminary students with a better understanding of the importance of science in their learning and their ministry. Analyzing the Systems of Privilege is a required course for all master's students. The course aims to provide students with both academic and experiential knowledge about some of the -isms in our world. Students engaged in personal and social analysis of issues that limit the sharing of the gospel message and the love of Christ in our churches and communities.

Some of the resources for this class were purchased with grant funds. Required books for IN511 were:

- Graves, Joseph L. *The Race Myth: Why We Pretend Race Exists in America*. New York: Plume, 2005.
- Wytma, Ken. *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Press, 2019.
- Leong, David P. *Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017.
- Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Crown Publishing, 2017.

NBTS Launches WELL Program, Receives \$1 Million Grant

Thanks to a generous grant of nearly \$1 million from the Lilly Endowment Inc., NBTS designed the WELL Program to create a collaborative and supportive community for African American pastors leading urban congregations and Latinx pastors launching new churches.

The term WELL, though not an acronym, has theological, biblical, and psychological implications that matter to our project. First, WELL denotes what we propose to be the quality of the program—an excellent endeavor that through its very execution will foster and enhance wellness among both leaders and participants. Second, this biblical motif represents a place where God’s people frequently gather and are met with the provision of God. One scriptural account depicts Jesus meeting a woman who was marginal to the religious community and describing himself as living water. The WELL program seeks to extend this metaphor into practice, where pastors find resources and respite. Third, the name reflects our project’s inherent mission of promoting soundness of body and mind and personal satisfaction.

Pastors play a pivotal role in their congregations, and the demands on them are great in ordinary times, much less the extraordinary challenges faced in 2020 and 2021. We created WELL with thoughtful input from pastors and with our three core principles of “think critically, act justly, and lead faithfully” in mind. We believe this multi-faceted approach of assisting pastors who serve in two diverse ministries, African American and Latinx, will help revitalize their personal and professional ministry development and growth while creating a collaborative community.

Our project draws on our experiences as educators, mental health practitioners, and pastors. It is designed to address the pressures—spiritual, emotional, and financial—of urban pastoral leaders, which are magnified by the disproportionately high rate of COVID-19 among Black and Brown people. Our primary aim for the project is to help participating pastors embrace and embody a mindset and lifestyle of WELL-ness in personal spirituality and self-care, leadership, authentic relationships, and overall vitality.

Although in service to the church and its members, pastoral ministry seeks to address the needs of the wider community, and the pastor’s role is to care for, nurture, and minister to the needs of all God’s people. We see WELL as a way to improve pastors’ resilience and overall well-being and to grow their capacity for constructive outreach to congregants and the broader community. The program, which commences this year and runs through 2025, offers participants (four groups of twenty in two-year cycles, for a total of eighty) a wealth of personal, interactive, and educational resources. These include:

1. The WELL Team: Developed by a core team of university and seminary professors and pastors, the project will include a financial consultant, a church generosity strategist, and an urban planner, and brings together pastors, in person or virtually, for learning sessions and conferences.
2. WELL Learning Intensives: Via Zoom, these are structured learning activities that strengthen mental health and leadership skills.
3. The WELL Conferences: Conducted by NBTS faculty and staff as well as experts in the fields of church stewardship and real estate and finance, these will be in person or conducted online via Zoom.

4. The WELL Developmental Learning Plan (Capstone): At the end of each group's first and second year, WELL fellows and/or WELL teams will summarize their learning experiences and detail how these will be incorporated into their ministries.

A seasoned team with expertise in relevant fields will be involved in every step of WELL:

- Denominational leaders: Eddy Alemán (general secretary, RCA), Micah L. McCreary, PhD (president, NBTS)
- Staff: Gihane Jérémie-Brink, Jacqueline Madison-McCreary, Terry A. Smith
- Consultants: Jimmy Hanson (president and chief executive officer, The Hampshire Companies), Carla Ray (senior generosity strategist, Generis)

Digital Theological Library (DTL)

NBTS, under the leadership of Patrick Milas, has added the DTL, an expansive database in the studies of religion and theology. Our students, faculty, and staff can find more than 600,000 ebooks, 60 million full-text articles, and 21,000 journals from over 150 databases. Using this database, our community can access Proquest dissertations and theses and find millions of dissertations from 1743 to current day. Access to the DTL is restricted to matriculated students and current faculty and staff.

NBTS Presidential Scholars Program

This year, NBTS introduced the Presidential Scholars Program. Presidential scholars will work with NBTS President McCreary to strengthen and expand the work of the seminary and the Office of the President. There will be two simultaneous programs—one for Doctor of Ministry students and the other for NBTS faculty first, and eventually other church mavens. The goal of the program is to develop theological-based briefs on theology and praxis, and power and privilege. We are grateful for the partnership with Charles Boyer and his organization, Salvation and Social Justice: Liberating Public Policy Theologically, whose generosity has made this project possible.

RCA/NBTS Month—March 2021

As the RCA's first and oldest seminary, through the years, NBTS and RCA have been an important part of each other's legacies. Today, we continue to partner to equip lay leaders and pastors for ministry. This year, our constituencies gathered during the month of March for a series of online events to learn more about how the RCA and NBTS are working together. The events were free, but registration was required.

March 8: Leadership. We kicked off with a conversation between Eddy Alemán, RCA general secretary; Micah L. McCreary, NBTS president; Jill Ver Steeg, RCA chief operating officer; and Amanda Bruehl, NBTS chief of staff.

March 10: Global Mission. Strengthening and growing the global church by creating ministries of compassion, by developing leaders, and through sharing the good news, our goal was to provide opportunities for local churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful, helping us all live and love like Jesus. Participants learned about what is happening around the world through RCA Global Mission and how NBTS and RCA Global Mission are partnering together to equip people for work in the global church.

March 13: Women's Stories Day (www.nbts.edu/events/2021-womens-stories-day). Anna M. Jackson, co-pastor of Second Reformed Church in Hackensack, New Jersey, was the featured speaker at the 2021 Women's Stories Day. Jackson, who is the 2020–2021 Hazel B. Gnade Fellow in RCA Women's Studies at NBTS, presented on the topic "Like Trees Planted By the Water: RCA New York City Black Women Lay Leaders of the 1950s–1970s," her study of matriarchs in Black RCA congregations and the larger church in the 1970s and 80s. There were a large number of Black women, even more so than in other RCA congregations, who were not ministers of Word and sacrament but who took leadership for their congregations in denominational settings and even on the world stage—such as during the struggle against apartheid. Jackson plans to look at the work they did and conduct oral interviews with several of the women and people who knew them. Sharon Atkins, pastor of Bethany Memorial Reformed Church in New York City and the new president of the RCA African American Black Council, was our devotional leader. A native of Montego Bay, Jamaica, she was raised in Brooklyn and has been an active member of the RCA since her youth.

March 17: Transformed & Transforming. The RCA's Transformed & Transforming team walks alongside churches, helping them take their next step toward fulfilling God's vision for ministry. Their strategic priorities are to cultivate transformation in Christ and equip emerging leaders of today and tomorrow, focusing on discipleship, leadership, local mission, and next generation engagement. Participants learned how the RCA supports leaders in seminary and beyond, as they lead in their congregations and communities.

March 24: Church Multiplication. The RCA's Church Multiplication team works with local classes, regional synod teams, and international partners to equip them to start new churches. Participants learned about church revitalization through multiplying ministry, including a new effort called "Fresh Expressions," which is designed to help existing churches foster and support the expansion of ministries.

Collaboration with RCA Global Mission and NBTS Doctor of Ministry in Missiology and Global Christianity

RCA Global Mission and NBTS have been working together to develop a framework to advance the works of RCA Global Mission and NBTS Missions. We are developing our framework around a focus on programs, partnerships, and promotions. Our team also consulted the RCA Missionaries Timeline, composed by James Brumm.

We have assembled the following project teams:

- **Overwatch group:** Beth Tanner, Jaeseung Cha, JP Sundararajan, and Micah McCreary
- **Program group:** Janice McLean-Farrell, Jinhong Kim, Derrick Jones, and En Young Kim
- **Partnership group:** Nathan Jérémie-Brink, Amanda Bruehl, Scott Engelsman, and Luis Ruiz
- **Promotion group:** Cathy Proctor, Amanda Bruehl, Scott Engelsman, and Gael Uwera

We are currently working within each committee to develop the purpose and objectives of our partnership. We solicit your prayers.

Nomination of the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary as a General Synod Professor

New Brunswick Theological Seminary would like to offer one recommendation to the RCA General Synod: The New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees recommends Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary to the Office of General Synod Professor.

Greg Dunlap, chair of the NBTS Board of Trustees—Board of Affairs Committee, proposed that the board nominate NBTS President Micah L. McCreary to be recommended by the board as a candidate to become a General Synod professor. President McCreary agreed to serve in this capacity representing NBTS. The full Board of Trustees then unanimously voted to nominate and forward to the General Synod of the RCA a recommendation that McCreary serve as a General Synod professor for the RCA. The following resolution was prepared by John Coakley for NBTS:

TE 21-2

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary has been since 2018 a minister of Word and sacrament in good standing in the Reformed Church in America, having previously held his ordination in the National Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Convention and having served faithfully for 19 years as a pastor in those denominations; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary has served faithfully since 2017 as president and John Henry Livingston Professor of Theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, one of the two historic seminaries of the Reformed Church in America, and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary is a member of the First Reformed Church of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Classis of New Brunswick, and has traveled widely in the Reformed Church in America as preacher and presenter; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary provides leadership in the Reformed Church in America in matters of clergy development and theological education, not least as a member of the Commissioned Pastors Advisory Team and of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board, for which he has helped to fashion the bylaws and structure; and

WHEREAS in his role as president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary oversees the implementation of the seminary's curriculum and the evaluation of students for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry in the Reformed Church in America, and has worked to expand the program of the seminary's Reformed Church Center; and

WHEREAS in his role as a faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary teaches required courses in both the Master of Divinity and the Doctor of Ministry degree programs, drawing upon his 21 years of experience

in higher education at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he served as a senior faculty member; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary is an established scholar who has published widely, specializing in matters closely related to ministry, including family and community mental health and the integration of psychology and spirituality;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 214th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting October 14–19, 2021, declares the Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary a General Synod professor.

The NBTS leadership and community continue to pray, connect, and serve to the glory of God in this season of enduring and in preparation for the times to come. Thank you for your continued commitment, generous spirit, and other contributions of support.

Report of Western Theological Seminary

Mission Statement

By God's grace, Western Theological Seminary forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God's ongoing redemptive work in the world.

As Western Theological Seminary (WTS) begins the 2021 academic year, we have much to be grateful for and much to celebrate.

Enrollment

At the time of this written report, the seminary projects to have over 400 students across all degree programs for the fall 2021 semester, which would be the highest enrollment in the institution's history. Growth in the Hispanic Ministry Program (113 students) and the Doctor of Ministry program (over 100 students) has been largely responsible for the seminary's overall growth of the past few years (the seminary had a total of 286 students enrolled in Fall 2016). This year, we are also seeing growth in the master's programs, including a 60 percent growth in the incoming in-residence master of divinity (MDiv) class (compared to the last two years) and a return to pre-pandemic level for the incoming distance-learning MDiv class.

In short, WTS has more students being equipped for ministry at this time than during any other time in the seminary's distinguished history. We give thanks to God for this incredible privilege and opportunity to train up leaders for the church!

The Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

Western Theological Seminary was selected by the family of Eugene Peterson to establish the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination. According to Eugene's son, Eric, "WTS is the school that Eugene exclusively recommended to prospective students preparing to serve the church." In 2010, Eugene said this: "It is everything I think a seminary needs to be— theologically focused, faculty accessible, personally relational, and God honoring. I never fail to feel at home there with its professors and students."

Under the leadership of Winn Collier, the Peterson Center exists to promote the pastoral theology of Eugene Peterson for future scholarship, the health of pastors, and the church's renewed imagination. The center will steward the Peterson papers and archives, promote robust learning, create generative models for pastoral formation, and provide resources to encourage pastors for sustainable, joyful, and courageous ministry.

For more information about the Peterson Center, please visit www.westernsem.edu/peterson-center.

Other Seminary News (in Chronological Order)

- Kristen Deede Johnson, professor of theology and Christian formation, was named the dean and vice president of academic affairs in July 2019. Additionally, Johnson will be installed as the G.W. and Edna Haworth Chair of Educational Ministry and Leadership on April 7, 2022. A graduate of the University of St. Andrews, Johnson is a well-respected scholar and sought-after teacher who focuses on the areas of theology,

discipleship, formation, culture, and political theory. In 2018, she was named by *Christianity Today* as one of “10 New or Lesser Known Female Theologians Worth Knowing.” Dean Johnson is an outstanding leader who has provided visionary, excellent, and faithful leadership to the academic affairs of the seminary.

- In October 2019, WTS established the Center for Disability and Ministry under the leadership of Ben Conner. The center exists to support ministry leaders of all abilities in nurturing and receiving the gifts and contributions of persons with disabilities through formational opportunities, including theological education, consultation, forums, and publications. For more information, visit www.westernsem.edu/center-for-disability-and-ministry.
- On March 1, 2020, two-time WTS alumnus Stephen Kaziimba was enthroned as the archbishop of Uganda, the head of the Anglican church in Uganda. We congratulate the Church of Uganda for this significant selection.
- During the May 2020 meeting of the Board of Trustees, the WTS board voted to defer the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry of a gay student who was in a committed relationship. As a theological agent of the General Synod, it is the board’s understanding that the seminary needs to act in a manner consistent with policies established by the RCA and to operate under the doctrines of the church as established by the General Synod. In light of this, the board determined that WTS would grant the student his master of divinity degree, but that it was necessary to defer the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry until the General Synod’s Vision 2020 work and report outcomes are finalized.
- The faculty successfully approved a new MDiv curriculum revision in March 2021. The new curriculum extends WTS’s commitment to formation by intentionally integrating formational objectives into every course, including a new foundational course that invites students to reflect on how God’s story, our own stories, and the story of our cultural moment and context are coming together in their preparation for ministry. Western has increased the number of required courses in the biblical field to help increase biblical literacy, while still reducing the total credit hours from 96 to 87 credit hours. To learn more about the new MDiv curriculum, visit www.westernsem.edu/curriculum-revision-announcement.
- WTS, along with Hope College, has launched the Hope–Western Prison Education Program to offer a Christian liberal arts education to long-term incarcerated men at Muskegon Correctional Facility in Muskegon, Michigan. Men housed there will be able to earn a bachelor of arts majoring in faith, leadership, and service. Classes will be taught by professors from Hope College and Western, and students from both institutions will have the opportunity to be teaching assistants. WTS professor of ethics and theology David Stubbs serves as the co-director of the program.

Faculty News

New Faculty

- Winn Collier, associate professor of pastoral theology, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

- Wesley Hill, associate professor of New Testament
- David Escobar Arcay, associate professor of theology and director of the Hispanic Ministry Program

Faculty Retirement

- Timothy L. Brown, president emeritus, Bast/Brown Professor of Preaching Emeritus, retired from Western Theological Seminary, effective June 30, 2020. Brown was named the 2021 distinguished alumnus of WTS. The Board of Western Theological Seminary requests that Timothy Brown be named General Synod Professor Emeritus.
- James V. Brownson, professor of New Testament, retired from Western Theological Seminary, effective August 27, 2021.

Faculty Publications

The following publications, presented in chronological order, were published by WTS faculty since the 2019 General Synod. We trust that their work will continue to be an immense resource to the Church.

- Han-luen Kantzer Komline, *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account*, Oxford University Press (December 2019)
- Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, InterVarsity Press (March 2020)
- J. Todd Billings, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live*, Brazos Press (September 2020)
- David Komline, *The Common School Awakening: Religion and the Transatlantic Roots of American Public Education*, Oxford University Press (September 2020)
- David Stubbs, *Table and Temple: The Christian Eucharist and its Jewish Roots*, Eerdmans (September 2020)
- Winn Collier, *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson, Translator of The Message*, Waterbrook (March 2021)
- James V. Brownson, *Questions Christians Aren't Supposed to Ask*, Eerdmans (June 2021)

Petitions Approved by the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary

- A petition of the Holland Classis to substitute a period of supervised ministry (six months) as part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Trey Tirpak.
- A petition of the Holland Classis to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Bryce VanderStelt.

Trustee Changes

Trustee Doug Honholt resigned, effective February 2020. Trustees James Poit and James Veld completed their terms of service on June 30, 2020.

Four new members joined Western's Board of Trustees, effective July 1, 2020:

- David Izenbart is co-lead pastor of Living Springs Community Church in Glenwood, Illinois.
- Beth Snyder is the grant director of the *in*Vocation Project at Hope College and a member of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan.
- Tite Tiéno is professor and dean emeritus at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.
- Emilie Prince Wierda is a transitional deacon in the Anglican Church of North America.

Trustees Alberto Salazar Gaviria and Brian Vriesman resigned, effective June 30, 2021. Trustee Philip Miller completed his term of service on June 30, 2021.

RESOLUTIONS

Declaring Tim Brown General Synod Professor Emeritus

Timothy Brown retired from his faculty position at Western Theological Seminary in June 2020. As a result, he is no longer eligible to be a General Synod professor. President Theonugraha and Dean Johnson, together with the WTS faculty and board of trustees, therefore recommend that he be declared retired and that a resolution be brought to the 2021 General Synod to declare him a General Synod professor emeritus.

TE 21-3

WHEREAS Timothy Brown was ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America in 1976 and served in a variety of ways throughout his years of ministry; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Timothy Brown has served the Reformed Church in America as a General Synod professor since 2002; and

WHEREAS Dr. Brown has served the Reformed Church in America faithfully on its boards, committees, and commissions and in ecumenical bodies; and

WHEREAS Dr. Brown has contributed in very significant ways to the life of Western Theological Seminary as Henry Bast Professor of Preaching, recruiting generations of students to Western; forming students as preachers of God's Word through his teaching of homiletics; inviting students to practice the contemplation, memorization, and interiorization of Scripture; and sending students forth to serve the church and proclaim the word of God throughout the country and world;

WHEREAS Dr. Brown has also made an indelible mark on the seminary as its eleventh president, launching innovative programs and forging important partnerships; leading the renovation and addition of significant spaces within Western Theological Seminary, including Mulder Chapel, Cook Library, the DeWitt Learning Center, and the Haworth Leadership Center; and recruiting key faculty and staff and successfully completing the Our New Day campaign to

enable Western to head into its future with strength and vitality upon his retirement;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 214th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona, from October 14–19, 2021, expresses its deepest gratitude to Dr. Brown for his years of service, and offers its prayers for a fulfilling retirement along with his wife, Nancy;

AND BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that the Rev. Dr. Timothy Brown be declared a General Synod professor emeritus as of October 19, 2021.

For Amended Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation to Become an Affiliated Institution of the RCA

The Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary requests permission from the General Synod to allow the seminary to become an affiliated institution of the RCA like Hope College, Northwestern College, and Central College. We believe that moving to affiliated status, which reflects how the RCA website already refers to WTS, will result in many mutually-beneficial outcomes for both organizations. We desire to remain the preferred seminary of the RCA and to be the leading provider of candidates for ordained ministry of Word and sacrament, while also expanding our mission to serve the broader church. Moving to an affiliated status with the RCA will allow us to explore additional partnerships and train even more pastors and Christian leaders around the world, thus also furthering the RCA's goal of equipping congregations for ministry and being the very presence of Christ in the world.

Over the years, our students and faculty have become much more denominationally diverse. Today, one-third of our students are RCA-affiliated while more than another third of our students identify as non-denominational or "other." The rest are affiliated with other denominations. Additionally, only about half of our faculty is ordained in the RCA. These are trends we only expect to continue.

WTS seeks to be responsive to this growing reality. We desire to become the preferred theological education institution in the Reformed tradition for added representation and service. Beyond that, we believe that a more denominationally diverse WTS is also a positive for the RCA. Given the religious landscape within the United States, graduates of Western who become ordained in the RCA will find a greater diversity of denominational backgrounds in their churches. Exposure to the wider church and learning about and from the global church while still being faithfully rooted, steeped in, and formed by Reformed doctrines and theology will not only reflect the RCA heritage, but also better prepare students for the ministry and congregational reality that they will encounter in the coming decades.

Finally, becoming an affiliated institution will also help strengthen WTS. With this change, the seminary board would be organized on a directorship basis with ultimate oversight of WTS. This would allow the institution to be more nimble, agile, and responsive to emerging needs and to develop new partnerships and collaborations which are increasingly necessary given the current and continually evolving landscape of theological education.

Should this request be approved, the RCA can continue to expect the following from Western Theological Seminary.

- We will continue to affirm the Theological Identity Statement of WTS, which was unanimously approved by the board in 2019 and which affirms the creeds and confessions of the RCA.
- In accordance with the *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 5 [2019 edition, p. 72]), the WTS board will continue to include three trustees who are officially designated by the General Synod as General Synod representatives to the Board of Western Theological Seminary.
- WTS will continue to provide all requisite courses so that candidates for the ministry of Word and sacrament can meet their ordination requirements.
- All RCA-affiliated students will receive a 25 percent tuition discount. Additionally, students currently in ministry or with significant ministry experience can receive additional scholarships up to 40 percent off tuition. Simply put, any RCA members who are serving in an RCA church can expect to receive significant benefit and notable discounts off Western's tuition, which we steadfastly strive to make affordable.

In conclusion and for all these noted reasons to support and strengthen both the denomination and WTS, the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary formally requests approval from the General Synod for WTS to become an affiliated institution of the RCA. Following are the revised texts of both the bylaws and articles of incorporation of Western Theological Seminary, which we are submitting for General Synod approval.

TE 21-4

To approve the request of the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary for Western Theological Seminary to become an affiliated institution of the Reformed Church in America by approving the following amendments to the Bylaws and the Articles of Incorporation of Western Theological Seminary as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are struck; articles to which no changes are being proposed are omitted here):

BYLAWS

Article II Member

Sec. 1 ~~The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the "General Synod"), or its successor by any merger or consolidation, will be the sole member of the Corporation. The General Synod, acting in accordance with applicable law, may exercise all rights granted to members of nonprofit corporations by the laws of the state of Michigan.~~ Corporation has no members and is organized on a directorship basis.

Sec. 2 ~~The date, time and purpose of the annual or any special meeting of the General Synod intending to take any action required or permitted to be taken by the General Synod pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation of this Corporation (the "Articles") or these Bylaws will be determined by the General Synod.~~

Article V
Trustees

Sec. 1 ~~The General Synod entrusts to the Board all~~has authority and power necessary for the proper oversight and direction of the Corporation and its seminary (the "Seminary"), as well as the control of the Corporation's finances, securities, and property.

Sec. 2 All members of the Board must be confessing Christians who acknowledge a commitment to the authority of the Bible over all matters of faith and practice, the sovereignty of God, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. The members also must be interested in and willing to contribute their wealth, wisdom, work and witness.

Sec. 3 The Board must consist of a minimum of twelve and a maximum of twenty-four members who are to be elected for a term of three years beginning the first day of July following their election by the ~~General Synod~~Board and continuing until the end of June when their successors have been elected. Members may serve three consecutive full terms but must be off the Board for two years before becoming eligible again for re-election to the Board.

Sec. 4 All trustees must be recommended by the Board Governance and Church Relations Committee and elected by the ~~General Synod~~Board at its annual meeting or at any special meeting. Three of the trustees must be designated General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the "Synod") members of the Board, each of whom must be approved by the Synod as a condition to their election.

Sec. 5 The president, one member of the faculty, and the student council president of the Seminary will be an *ex-officio* member, without vote, of the Board.

Sec. 6 ~~One member of the faculty of the Seminary who is tenured or who holds the office of General Synod Professor of Theology of the Seminary must be elected by the faculty to~~

~~serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board. The faculty may waive the tenure / General Synod Professor requirement.~~

~~Sec. 7 The student council president of the Seminary is to serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.~~

~~Sec. 8 The general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, or a representative appointed by the general secretary, is to be an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.~~

Sec. 96 A trustee may resign by written notice to the Corporation's secretary. The death or resignation of a trustee will create a vacancy. Vacancies must be filled for the remaining portion of the term by the Executive Committee, ~~subject to approval by General Synod, at any regular or special meeting of the General Synod.~~ The Board may remove a trustee with or without cause.

Sec. 107 The Board assumes the responsibility for providing the Corporation with such property and buildings, information resources, equipment, and supplies as are necessary for the effective accomplishment of the Corporation's mission.

Article IX Committees

Sec. 1 The Board has established the following standing committees:

Executive, Student and Community Life, Academic, ~~Advancement, and Development,~~ Finance and Audit Board of Governance and Church Relations. The Board may establish such ad hoc committees as it deems necessary to carry out the business of the Seminary.

Sec. 2 The Executive Committee is to consist of the officers of the Board and the chairs of the other standing committees. The Board may designate one or more individuals who are not trustees to receive notice of, attend, and be heard at a committee meeting, but such individuals cannot vote. The Executive Committee is empowered to conduct all the business of the Board between its stated meetings. The Executive Committee has no power to:

- a. amend the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws;
- b. change the mission of the Corporation;
- c. adopt an agreement of merger or conversion;

- d. recommend to the member the sale, lease, or exchange of all or substantially all of the Corporation's property and assets;
- e. fill vacancies in the Board;
- f. fix compensation of the trustees for serving on the board or committee; or
- g. terminate memberships.

All Executive Committee actions are to be reviewed and are subject to ratification by the Board at its next meeting. The Executive Committee is responsible for the annual performance review of the president of the Seminary with recommendation to the full Board regarding compensation. When unexpected vacancies on the Executive Committee occur, the vacancy is to be filled by election by the remaining members of the Executive Committee. The elected member is to serve until the next annual meeting of the Board.

Sec. 3 The Executive Committee must review the vitality, effectiveness and appropriateness of the Board's functioning and make recommendations for change; continuously develop a list of potential Board members; gather information regarding their qualifications and preparedness to serve if nominated; prepare nominations of Board members for consideration by the Board; arrange and oversee the orientation and training of members of the Board; arrange for the full involvement of members of the Board in the activities of the Board; give leadership in encouraging members to evaluate their own performance; and provide appropriate recognition for the service of members of the Board.

Sec. 4 All other standing committees must consist of trustees. All ad hoc committees established by the Board are to consist of such persons as are selected by the Board and may or may not consist of individuals who are trustees or officers. All other standing committees and ad hoc committees serve solely to assist in the conduct of the Corporation's affairs and cannot exercise any of the Board's powers or authority. The resolution that establishes the committee must state the purpose and functions of the committee, the terms and qualifications of the committee members, and the ways in which the members of the committee are selected and removed.

Article XII
Dedication of Assets

- Sec. 1 The Corporation's funds and property must be used exclusively for the Corporation's purposes set forth in the Articles. No part of the income or assets of the Corporation may inure to the benefit of any individual or trustee.
- Sec. 2 The Corporation must hold and administer all of the Corporation's assets and accumulated income to effectuate the Corporation's tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this Corporation will inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the Corporation's purposes fail or if the Corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the Corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the Corporation's assets and accumulated income must be distributed to the General Synod. ~~The Corporation must be dissolved after all of the Corporation's property has been so distributed as provided in the Articles.~~

Article XIII
Amendment of the Bylaws

- Sec. 1 These Bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the Board at any regular meeting after ten days' notice to the trustees ~~and the approval of the General Synod~~ Board.

Article XIV
Adoption of the Bylaws

- Sec. 1 These Bylaws, when adopted by the Board ~~and the General Synod~~, will supersede all previous Bylaws controlling the affairs of the Corporation.

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

ARTICLE II
Purposes

The purpose or purposes of this corporation are:

- (a) To maintain and operate a theological seminary (the "Seminary") for the purpose of providing courses of study in theology, religion, church history, and other subjects suitable for the training of men and women for the Gospel ministry, and for the teaching of religion according to the Holy Scriptures and secondarily the doctrines and standards of The Reformed Church in

America, as based on the Holy Scriptures, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort and the Belhar Confession as historic and faithful witness to the word of God in Scripture.

(b) To acquire by purchase, gift, or otherwise, property of every description, real and personal, for the use and benefit of the Seminary, and to exchange, sell, or dispose of such property.

(c) To do each and everything necessary, suitable, or proper for the accomplishment of the above purposes or which at any time appear convenient for or conducive to the accomplishment of such purposes; and which a nonprofit corporation organized under the provisions of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act may exercise. The corporation may deal with and distribute the corporation's property in such manner as will best promote its objectives and purposes, without limitation except such, if any, as may be contained in instruments under which such property is conveyed to the corporation.

Notwithstanding any other provision of these Articles, the corporation shall not carry on any activity or have any purpose that is not permitted for (i) an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (the "Code") and other related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended or (ii) an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Code and related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended. No substantial part of the corporation's direct or indirect activities shall consist of carrying on propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The corporation shall not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

ARTICLE III Form of Organization and Financing

The corporation is formed on a nonstock directorship basis.

The general plan under which the corporation is to be financed is as follows:

(a) By income derived from endowment funds previously acquired by the corporation and/or by the trustees of the corporation, by gift, bequest, or devise and by such other

endowment funds as may be acquired in the future by gift, bequest, devise, or otherwise.

(b) ~~By contributions and appropriations from the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the "General Synod"), from the particular synods, classes and churches of The Reformed Church in America, and from individuals from those~~ interested in promoting the advancement of ~~The Reformed Church in America and/or~~ religious and social education and welfare.

~~The corporation is formed on a membership basis.~~

ARTICLE IV Registered Office and Resident Agent

The street address (which is the mailing address) of the corporation's registered office is 101 East 13th Street, Holland, Michigan 49423.

The name of the resident agent at the registered office is Dr. ~~Timothy L. Brown~~ Felix Theonugraha.

ARTICLE VI Member

~~The sole member of the corporation is the General Synod.~~

ARTICLE VII Seminary

~~The Seminary shall be under the control and support of the General Synod, subject to the remaining provisions of the Articles.~~

ARTICLE VIII Degrees

Upon the recommendation of the faculty of the Seminary, the trustees of the corporation are authorized to grant the degrees of Bachelor of Divinity or Master of Divinity (M.Div.), whichever is by custom and usage recognized as the terminal award for the first professional degree program, and the degrees Master of Theology (Th.M.), Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) and Master of Arts (M.A.), as well as certificate programs.

ARTICLE ~~IX~~VII
Trustees

The affairs of the corporation will be conducted by a board of trustees. The board of trustees has the power to provide for the organization of the board, the conduct of the affairs of the board, the performance of the function of the corporation, and in general to have all of the powers legally vesting in such boards by virtue of the law of the State of Michigan. Without limiting the above, the board is to hold in trust such property, either real, personal or mixed, as may be granted, conveyed, given, or in any other manner acquired by the corporation and to hold, invest, sell, transfer, or dispose of the such property for the purposes of the corporation.

The number, qualifications, classifications, terms of office, and manner of election or removal of the trustees of the corporation are as prescribed in the corporation's bylaws. ~~Any bylaw for these purposes may be made or altered only by the General Synod.~~

ARTICLE ~~X~~VIII
Limitation of Trustee's and Volunteer Officer's Liability

A trustee or volunteer officer shall not be personally liable to the corporation for money damages for any action taken or any failure to take any action as a trustee or volunteer officer, except liability for any of the following:

- (1) the amount of a financial benefit received by a trustee or volunteer officer to which he or she is not entitled;
- (2) intentional infliction of harm on the corporation or its member;
- (3) a violation of Section 551 of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act;
- (4) an intentional criminal act; or
- (5) a liability imposed under Section 497(a) of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act.

Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

If the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act is amended to further eliminate or limit the liability of a trustee or volunteer officer, then a trustee or volunteer officer (in addition to the circumstances

in which a trustee or officer is not personally liable as set forth in the preceding paragraph) shall, to the fullest extent permitted by the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act as so amended, not be liable to the corporation. No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this Article shall increase the liability or alleged liability of any trustee or volunteer officer of the corporation for or concerning any act or omission of such trustee or officer occurring before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal.

The above limitation of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

ARTICLE ~~XIX~~
Assumption of Liability for Acts of Volunteers

The corporation shall assume all liability to any person other than the corporation for all acts or omissions of a volunteer trustee incurred in the good faith performance of the volunteer trustee's duties as such. The corporation shall assume the liability for all acts or omissions of a volunteer trustee, volunteer officer or other volunteer, if all of the following conditions are met:

(1) the volunteer was acting or reasonably believed he or she was acting within the scope of his or her authority;

(2) the volunteer was acting in good faith;

(3) the volunteer's conduct did not amount to gross negligence or willful and wanton misconduct;

(4) the volunteer's conduct was not an intentional tort;
and

(5) the volunteer's conduct was not a tort arising out of the ownership, maintenance, or use of a motor vehicle for which tort liability may be imposed as provided by Section 3135 of the Michigan Insurance Code of 1956.

No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this article shall reduce the scope of the corporation's assumption of liability under this article for or concerning any volunteer's acts or omissions that occur before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal. Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

The above assumption of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

**ARTICLE ~~XIX~~
Dedication of Assets**

The corporation shall hold and administer all its assets and accumulated income to effectuate its tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this corporation shall inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the corporation's purposes fail or if the corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the corporation's assets and accumulated income shall be distributed to ~~the General Synod~~such other organizations or units of government as the trustees (or in default of designation by the trustees, the Circuit Court for the County of Ottawa) shall designate as best accomplishing the purposes for which the corporation was formed, provided that (i) each organization receiving such assets is qualified as tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code or the corresponding provisions of any subsequent federal tax laws and (ii) each distribution to a unit of government is made for a public purpose to the United States federal government or to a state or local government. The corporation shall be dissolved after all its property has been so distributed.

**ARTICLE ~~XIX~~
Amendments**

The ~~Synod~~board of trustees may amend or repeal any provision contained in these Articles and add additional articles in the manner prescribed by statute.

Restated Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation – Final Versions

Following is how the Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation of Western Theological Seminary will read if the proposed amendments above are approved by the General Synod.

**RESTATED BYLAWS
OF
THE WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA**

Article I

Name

- Sec. 1 The name of this corporation is The Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America (the “**Corporation**”).
- Sec. 2 The Corporation will operate under the assumed name Western Theological Seminary and such other assumed names as may be approved by the Board of Trustees of the Corporation (the “**Board**”).

Article II

Member

- Sec. 1 The Corporation has no members and is organized on a directorship basis.

Article III

Purposes

- Sec. 1 The purposes of this Corporation are as stated in the Articles.

Article IV

Powers

- Sec. 1 The Corporation may exercise any power that is consistent with the purposes described in the Articles and that a nonprofit corporation organized under the provisions of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act may exercise. The Corporation may deal with and distribute the Corporation’s property in any manner as will best promote the Corporation’s objectives and purposes, without limitation except as may be contained, if any, in instruments under which the property is conveyed to the Corporation.
- Sec. 2 Notwithstanding any other provision of the Articles or these Bylaws, the Corporation must not carry on any activity or have any purpose that is not permitted for (a) an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and other related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may in the future be amended or (b) an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Internal Revenue Code and related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may in the future be amended. No substantial part of the Corporation’s direct or indirect activities is to consist of carrying on propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The Corporation must not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

Article V

Trustees

- Sec. 1 The Board has authority and power necessary for the proper oversight and direction of the Corporation and its seminary (the “**Seminary**”), as well as the control of the Corporation’s finances, securities, and property.

- Sec. 2 All members of the Board must be confessing Christians who acknowledge a commitment to the authority of the Bible over all matters of faith and practice, the sovereignty of God, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. The members also must be interested in and willing to contribute their wealth, wisdom, work and witness.
- Sec. 3 The Board must consist of a minimum of twelve and a maximum of twenty-four members who are to be elected for a term of three years beginning the first day of July following their election by the Board and continuing until the end of June when their successors have been elected. Members may serve three consecutive full terms but must be off the Board for two years before becoming eligible again for re-election to the Board.
- Sec. 4 All trustees must be recommended by the Board Governance and Church Relations Committee and elected by the Board at its annual meeting or at any special meeting. Three of the trustees must be designated General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the “**Synod**”) members of the Board, each of whom must be approved by the Synod as a condition to their election.
- Sec. 5 The president, one member of the faculty, and the student council president of the Seminary will be an *ex-officio* member, without vote, of the Board.
- Sec. 6 A trustee may resign by written notice to the Corporation’s secretary. The death or resignation of a trustee will create a vacancy. Vacancies must be filled for the remaining portion of the term by the Executive Committee. The Board may remove a trustee with or without cause.
- Sec. 7 The Board assumes the responsibility for providing the Corporation with such property and buildings, information resources, equipment, and supplies as are necessary for the effective accomplishment of the Corporation’s mission.

Article VI
Meetings of the Board

- Sec. 1 The Board must meet at least three times per year, with the annual meeting to be in the spring. Notice of each meeting must be given thirty days prior to the date of the meeting.
- Sec. 2 A special meeting of the Board may be called by the chairperson or vice-chairperson of the Board. The chairperson or vice-chairperson is obliged to call such a meeting if so requested in writing by any five trustees. If the chairperson or vice-chairperson fails to call the meeting within ten days of such request, the secretary must issue the call to meeting based on the trustees’ written request. Notice of special meetings, stating the nature of the business to be considered, must be given to all trustees not less than ten days prior to each such meeting. No other business is to be considered at such special meetings except by two-thirds vote of those present at the meeting.
- Sec. 3 Notice of the annual or any special meeting stating the time and place of the meeting must be given to each trustee by one of the following methods:

- a. by mailing a written notice to such address as the trustee designates from time to time or, in the absence of designation, to the last known address of the trustee;
- b. by personally delivering a written notice to the trustee;
- c. by orally notifying the trustee, either personally or by telephone; or
- d. by electronic transmission to the trustee in a manner authorized by the trustee entitled to the notice;

except that, if the transmitted notice is returned as undeliverable, a different permitted method of notification must be used.

- Sec. 4 A majority of all voting trustees of the Board constitutes a quorum. If there is less than a quorum present, the meeting will be adjourned. Motions may be passed by a majority of those present. Each trustee present in person at a Board meeting is entitled to one vote.
- Sec. 5 The Trustees must receive the agenda at least ten days prior to the meeting of the Board.
- Sec. 6 Every meeting of the Board must be opened and closed with prayer.
- Sec. 7 The Board may meet in executive session for a portion of any business meeting at which time only voting trustees and the president of the Seminary are to be present. The Board may also ask to meet without the president during executive session.
- Sec. 8 A trustee's attendance at or participation in a meeting waives notice to the trustee of the meeting, unless the trustee at the beginning of the meeting, or when the trustee arrives, objects to the meeting or the transacting of business at the meeting and after objecting does not vote for or assent to any action taken at the meeting. A trustee may waive any right to notice before or at the meeting.
- Sec. 9 Trustees' meetings must generally follow accepted rules of parliamentary procedure. The presiding official has authority over matters of procedure and may adopt any other form of procedure suited to the business being conducted.
- Sec. 10 Unless otherwise provided by the Articles or these Bylaws, any action permitted to be taken under authorization voted at a meeting of the Board or a committee of the Board may be taken without a meeting if, before or after the action, all members of the Board then in office or of the committee consent to the action in writing or by electronic transmission. The written consent must be filed with the minutes of the proceedings of the Board or committee. The consent has the same effect as a vote of the Board or committee for all purposes.
- Sec. 11 A trustee or a member of a committee may participate in a meeting by means of a conference telephone or similar communications equipment by means of which all persons participating in the meeting can hear each other. Such participation in a meeting constitutes presence in person at the meeting.

- Sec. 12 A trustee who is present at a trustees' meeting, or at a meeting of a committee of which the trustee is a member, at which action on a corporate matter is taken is presumed to have concurred in that action taken unless a dissent is entered in the minutes of the meeting or unless the trustee files a written dissent to such action with the person acting as the secretary of the meeting before or promptly after its adjournment. A trustee who is absent from a meeting of the Board or of a committee of which the trustee is a member at which any such action is taken is presumed to have concurred in the action unless the trustee files a written dissent with the secretary of the meeting within a reasonable time after obtaining knowledge of the action.

Article VII

Officers

- Sec. 1 The elected officers of the Board must consist of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a secretary, and a treasurer, all of whom must be members of the Board.
- Sec. 2 The president of the Seminary must serve as the chief executive officer of the Corporation.
- Sec. 3 The Executive Committee must present a slate of officers for Board approval at its annual meeting.
- Sec. 4 The term of each office begins July 1 and will be for one year or until successors are elected and properly qualified. A vacancy in any office must be filled at the next regular or special meeting of the Board.
- Sec. 5 In the event of the death or disability of both the chairperson and the vice-chairperson, the Executive Committee must appoint a member of the Board to serve as chairperson until the next annual meeting of the Board.
- Sec. 6 The president of the Seminary must be elected by the Board.

Article VIII

Duties of Officers

- Sec. 1 The chairperson must call and preside at all regular and special meetings of the Board, will be an *ex-officio* member of all committees of the Board, and is authorized to perform such other duties and exercise such other powers as usually pertain to the office. The chairperson is entitled to vote on all matters coming before the Board for decision.
- Sec. 2 The vice-chairperson must assist the chairperson in the performance of the duties of the office of chairperson, and in the absence of the chairperson, is to perform all the duties and exercise all powers of that office.
- Sec. 3 The secretary must keep a true and accurate record of all proceedings of the Board, a separate minute book for all actions taken in executive session, and perform such other duties as usually pertain to the office.

- Sec. 4 The treasurer or his/her agent will be the fiscal officer of the Corporation and is responsible for the proper custody of all corporate funds and securities. The treasurer is responsible for making certain that proper books of account setting forth all corporate receipts, disbursements, and assets are kept and is responsible for making certain that all corporate funds are deposited in such banks and other depositories as the Board designates. The treasurer must also perform such other duties as may be directed by the Board.
- Sec. 5 The duties of the president of the Seminary includes the position description as adopted by the Board and the provisions of the contract at the time of employment. The board must conduct an annual performance review of the president.

Article IX *Committees*

- Sec. 1 The Board has established the following standing committees:
- Executive, Student and Community Life, Academic, Development, Finance and Board of Governance and Church Relations. The Board may establish such ad hoc committees as it deems necessary to carry out the business of the Seminary.
- Sec. 2 The Executive Committee is to consist of the officers of the Board and the chairs of the other standing committees. The Board may designate one or more individuals who are not trustees to receive notice of, attend, and be heard at a committee meeting, but such individuals cannot vote. The Executive Committee is empowered to conduct all the business of the Board between its stated meetings. The Executive Committee has no power to:
- a. amend the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws;
 - b. change the mission of the Corporation;
 - c. adopt an agreement of merger or conversion;
 - d. recommend to the member the sale, lease, or exchange of all or substantially all of the Corporation's property and assets;
 - e. fill vacancies in the Board;
 - f. fix compensation of the trustees for serving on the board or committee; or
 - g. terminate memberships.

All Executive Committee actions are to be reviewed and are subject to ratification by the Board at its next meeting. The Executive Committee is responsible for the annual performance review of the president of the Seminary with recommendation to the full Board regarding compensation. When unexpected vacancies on the Executive Committee occur, the vacancy is to be filled by election by the remaining members of the Executive Committee. The elected member is to serve until the next annual meeting of the Board.

- Sec. 3 The Executive Committee must review the vitality, effectiveness and appropriateness of the Board's functioning and make recommendations for change; continuously develop a list of potential Board members; gather information regarding their qualifications and preparedness to serve if nominated; prepare nominations of Board

members for consideration by the Board; arrange and oversee the orientation and training of members of the Board; arrange for the full involvement of members of the Board in the activities of the Board; give leadership in encouraging members to evaluate their own performance; and provide appropriate recognition for the service of members of the Board.

- Sec. 4 All other standing committees must consist of trustees. All ad hoc committees established by the Board are to consist of such persons as are selected by the Board and may or may not consist of individuals who are trustees or officers. All other standing committees and ad hoc committees serve solely to assist in the conduct of the Corporation's affairs and cannot exercise any of the Board's powers or authority. The resolution that establishes the committee must state the purpose and functions of the committee, the terms and qualifications of the committee members, and the ways in which the members of the committee are selected and removed.

Article X *Indemnification*

- Sec. 1 The Corporation shall indemnify the Corporation's trustees and officers against expenses (including but not limited to attorneys' fees), judgments, fines, and amounts paid in settlement actually and reasonably incurred by them in connection with any actions or suits brought or threatened against them, including actions by or in the right of the Corporation, by reason of the fact that such person was serving as a trustee or officer, employee, non-trustee volunteer, or agent of the Corporation, to the fullest extent permitted by both the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act and Chapter 42 of the Internal Revenue Code. The Corporation may indemnify persons who are not trustees or officers to the extent authorized by resolution of the Board or by contractual agreement authorized by the Board. A change in the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act, the Articles, or these Bylaws that reduces the scope of indemnification does not apply to any action or omission that occurs before the change.
- Sec. 2 The Corporation may purchase and maintain insurance on behalf of any person who is or was a trustee, officer, employee, non-trustee volunteer, or agent of this Corporation or is or was serving at the Corporation's request in any other enterprise against any liability incurred in such capacity.

Article XI *General Provisions*

- Sec. 1 All Corporation checks or demands for money and notes must be signed by such persons as the Board designates.
- Sec. 2 The Corporation's fiscal year is as fixed by the Board.

Article XII *Dedication of Assets*

- Sec. 1 The Corporation's funds and property must be used exclusively for the Corporation's purposes set forth in the Articles. No part of the income or assets of the Corporation may inure to the benefit of any individual or trustee.
- Sec. 2 The Corporation must hold and administer all of the Corporation's assets and accumulated income to effectuate the Corporation's tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this Corporation will inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the Corporation's purposes fail or if the Corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the Corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the Corporation's assets and accumulated income must be distributed as provided in the Articles.

Article XIII

Amendment of the Bylaws

- Sec. 1 These Bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the Board at any regular meeting after ten days' notice to the trustees of the Board.

Article XIV

Adoption of the Bylaws

- Sec. 1 These Bylaws, when adopted by the Board, will supersede all previous Bylaws controlling the affairs of the Corporation.

RESTATED ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

ARTICLE I

Name

The name of the corporation is The Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America.

ARTICLE II

Purposes

The purpose or purposes of this corporation are:

(a) To maintain and operate a theological seminary (the "**Seminary**") for the purpose of providing courses of study in theology, religion, church history, and other subjects suitable for the training of men and women for the Gospel ministry, and for the teaching of religion according to the Holy Scriptures and secondarily the doctrines and standards of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort and the Belhar Confession as historic and faithful witness to the word of God in Scripture.

(b) To acquire by purchase, gift, or otherwise, property of every description, real and personal, for the use and benefit of the Seminary, and to exchange, sell, or dispose of such property.

(c) To do each and everything necessary, suitable, or proper for the accomplishment of the above purposes or which at any time appear convenient for or conducive to the accomplishment of such purposes and which a nonprofit corporation organized under the provisions of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act may exercise. The corporation may deal with and distribute the corporation's property in such manner as will best promote its objectives and purposes, without limitation except such, if any, as may be contained in instruments under which such property is conveyed to the corporation.

Notwithstanding any other provision of these Articles, the corporation shall not carry on any activity or have any purpose that is not permitted for (i) an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (the “Code”) and other related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended or (ii) an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Code and related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended. No substantial part of the corporation's direct or indirect activities shall consist of carrying on propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The corporation shall not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

ARTICLE III Form of Organization and Financing

The corporation is formed on a nonstock directorship basis.

The general plan under which the corporation is to be financed is as follows:

(a) By income derived from endowment funds previously acquired by the corporation and/or by the trustees of the corporation, by gift, bequest, or devise and by such other endowment funds as may be acquired in the future by gift, bequest, devise, or otherwise.

(b) By contributions from those interested in promoting the advancement of religious and social education and welfare.

ARTICLE IV Registered Office and Resident Agent

The street address (which is the mailing address) of the corporation's registered office is 101 East 13th Street, Holland, Michigan 49423.

The name of the resident agent at the registered office is Dr. Felix Theonugraha.

ARTICLE V Duration

The term of the corporate existence is perpetual.

ARTICLE VI Degrees

Upon the recommendation of the faculty of the Seminary, the trustees of the corporation are authorized to grant the degrees of Bachelor of Divinity or Master of Divinity (M.Div.), whichever is by custom and usage recognized as the terminal award for the first professional degree program, and the degrees Master of Theology (Th.M.), Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) and Master of Arts (M.A.), as well as certificate programs.

ARTICLE VII Trustees

The affairs of the corporation will be conducted by a board of trustees. The board of trustees has the power to provide for the organization of the board, the conduct of the affairs of the board, the performance of the function of the corporation, and in general to have all of the powers legally vesting in such boards by virtue of the law of the State of Michigan. Without limiting the above, the board is to hold in trust such property, either real, personal or mixed, as may be granted, conveyed, given, or in any other manner acquired by the corporation and to hold, invest, sell, transfer, or dispose of the such property for the purposes of the corporation.

The number, qualifications, classifications, terms of office, and manner of election or removal of the trustees of the corporation are as prescribed in the corporation's bylaws.

ARTICLE VIII Limitation of Trustee's and Volunteer Officer's Liability

A trustee or volunteer officer shall not be personally liable to the corporation for money damages for any action taken or any failure to take any action as a trustee or volunteer officer, except liability for any of the following:

- (1) the amount of a financial benefit received by a trustee or volunteer officer to which he or she is not entitled;
- (2) intentional infliction of harm on the corporation or its member;
- (3) a violation of Section 551 of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act;
- (4) an intentional criminal act; or
- (5) a liability imposed under Section 497(a) of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act.

Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

If the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act is amended to further eliminate or limit the liability of a trustee or volunteer officer, then a trustee or volunteer officer (in addition to the circumstances in which a trustee or officer is not personally liable as set forth in the preceding paragraph) shall, to the fullest extent permitted by the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act as so amended, not be liable to the corporation. No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this Article shall increase the liability or alleged liability of any trustee or volunteer officer of

the corporation for or concerning any act or omission of such trustee or officer occurring before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal.

The above limitation of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

ARTICLE IX Assumption of Liability for Acts of Volunteers

The corporation shall assume all liability to any person other than the corporation for all acts or omissions of a volunteer trustee incurred in the good faith performance of the volunteer trustee's duties as such. The corporation shall assume the liability for all acts or omissions of a volunteer trustee, volunteer officer or other volunteer, if all of the following conditions are met:

- (1) the volunteer was acting or reasonably believed he or she was acting within the scope of his or her authority;
- (2) the volunteer was acting in good faith;
- (3) the volunteer's conduct did not amount to gross negligence or willful and wanton misconduct;
- (4) the volunteer's conduct was not an intentional tort; and
- (5) the volunteer's conduct was not a tort arising out of the ownership, maintenance, or use of a motor vehicle for which tort liability may be imposed as provided by Section 3135 of the Michigan Insurance Code of 1956.

No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this article shall reduce the scope of the corporation's assumption of liability under this article for or concerning any volunteer's acts or omissions that occur before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal. Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

The above assumption of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

ARTICLE X Dedication of Assets

The corporation shall hold and administer all its assets and accumulated income to effectuate its tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this corporation shall inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the corporation's purposes fail or if the corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the corporation's assets and accumulated income shall be distributed to such other organizations or units of government as the trustees (or in default of designation by the trustees, the Circuit Court for the County of Ottawa) shall designate as best accomplishing the purposes for which the corporation was formed, provided that (i) each

organization receiving such assets is qualified as tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code or the corresponding provisions of any subsequent federal tax laws and (ii) each distribution to a unit of government is made for a public purpose to the United States federal government or to a state or local government. The corporation shall be dissolved after all its property has been so distributed.

ARTICLE XI Amendments

The board of trustees may amend or repeal any provision contained in these Articles and add additional articles in the manner prescribed by statute.

Report of Central College

Central College in Pella, Iowa, is a private, four-year liberal arts college. Central is known for its academic rigor, leadership and character development, global experiential learning, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and sustainability education, athletics, and service.

For more than 100 years, Central has valued its covenant with the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Central's connection with the RCA is invaluable to students learning to live out their faith through service to God and humanity. RCA members serve on Central's board of trustees, and Reformed churches support students through Central's Journey Scholarship Fund. RCA students also can receive the Heritage Award. Many Central graduates go on to serve as leaders in RCA congregations worldwide.

Central's mission integrates career preparation with developing values essential to responsible citizenship. Central empowers graduates to serve in local, national, and international communities. A Central education prepares students for civic responsibility, to "learn to do right; seek justice" (Isaiah 1:17, NIV). Through activities, courses, service opportunities, and Central's relationship with the RCA, students learn to take their place in the world as justice seekers.

Campus Ministries

Campus Ministries students plan and lead a variety of activities and events on campus.

The Calm

An average of 65 students participate in The Calm, a weekly worship service.

Fundraisers

Campus Ministries holds several fundraisers annually for organizations including World Vision, Water to Thrive, Freedom House, and Many Hands for Haiti. In fall 2020, students put on drives for Crisis Intervention Services and Love Packages and began working on fundraising efforts toward a third well for Water to Thrive.

Mission Trips

Mission trips allow students to serve others while growing their faith. Campus Ministries is dedicated to global missions and has traveled to Haiti, Tanzania, Mississippi, and a variety of other locations over the years. Due to COVID-19, students only traveled to Mission, Texas, to help build homes for families near the Mexico border in January 2020.

Services and Discipleship

Many students are involved with local churches, including assisting with worship services and youth/children's ministries. In addition to connections with local churches, about 40 students have been paired with faculty, upperclassmen, and staff mentors in a discipleship program designed to help grow their faith and relationships with God.

Leadership Teams

More than 40 students participated in six weekly leadership team meetings to plan worship; organize campus and community outreach; participate in hands-on ministry with local organizations; fight issues of global injustice; and play music and run sound systems and media at worship services. Events that resulted from these groups include the Global Care Fair, Angel Tree Nights, Pop-Up Bible Studies, service opportunities at Pella Food Shelf, and more.

Small Groups and Bible Studies

Nearly 20 groups—some led by staff, some by students—address a variety of topics ranging from the basics of faith to various book, Bible, and music studies.

Community Service

Service plays a major role on Central's campus. It is expressed through student organizations, classes with service-learning components, and independent projects by students, faculty, and staff. In 2020, more than 200 students participated in service learning, much of it facilitated by the college's Center for Community Based Learning, which manages reciprocal partnerships with more than 150 nonprofit organizations and agencies in the Pella region.

Community service teaches civic engagement. By engaging with the community, students practice treating others with care and respect. Living a servant-hearted life means understanding one's responsibility to others and the pursuit of justice for all. Central is committed to teaching civic responsibility through multiple activities.

Service Learning

Service learning strengthens cognitive, vocational, social, emotional, behavioral, and moral competencies. Students are placed in settings in which they can provide direct service to community members, such as teaching English as a second language, leading fitness activities with seniors, assisting with after-school programs, and serving food to families who are food insecure.

Service learning was cut short in the spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the challenges posed by the pandemic reinforced the crucial nature of our community partners' work with vulnerable populations.

As a service-learning student, Sami Craig, class of 2021, will help manage food rescue data for Eat Greater Des Moines (EGDM), a central Iowa-based nonprofit that facilitates and builds connections to strengthen the area's food system. Craig says she is looking forward to seeing the impact EGDM has on the community and to gaining valuable knowledge for how she can make an impact, too.

All Campus Service Day

Central's 2020 Service Day took place on October 6, 2020. Each year on Service Day, classes are canceled so all members of the Central family can collaborate on projects that address a community need. More than 650 students, faculty, and staff served at 50 locations in Central

Iowa—many at faith-based organizations. In total, there were 1,821 hours donated with an economic impact in the community of more than \$43,000.

Coursework

Many courses at Central include a service component. Despite restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, students continued to safely serve the community, both in person and virtually, through service links to individual courses. In fact, many students were conducting Zoom-based English language-learning lessons with students at Des Moines Public Schools, who themselves were engaged in remote learning. Others were safely assisting with pod-type learning in person at Des Moines Public Schools or Mahaska County Head Start.

As a result, in fall 2020, 79 percent of students developed a greater sense of personal responsibility, while 93 percent of students reported their service experience helped to “appreciate the diversity of cultures present in the United States.” Eighty-six percent reported becoming “more sensitive to the hardships and needs of others.”

Food Security Projects

The college annually participates in a Crop Hunger Walk, an initiative of Church World Service that raises funds to end hunger in the U.S. and around the world. This year, the Crop Hunger Walk was held virtually because of the pandemic. The event raised \$10,411 in contributions. The college also raised \$2,602 in contributions to the Pella Food Shelf.

Season of Gratitude

In fall 2020, several college departments and community partners collaborated for Season of Gratitude in Action. Activities included writing letters to veterans and first responders, a coat drive for refugees, two food drives, crocheting homeless mats made of used plastic grocery bags, and celebrating Giving Tuesday to encourage giving to nonprofits.

Individual Service Commitments

Students and faculty individually pursue a number of service commitments. Students often initiate their own service or social justice-oriented groups.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

The observance in 2021 included an in-class experience facilitated by faculty, during which students shared their dreams for 2021 alongside a display commemorating King; a Martin Luther King Jr. Day service activity to create tie fleece blankets for displaced, abused, and disadvantaged children; and a virtual event presented by Fred Saffold, titled “What They Didn’t Teach You in History Class—America’s Hidden True Black History.” Saffold used historic artifacts, documents, and photographs to explore solutions for racial equity and inclusion.

School Visits

Central’s community-based learning program collaborates with the admission department to offer college visits to students served by Central’s community partners. This strengthens the college’s goal of increasing college access to students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural perspectives.

The college partners annually with the Children and Family Urban Movement, Des Moines' Findley Elementary and Harding Middle Schools, and the Des Moines Oakridge Neighborhood Services to provide outreach and educational programming and college visits for underserved youth.

Prior to the pandemic, approximately 300 K–12 Harding Middle School students visited Central early in the spring 2020 semester. Students learned about physics with a model roller coaster, skin cells and bees with microscopes, and how to play the ukulele; watched a glass-blowing demonstration; and participated in a team-building exercise.

Financial Aid

In the 2020–2021 academic year, 140 students are receiving a total of \$161,482 in Community Service Awards. These scholarships are based on prospective students' past community engagement and their future plans for engagement in and after college.

Conclusion

Central takes seriously its mission of preparing students to lead. Part of this preparation is learning what it means to serve and how to change the world for the better. The global pandemic challenged students to serve the community in new ways. These lessons are integral to the life of a Christian and central to the college's mission, and the college's relationship with the RCA is essential to this mission. Central values its relationship with the RCA and the support—through gifts, guidance, and prayer—that the RCA offers this vital undertaking.

Report of Hope College

Affiliated with the Reformed Church in America since its founding in 1866, Hope College is known for our invitational, ecumenical Christian atmosphere, vibrant campus community, and outstanding academic and co-curricular offerings. We are intentional about our mission to educate students for lives of leadership and service in the context of the historic Christian faith.

Hope is a recognized leader in undergraduate research, scholarship, and preparation for graduate school and the workplace. Hope faculty members offer an academically rigorous, co-educational and residential education to approximately 3,000 undergraduate students from more than 40 states and 45 countries. Our teachers and talented researchers engage students in small classes and one-to-one collaborative research opportunities for an 11:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Hope offers over 1,800 internships and 300 study abroad opportunities in over 60 countries to provide a global perspective and experience that equips our graduates to excel in a global society. Ninety-four percent of our graduates join the workforce or enroll in graduate school within six months of graduation. The college's 80-plus student groups are marked by tradition, service, and enthusiasm, through which students are encouraged to explore their interests, build their leadership skills, and give back to the community.

Hope Forward

Under the leadership of President Matthew A. Scogin, Hope College recently announced a vision to fully fund the tuition of all students who come through Hope's doors. Called "Hope Forward," this vision is for an entirely new funding model for higher education: instead of charging tuition up front, which often burdens students with decades of debt, Hope will ask students to commit to donating to Hope after they graduate. Based on the biblical principles of generosity and gratitude, this model is rooted in our Christian mission and worldview. While it will be a long journey to transition to this model—Hope will have to raise over \$1 billion to fully fund tuition for all students—Hope is enthusiastic about the early momentum and the \$31 million raised so far.

While Hope Forward is in some ways an entirely new way of thinking about funding college, it's also deeply rooted in our DNA. When Hope was founded and for more than 50 years afterwards, Hope didn't charge tuition. A course catalog in 1907 states, "the aim constantly kept in mind is to provide at Hope College everything necessary to a broad, liberal education at the lowest possible cost." Our hope is to make Hope's transformative Christian education accessible to even more students, just like our founders envisioned.

Academic Excellence and Collaborative Research

Grounded in a general liberal arts education, Hope offers specialized study in more than 90 majors, minors, and pre-professional programs. Our students are presented with a rigorous intellectual experience, and their engagement with faculty often leads to the life-changing discovery of an academic passion or a professional calling.

Our faculty are active teacher-scholars, committed to their students. We are a recognized leader in undergraduate research with our students and faculty carrying out high quality research projects that are challenging and meaningful and contribute to exciting new knowledge in a broad range of disciplines. For decades, our students have benefited from this "graduate-level

undergraduate experience.” This experience is transformational, giving students the opportunity to conduct research, publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals (sometimes as primary author), present their work at conferences, and perform in front of audiences around the world. In addition, amid an unprecedented and challenging year for learning and teaching, Hope faculty and staff have authored approximately 160 peer-reviewed publications, designed 140 creative works, and submitted 88 proposals for external funding in the past academic year.

Creative Performance

Hope College was the first private liberal arts college to hold national accreditation in art, dance, music, and theatre, and is the only liberal arts school in Michigan with an accredited art program.

- In addition to superior art facilities, our art students have the benefit of an extensive exhibition program that regularly crosses cultural and historical boundaries.
- We believe in the transformative power of dance, and our dance program is a place where our students grow artistically, intellectually, physically, and spiritually.
- A student’s passion for music speaks to the world, and we believe music is the language that communicates to everyone. Music students at Hope practice in state-of-the-art facilities and perform in acoustically-superior spaces.
- The Hope College theatre program is one of recognized excellence that develops students as practicing theatre artists and engaged audience members. Both theatre majors and non-majors participate in all aspects of theatre work.

There is a strong inter-divisional collaboration among our art, dance, music, and theatre programs, which contributes to the success of each. Hope students work with nationally known writers, musicians, performers, and artists on stage, in the gallery, in the concert hall, and in the classroom.

Athletics

In addition to excelling in scholarship, research, and artistic performance, our students also excel in athletics. We believe that intercollegiate sport is a powerful vehicle for education as well as for personal development. Our athletics program is part of our Kinesiology Department and is guided by a community of coaches, scholars, and leaders who prioritize excellence and the student-athlete experience. The members of our athletics program are committed to the utmost integrity in competition and engagement in Christian faith formation. They are dedicated to excelling in sports, academics, and life.

Calling and Career

Hope’s Boerigter Center for Calling and Career (BCCC) is a college-wide initiative engaging our students and alumni in lifelong practices for career development beginning in a student’s freshman year. The BCCC is more than a resource for reaching career goals; it is a process, a plan, and a guided journey over four-plus years. Interests, strengths, and values are assessed, and students become part of the Hope network. Integrated into the academic program of the college, the BCCC includes and expands upon the work of our former Career Development office. Staff members from Academic Advising, Career Development, and Alumni and Family

Engagement combine to help students ascertain clear next steps and prepare for graduate school and the workplace.

Campus Health

Over the last year, Hope College has navigated unprecedented disruption to higher education with characteristic excellence. Hope provided in-person residential learning for the entire year, relying on a variety of COVID testing and mitigation strategies. Hope's chemistry and biology department was recognized by the State of Michigan for excellence and innovation in COVID-19 wastewater testing. Classes were offered in three main teaching modalities: fully in-person (which made up the majority of our offerings), fully online, and hybrid. The college took the pandemic as not just a challenge but as an opportunity, investing in streaming technology and innovative strategies to engage students, their families, and the broader Hope community in arts performances, research presentations, chapel services, and more.

Campus Ministries

Hope College is a Christian community that invites all its members into a holistic and robust engagement with the historic Christian faith and a personal encounter with the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our Christian identity is described by these three aspirations: Hope aspires to be faithful, welcoming, and transformational. Hope is committed to the historical Christian faith as expressed in the ecumenical creeds of the ancient church, and the variety of expressions of the Christian faith we hold contributes to the vitality of the life of the college. Hope seeks to affirm the dignity of all persons as bearers of God's image and welcome those of different faiths or of no faith at all. We are committed to freedom of inquiry, yet also to the centrality of Scripture and renewal of our minds according to the will of God. The whole Hope community is encouraged in a life-long commitment to grow in God's grace and to pursue vocations through which the world so loved by God is renewed.

The Hope-Western Prison Education Program (HWPEP)

An extension of our mission beyond Holland, HWPEP is a partnership between Hope College and Western Theological Seminary. The pilot phase began in March 2019. In July, Presidents Scogin and Theonugraha signed a six-year renewable agreement with the Michigan Department of Corrections to launch a Hope College BA degree at Muskegon Correctional Facility. One hundred faculty members from the two institutions have expressed interest in teaching in this program. Twenty-three non-degree-seeking students at the prison have taken six non-credit courses to date. The credit-bearing program begins in the fall 2021 semester.

College education programs in prisons can lower violence by up to 80 percent; lower recidivism by 45 percent; lower costs to taxpayers; improve education for traditional students; engage hard-to-reach donors; transform prisoners' hearts and minds; and unify faculty, staff, students, and friends across different perspectives.

Conclusion

Hope College is a Christian community offering a liberal arts curriculum, graduate school-style research, hands-on opportunities, creative performance opportunities, competitive athletics, and challenging collaborations. Our students learn through experience in more than 300 study abroad programs and countless internships available locally and throughout the United States.

Ours is an environment of the highest standards where students have a sense of belonging, can explore, and become all that God intends them to be.

Report of Northwestern College

After moving to online classes in March 2020 due to the global pandemic, Northwestern College began the semester in person in the fall with record enrollment. This spring's enrollment was an all-time high, including graduate programs, with 1,482 students enrolled. In addition, 99.5 percent of 2020 graduates were employed or continuing their education within six months of graduation.

Software Engineering Major Launching Fall 2021

A new major in software engineering will launch in the fall of 2021, designed to prepare students for careers in software engineering and development, database administration, and web and mobile app development. The program will focus on how software is developed in industry.

The new major is based on standards recommended by the Association for Computing Machinery. It will include required courses in such areas as web development, data management systems, principles of software engineering, cybersecurity, management, and calculus. Students will learn how to write code in a variety of programming languages and develop efficient algorithms to solve problems.

Additionally, students will study best practices for project management, design, testing, documentation, verification, and quality assurance. Large-scale projects and teamwork are integrated throughout the curriculum to provide hands-on experiences simulating real-world practices. This program will offer preparation, bridging the skills gap between what academics is producing and what industry wants: the ability to design, test, validate, calibrate, and work with teams.

The new major will join a major in computer science, designed to prepare students for graduate school or research-oriented industry positions, as well as a minor in computer programming and a career concentration in computer science.

New MEd in Teaching History

Northwestern College began offering two new graduate education programs in teaching history in January 2021. The online master of education (MEd) in teaching history features 18 graduate credits in history and is specifically designed for current K–12 social studies and history teachers.

Completion of the program will qualify educators to teach dual-credit history courses or in a community college setting. Educators will take 33 total credits for the MEd degree, which can be completed in two years or less. Teachers interested in completing the 18 graduate credits in history without earning a master's degree can pursue the option of a graduate certificate in teaching history.

Rebecca Koerselman, director of Northwestern's graduate programs in teaching history, is a 2003 Northwestern College alumna who earned a doctorate in U.S. history at Michigan State University. She has taught at Northwestern since 2014.

Northwestern Online MEd Program Ranked among Top 100 by U.S. News

Northwestern College's master of education program is ranked 91st out of more than 300 schools in U.S. News & World Report's 2021 Best Online Programs ranking. Only two Iowa schools have higher rankings than Northwestern's program, and only one Council for Christian Colleges & Universities program across the country is ranked higher. Northwestern places a high value on our students' experience online. The programs are high quality, relevant, and taught by experienced and caring faculty, at an affordable price, in a flexible format for working adults.

Northwestern offers the MEd degree in eight tracks: early childhood, early childhood + endorsement, educational administration + K–12 principal endorsement, master teacher, special education, special education + endorsement, teacher leadership, and teaching history. Graduate-level endorsements and certificates are also available. Northwestern began offering online graduate programs in education in 2015 and now has 446 students enrolled.

Northwestern is also tied for 102nd in the online bachelor's degree program category out of more than 360 schools. Northwestern offers two degree-completion online programs: early childhood and RN to BSN.

Center for Innovation and Leadership Launched

Northwestern College has begun a new Center for Innovation and Leadership. The center seeks to connect students' ingenuity and organizational leaders' insight to create shared opportunities that serve Christ's kingdom and the common good.

The center will invest in communities, organizations, and initiatives through collaborative, innovative, Christ-centered leadership development, and problem-solving services and opportunities—under the direction of Erica Vonk, with the assistance of a proven innovative businessperson in Josh Van Es.

The Center for Innovation and Leadership features five launch programs:

- **Accelerate Siouxland:** a regional leadership development program focused on linking community members, college students, and resources for the common good
- **Learner to Leader:** curriculum and mentoring programs that connect visionary students and organizational employees with innovative role models
- **Research and Consultancy:** access to the opinions, ideas, and imaginations of college students for research, assessment, and product or service development
- **Entrepreneur/Business Leader in Residence:** bringing experienced and emerging leaders together both in the classroom and community
- **Innovation Sandbox:** an inspiring space for collaboration, creative thinking, and problem solving for both students, alumni, and regional organizations.

Vonk, a Northwestern business professor since 2015, played a role in developing the college's interdisciplinary entrepreneurship minor and has connected students with Siouxland organizations through her courses in leadership, organizational behavior, and entrepreneurship. She also has experience in agricultural finance and management as well as economic and community development. Her community contributions have included serving as a foster parent,

as a member of her church's leadership team, and as a board member and volunteer with the Seahawks Swim Team. A 2000 Northwestern alumna, she holds an MBA from the University of South Dakota and is earning a doctorate in organizational leadership from Concordia University Chicago.

Van Es, a 2009 Northwestern graduate who owns Orange City's Ben Franklin-Crafts Central, serves as the center's assistant director and program coordinator for Accelerate Siouxland. He has 11 years of management experience with Walmart in Sioux Center and Storm Lake.

Faculty Book on Servant Leadership

Jiying (Jenny) Song, assistant professor of business and economics at Northwestern College, served as first editor of a newly published anthology, *Servant Leadership and Forgiveness: How Leaders Help Heal the Heart of the World*.

Published by SUNY Press, the volume includes chapters written by 21 authors from around the world. Many of the authors, like Song, are alumni of Gonzaga University's School of Leadership Studies or are on its advisory board. The book draws upon contexts from personal, organizational, and global levels to engage a deeper conversation about the role of leadership and forgiveness in the midst of political and social upheaval.

Chapters cover the theories of servant leadership and apply them to life. The book includes a number of personal forgiveness stories, including accounts of people who forgave the murderers of their children, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse who forgave his abuser, healing that took place in families rocked by alcoholism and dysfunction, and executives who both sought and granted forgiveness from coworkers. Two chapters address the need for servant leadership and forgiveness in law enforcement.

In addition to serving as first editor, Song wrote the first chapter, "Awareness, Healing and Forgiveness: Servant Leaders Help Heal the Heart of the World."

Building Women Leaders

This year, Northwestern opened the Koinonia House, a new living opportunity for women on campus. It's designed to help its residents develop their leadership skills and grow in their Christian identity.

Named after the Greek word for Christian fellowship, the Koinonia House is home to six students. The living-learning community provides a space for a small cohort of women to be intentionally mentored so they will leave Northwestern as confident women, prepared for their workplaces, relationships, and the kingdom of God.

Throughout the year, the women read books about community, being unified in Christ, and expressing honesty and vulnerability. They focus on building their identity in Christ in the fall semester and move to hands-on leadership on campus in the spring. The women also each mentor a first-year student. One of the women participating in the Koinonia House this year shared, "I feel a lot more confident in my strengths as a leader as these women have spoken out against my insecurities and reassured me of my unique abilities, while still challenging me to take risks."

Financial Reports

In an attempt to keep the workbook to a more manageable length, the audited financial reports are not included in the 2021 General Synod Workbook. These financial reports are available online at www.rca.org/finance. As a matter of public record, copies of audited financial reports are always available by calling the treasurer's office at 616-698-7071 between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. (Eastern Time), Monday through Friday.

Affirmed + Celebrated

A Reformed Theology of Inclusion

Report of the Ad Hoc Theology Committee
of the Classis of New Brunswick
in the Reformed Church in America
2019

Committee Members:
Rev. David Groeneveld (chair)
Rev. Liz Estes
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Rev. George Montanari
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The Ad Hoc Theology Committee expresses our sincere gratitude to The Study Committee on the Bible and Life-long Same-Sex Relationships in the Classis Grand Rapids East of the Christian Reformed Church of North America, whose rigorous 2016 report, “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage,” formed the basis and inspiration for our work.

Introduction

In September, 2015, President Hartmut Kramer-Mills of the Classis of New Brunswick (CNB) of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) formed an ad hoc committee to address theological issues as they arise in the life of Classis. Our preliminary issue is the Church's full inclusion and affirmation of people who do not conform to heterosexual and gender binary norms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual and queer people (LGBTIAQ, shortened to LGBTQ in the rest of this report).

The Classis has expressed and adopted the following position in its Welcoming Statement:

CNB Welcoming Statement: "As Classis of New Brunswick, we affirm the great diversity of God's creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."
(adopted at 5/27/15 Stated Session)

and codified this position in a legally binding bylaw:

CNB BYLAW 3: The Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church, Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. (Approved on 5/27/15, adopted on 9/26/2015).

This document addresses the congregations of Classis as our primary audience in order to:

- Provide theological and scriptural reasoning for the Classis position;
- Define sin and grace as they pertain to human sexuality;
- Contextualize the decades-long history of this issue within Classis and the RCA;
- Critique the majority RCA position;
- Provide pastoral direction and practical guidance for churches and congregants;
- Discuss the ways in which the unity of churches may be affected.

In this document, our hope is to confess what we have come to believe for our own benefit and for the benefit of the wider church and world.

Chapter 1

Our Call for Unity in the Church

In all of the matters described in this report, the Classis of New Brunswick recognizes that there are yet significant differences of understanding that lead to deeply felt tension. Such tension is perhaps most keenly felt because the church as a whole does not yet discern a consistent message between the Scriptures of God and the Spirit of God.

We feel this tension in our Classis as we continue to work our way through it.

Yet the actions of the Classis of New Brunswick, guided by sincere conviction directed by our understanding of both Scripture and Spirit, are offered to help lead the church in the Christ-like and gracious response to such real and genuine needs as:

- The LGBTQ disciples of Jesus who feel more greatly than anyone else the tension of an identity that simultaneously feels undeniably real and yet is regarded as wrong; who wonder if they may experience love in as full measure as their neighbor;
- The families suddenly navigating their way through the issues and questions of faith and faithfulness when a loved one “comes out,” wondering if the community of Christ, their church, will embrace or reject them, will offer care and counsel or critique and condemnation;
- The congregations who experience tension over how to support individuals and families; whose communities seek Christian witness in the face of discrimination and violence toward LGBTQ neighbors; whose pews increasingly include visitors and members who openly express LGBTQ identity;
- Classes, Regional Synods and General Synod, wondering how to lead the church in discernment of both God’s word and God’s will, wondering how a witness of unity can prevail in a context of discord;
- The wider culture, watching the church to see how we will resolve the differences in our understanding on these issues; watching to see if our confession of God’s love and reconciliation will be matched by the way we treat one another and the way we treat those of LGBTQ identity.

While recognizing the deep and sincere differences of understanding in the church, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks only to begin its ministry at the same point where Jesus did: at the point of human need.

Doing so challenges our assumptions, as Jesus did with those around him – particularly the leaders of his day. It will force all of us to think more deeply about our own identities in ways that perhaps we have not done before. It will require us to listen more deeply to Scripture and to the

Spirit and to one another than we perhaps have done before. It will call us to deeper and more humble prayer than perhaps we have offered before.

Yet, we can do these with confidence:

- Trust that God will reveal the consistency between the witness of Scripture and Spirit;
- Trust that God will preserve the church that he has called and gathered together;

and with patience:

- Discover that people who hold views different from ours also value and honor God's Word;
- Discover that common witness thrives when we seek mutuality and not simply a majority consensus.

With such trust, and choosing to live with such patience, the Classis of New Brunswick implores our brothers and sisters in the RCA to respect the discernment of conscience among both individuals and assemblies in these matters; and in particular to resist the impulse to modify the RCA Constitution to resolve theological disagreements, but rather to share in the continued mutual upbuilding of dialogue (Ephesians 4: 21) and to participate in common witness at all points of human need.

Chapter 2

Reformed Interpretation of Scripture

It is a gift and a joy to engage the Bible and apply its lessons to our lives and the life of the world. We acknowledge that any time we read the Bible, we inevitably become involved in interpretation.

Scripture is always and necessarily interpreted. Whenever anyone reads the Bible, he or she always brings a framework of interpretation, whether recognized fully or not....No theory of inspiration, no method of interpretation, provides in itself unmediated access to divine wisdom.¹

The interpretation of scripture is an important task which requires our careful attention and best efforts. We approach scripture from a posture of humility, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and using all the God-given resources and methods of critical study that are available.

The Classis of New Brunswick affirms the faithfulness of a Reformed hermeneutic, or method of interpretation, as we seek God's guidance in scripture. Our understanding of a Reformed hermeneutic includes 12 important aspects.

1. God engages in Self-Revelation|

God is a God of love who desires to be known by humans. In many and various ways, God reveals God's very self to us. While remaining always transcendent and higher than our highest thoughts, God gives us the gift of revelation which communicates God's grace to us. Although our human perspective is limited and finite, God, through acts of self-disclosure, allows us to see a bit of God's very heart.

2. General Revelation²

Creation bears witness to the handiwork of God. The stars hanging in the sky, the towering mountains and the flowing streams all reveal a bit of the power of the Creator. God can work through all things. By means of general revelation God can speak through creation as well as science, culture, art, literature, the movements of history, and personal experience.

¹ Scripture and Moral Discernment: Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches, page 7.

² The Belgic Confession differentiates between general revelation and special revelation. Article 2 states, "We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe... second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word."

3. **Special Revelation**

God also communicates through special revelation. Scripture is God's special revelation to us because it conveys God's word of grace and communicates the history of salvation. Scripture most clearly records the story of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.

4. **Ongoing Revelation**

Our living God is active and dynamic, continuing to speak to us even now. God continues to give us the gift of revelation. Knowing our finite human capacity, God continues to speak to us contextually, giving us what we need in this time and space. So, too, scripture is a living word rather than a dead letter. Each time we turn to it we may find fresh challenges and new hope.³ Therefore, "[the interpretation of scripture] requires due attention to the unfolding character of revelation and its unity in the person and work of Jesus Christ."⁴ The on-going revelation given to us by God holds together in Christ. A new word given by God will echo, resound, and amplify the timeless message of the Incarnate Word, Christ Jesus.

5. **The Spirit is our Guide**

The Spirit guides us in many ways. Firstly, the Spirit was active in the writing of scripture. The Belgic Confession references this by citing I Peter 1:21: "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."⁵ Therefore we affirm that "scripture as the word of the faithful God is infallible and inerrant in all that it intends to teach and accomplish concerning faith and life."⁶ When the Spirit speaks to us through scripture, the Spirit does not fail and does not make errors. Secondly, the Holy Spirit works within us to tell us that scripture is a gift from God. We accept the books in the Bible "because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God."⁷ Thirdly, the Spirit is active even now in our reading of the Bible today. When we interpret scripture, when we listen and pray, we ask the Spirit to continue to guide us.

6. **Historic, Cultural and Literary Contexts**

Scripture was not written in a vacuum, rather it came to be recorded in particular times and specific places through distinct languages.

The Spirit has inspired Hebrew and Greek words,
setting God's truth in human language,

³ Brian Blount is very helpful on this point. He draws a distinction between understanding scripture as the last word or the living word. Blount claims that the first Christians used scripture "to interpret, not just recite their traditions." For this reason, African Americans found hope in scripture despite passages which, on face value, condoned slavery. Similarly, the bible can offer us a new word on homosexuality. "...biblical words are not the Last Word. They are the Living Word." Brian K. Blount, "The Last Word on Biblical Authority," in Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 68-9.

⁴ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-267.

⁵ Belgic Confession, Article 3.

⁶ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-267

⁷ Belgic Confession, Article 5.

placing God's teaching in ancient cultures,
proclaiming the Gospel in the history of the world.
The Spirit speaks truly what the nations must know,
translating God's word into modern languages,
impressing it on human hearts and cultures.⁸

As part of our careful reading, we try to be informed about the historic, cultural and literary features of scripture. Our aim is to better understand the context in which texts were written so that we might better understand their intended meaning.⁹ Our knowledge of the historic, cultural, and literary features of scripture continues to advance.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has devised methods of historical and literary study by which to reconstruct the historical situation, to recover the language and meaning of the words in their original presentation, and to assist in understanding the abiding message.¹⁰

7. Whole of Scripture

Just as we look to the historic context in which a passage was written, we also look to the whole of scripture when trying to better understand the meaning of a particular text. We bear in mind the overall purpose of scripture—the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ—when seeking to uncover the meaning of a specific verse. By comparing the apparent meaning of a text with the message of scripture as a whole we gain insights and understanding. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament hold together to convey God's fullest message of grace. Scripture interprets scripture. Any one individual passage must be seen in light of the whole of scripture. Additionally, more obscure passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of clearer passages.¹¹ When facing a passage that is difficult to understand, we turn to the clear, central message of the Bible for insight and guidance.

8. Jesus Demonstrates Faithful Interpretation of Scripture

Jesus knew the sacred texts of the Old Testament and interpreted them, communicating their meaning in applicable ways to those around him. At times Jesus gave us new

⁸ Our Song of Hope, Article 6.

⁹ James Brownson summarizes a wealth of scholarship on biblical texts which refer to homosexuality. Brownson points out, for example, that some texts may have prohibited pederasty—the sexual use of younger boys by older men (I Corinthians 6:9), while others prohibited a practice of kidnapping, sex trade and sex slavery (I Timothy 1:10). Brownson then points out how drastically different such practices are in comparison with committed, monogamous loving relationships between two consenting adults. According to Brownson, the term “homosexual” has been used in biblical translation for many different words that bear no reference to homosexuality as we define it today. The term “homosexual” didn't exist in biblical times and is therefore an irreverent translation of scripture.

See Brownson's book, *Bible, Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 40-5.

¹⁰ Minutes of the General Synod 1963, 264-7.

¹¹ *Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-sex Marriage*, Classis Grand Rapids East, January 2016, page 44.

teachings. For example, Leviticus 24:20 prescribes an eye for an eye as a form of justice. Jesus, on the other hand, says, “you have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt. 5:38-9). Jesus, out of love for scripture, demonstrated a faithful way of interpreting texts.

9. Christ is the Incarnate Word of God

Christ Jesus, as the Incarnate Word, helps us to see the whole of scripture more clearly. We claim that Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Therefore, Jesus, God’s clearest Word, guides our way of thinking. We place greatest value on the teachings of Jesus and how those teachings interpret other parts of scripture. We look at the Bible through Christo-centric lenses, giving greatest emphasis to the teachings, example and life of Christ Jesus. When we focus on the themes of love for God and love for neighbor which are primary in Jesus’ teachings, we are able to align our priorities with those of Jesus. Such teachings guide us in forming ethical principles¹² which engage our behavior but also our attitude; our actions and our hearts; encouraging us to follow God’s commands and live into a law of love.

10. Reading Individually and in Community

We read scripture on our own as individuals and we also read scripture together as the church in the world. Scripture is both a personal word and a public word. None of us has an exclusive claim to its meaning, but rather our reading is enriched when we read its message together. Similarly, no one faith community has a corner on biblical meaning, but rather the global Christian community informs our interpretation of scripture. God can speak through the words, actions and testimonies of faithful Christians today and throughout the history of Church tradition. When trying to interpret a text, we do well to share our interpretations with others and listen for the ways that the Spirit might be working through others, the communion of saints, to bring insight and understanding.

11. Discernment in Community

We look to the Bible to give us guidance as to how we should live our lives. As we spend time reading scripture, our ethics and moral decisions are shaped. This is a process that does not happen instantaneously, but rather takes time and requires thoughtful attention. As Christians we join with others in our faith communities and we commit ourselves to a posture of discernment. Rather than expecting a quick answer, we joyfully engage in discernment as an important part of life-long faithfulness.

¹² From a Reformed perspective, scripture’s authority lies not in specific rules but in guiding principles. This is explained in the paper, “Church and Scripture” in James I Cook, *The Church Speaks Volume 2: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1985-2000*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9-10. This topic is explored in greater depth in the next Chapter 3: Morality, Theology, and Scripture.

12. Encountering Redemption and Transformation

When we read scripture, we are not simply gathering abstract information but rather we are opening ourselves to being changed, renewed and restored by the message of God's grace encountered in scripture. We should expect that when we read scripture our minds can be changed; our hearts can be changed; and our church can be changed.

Daniel Migliore puts it well when he says:

Christians do not believe *in* the Bible; they believe in the living God attested *by* the Bible. Scripture is indispensable in bringing us into a new relationship with the living God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus into new relationship with others and with the entire creation."¹³

The transformation of lives and communities flows from the new life of God's word. The Spirit can work through God's gospel to constantly renew us. Therefore, we are reformed and ever reforming according to the word of God.

Grateful to God for the gift of the Bible, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks to employ these twelve principles of interpretation, as we apply scripture to our lives and the life of the world. This effort is always limited by our humanity and our conclusions will continue to change based on our knowledge and understanding. Since God has entrusted the church with the gift and the task of interpreting scripture, therefore, there is no single, inerrant interpretation of the Bible that is not subject to revision.

¹³ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Third Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 52.

Chapter 3

Morality, Theology, and Scripture

For Christians, determining what is moral is a deeply theological endeavor. Our understanding of what is moral is related to our understandings of God and God's desires for our lives. We affirm what is taught in the Belgic Confession that our primary means for coming to know God and God's will for our lives is God's revelation to us in the books of the Old and New Testaments. We also affirm what is taught in scripture: that the fullest and clearest revelation of God and God's will come to us in the birth, life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we seek to understand what is moral for our lives, we do so as a community, with the witness of scripture as our primary and indispensable guide, with Jesus Christ as our primary lens for interpretation, and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit who alone reveals God's truth.

Morality and Covenantal Life before God

Scripture reveals that the moral decisions we make are made in the context of our lives lived before God. We understand that we have a covenantal relationship with God in which God chooses, justifies, and sanctifies people for covenantal life and service. Our purpose as God's covenantal servants is to participate in God's ministry of love and reconciliation in the world. We understand that our moral lives are lived to participate in God's mission, in which Jesus Christ participated during his earthly ministry. As Christ embodied love through his incarnate presence, as he shared the good news of salvation through his preaching, as he called and taught others, as he sought out the lost, as he bound up the broken hearted, as he cast-out demons and healed the sick, as he sought fellowship with those who were considered sinners, traitors, and outcasts, as he gave his life as a witness to God's love, so, too, do we find ourselves called, equipped, and commissioned to live our lives of covenantal faithfulness before God.

Culturally Specific Expression of Covenantal Life

Scripture reveals that our moral decisions are made within our specific cultural contexts. As the authors of the RCA paper "Church and Scripture" say, "[our] covenantal life-before-God of which Scripture speaks is always specific, historical, and particular."¹⁴ God's call to moral life comes to individuals and communities living in specific cultural contexts and our context will shape our moral decisions. Thus, there is no single Christian culture to which all Christian communities strive to adhere. The writings of the apostle Paul in particular reveal that Christian communities, existing at the same time, but in different cultural contexts, came to diverse decisions about what was moral for their communities. In relation to this reality, which is seen in the writings of Paul and throughout the Bible, the authors of "Church and Scripture" write:

¹⁴ "Church and Scripture," *The Church Speaks*, Vol II, page 5.

This diversity at the level of specific moral rules is seen throughout Scripture: in contrasting forms of piety, in different approaches to family life, in differing approaches to church discipline, etc. Rather than supplying a universal set of abstract moral rules which is equally binding upon all people in all cultures, the Bible challenges all people to live out – often in a variety of ways – the particular life which is theirs in Christ.¹⁵

As members of the Classis of New Brunswick, we therefore recognize that our decisions concerning what is moral may be different from what other Christian communities have concluded in the past and in the present. Furthermore, what makes our decision moral is not a direct correspondence to the specific moral rules found in a Biblical text. Instead, we understand that our decisions about what is moral depend upon faithfulness to the life we share with Christ, by God's grace, and in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-Led Moral Discernment

The concept of moral discernment is essential to our decision-making process, considering the tendency for our cultural context to shift and change. Moral discernment is the process of seeking God's revelation and guidance as to what, given our shifting cultural context, is right and good for the life to which we have been called. Together with our ecumenical partners, we understand that moral decision-making is best done as a communal process. Individuals and communities must listen to God's leading through various means such as biblical study, the study of tradition, prayer, worship, compassionate service, pastoral listening, discussion, and debate. We understand that our decisions will never be free of the influence of sin, which influences all our capacities. However, we trust that we are able, with Christ as our aid and the Holy Spirit as our guide, to determine what moral behavior is fitting for members of Christ's body.¹⁶

From a Reformed perspective, scripture's authority lies not in rules, but instead in principles which guide us through the work of the Holy Spirit: "Another way of clarifying a Reformed use of Scripture is to distinguish between moral rules and ethical principles. Moral rules focus upon specific behaviors, whereas ethical principles focus upon the values and dispositions which are expressed by those rules. Moral rules answer the question, 'What must I do?' Ethical principles answer the question, 'What kind of person must I be?' Scripture is authoritative in the formulation of ethical principles—principles which flow out of the Christian identity and knowledge of God disclosed in Scripture. At the level of specific moral rules, however, the authority of Scripture is not always prescriptive; sometimes it is exemplary or illustrative."¹⁷

Our Cultural Context

Through personal experience, the churches and members of the Classis of New Brunswick have come to know, believe and affirm that LGBTQ people are not broken, inherently sinful, or damaged, but healthy and whole persons, vital members of society and the church. The Holy

¹⁵ "Church and Scripture," *Church Speaks, Vol II, 7*.

¹⁶ Scripture and Moral Discernment: Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches, page 6.

¹⁷ "Church and Scripture," 9-10.

Spirit has moved LGBTQ people to become members and leaders of our church, as the Spirit has moved members and leaders of our church to come out, living openly in the dignity of their God-given identities. As people with LGBTQ identities and allies of LGBTQ people, we have felt and seen the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of LGBTQ people. This urging of the Holy Spirit has been confirmed by significant amounts of scientific research, which finds that LGBTQ people are capable, with support and acceptance, to be stable and healthy people who represent natural occurring variations in the human experience. Myers and Scanzoni explain in their book *What God Has Joined Together* that recent research indicates that lesbian, bisexual, and gay orientations are most likely not matters of pathology, choice, or rearing, but more likely due to biological factors.¹⁸ Research has begun to demonstrate that gender identity is also the result of biological factors which are beyond human control or decision.

¹⁸ David G. Myers, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together: The Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 68.

Chapter 4

Theological Account of Our Classical Position

The Classis of New Brunswick believes that disagreement among Reformed Christians about same-sex relationships arises not only from differences in Biblical interpretation, but also from different beliefs about how God’s authority is upheld in matters of personal identity.

For proponents of the RCA’s position—that restricts marriage to heterosexual relationships and disciplines as sinful all sexual relationships between same-sex loving people—authority rests in the church to interpret God’s will for each person’s sexual and gender identity. For these Reformed Christians, faith requires individuals to submit their personal identities to the traditions, theology and biblical interpretation of the church.

For the Classis of New Brunswick, personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We believe that we can discover all aspects of our personal identity—including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—through experience, guided by faith. The role of the church, then, is to affirm and respect each person as they learn who it is that God is calling them to be; to guide all people to live in justice and love; and to help each person to interpret their experience of God’s call on their lives.

The following two positions explain the theology behind our non-discrimination bylaw and our welcome, inclusion, affirmation, and blessing of people in same-sex relationships.

Position 1: Personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship with God.

We believe personal identity—in the diversity of ways it unfolds, including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We find such intimate relationships in Biblical stories where God calls people of great faith out of their ordinary lives to take up an extraordinary role in God’s story of salvation. God calls Abram out of his father’s house in Chaldea, rebukes Sarah for her laughter, enflames Moses from a bush, confounds Hannah’s prayers in the temple, confronts Zechariah with his disbelief, and impregnates Mary with her mission to serve as the mother of humanity’s savior.

These ancestors in faith experienced a holy fear or terror when God challenged their pre-conceived notions about themselves and called them to act in ways their own limited imaginations could not fathom. We know God because they trusted God. Their personal relationships with God form the foundation of our faith. Therefore, we believe that personal identity is the holy ground where each person encounters God.

This personal relationship is the foundation of our faith and joyfully we confess our faith in God's sovereignty in determining personal identity.¹⁹

"We praise God because each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made!
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139).

Therefore, we proclaim that God alone prescribes who we are to be. As God determines whether we are right or left-handed, God weaves our gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation into our very being; No elements of our personal identity are more inextricable! People whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms—lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, and gender non-conforming identities—are gifts of God to humanity. They reveal that God's astonishing and diverse creativity surpasses our limited human understanding. Therefore, it is a sin to disparage people because they do not conform to society's heterosexual norms and binary conceptions of gender (either male or female based on biology at birth). The Bible affirms that God alone has primary authority over the gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation God has ordained for each of us."

Therefore, we embrace the following as our call to new obedience in a life of transformation in Christ:

- Each person's unique expression of our God-given identity reflects the mysterious perfection in which we were made.
- In our Christian witness, we believe it is fitting to proclaim God's primary authority in determining each person's gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
- No human being should attempt to prescribe personal identity for another.
- We acknowledge that it takes tremendous faith in God for people to express God-given identities that diverge from societal norms.
- The pastoral role of the church is to affirm each person's God-given identity and to uphold our faith in God's primary authority over who we are to be.

God challenged our forebears in faith, with fear and trembling, to discard their preconceived notions about themselves in order to prepare them to become leaders who usher in God's kingdom. In the same way, God calls each of us to faithful lives that are unique, individual and terribly significant. For this reason, Classis determined that the equality and full affirmation of gender identity or expression and sexual orientation are as deserving of protection as other

¹⁹ This text, from the confession to the call to faithful living, was developed as CNB's overture to GS 2015: The Sovereignty of God in Determining Personal Identity.

aspects of our personal identity, including age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability, as expressed in our bylaw #3:

Bylaw 3. The [New Brunswick] Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church,²⁰ Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons.

Non-discrimination is a policy that is based on the equality of all people, which is a secular tenet, held by all those who uphold human rights. However, in the Classis of New Brunswick, we uphold the equality of all people because it is based on one of the most important biblical principles. In fact, people who study the 16th century philosopher John Locke (whose declaration of the equality of all men influenced Thomas Jefferson's) say he was educated as a Calvinist and based his concept of the equality of men on the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 27:

So, God created humankind in God's own image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them.

Since we are all God's image-bearers, none of us is more worthy in God's eyes. For millennia this principle has been known by its Latin name, *Imago Dei*, Image of God. *Imago Dei* is as foundational to our faith as the equality of all human beings has become to our secular world. Like human equality, *Imago Dei* is not an edict or decree, but a guiding ethical principle, like a compass or a kind of North Star, that constantly challenges us to walk deeper and deeper into God's heart.

Imago Dei means the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God. Today we are learning that God is male and female, transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer. The RCA's restrictions on marriage present a challenge to the faith of all people because, if any of us are to have a faithful relationship with God, we must acknowledge that God's plan for each of us is unlike God's plan for any other person.

Position 2: Christ's ethical principles for holy living are the bases for Christian sexual ethics today.

As we stated in Chapter 3, as members of the Classis of New Brunswick, we recognize that our decisions concerning what is moral may be different from what other Christian communities have concluded in the past and in the present. Furthermore, what makes our decision moral is not a direct correspondence to the specific moral rules found in a Biblical text. Instead, we understand that our decisions about what is moral depend upon faithfulness to the life we share

²⁰ As reported by the RCA's Commission on Theology, see Minutes of General Synod 2014, 284.

with Christ, by God's grace, and in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. At the level of specific moral rules, the authority of Scripture is not always prescriptive; sometimes it is exemplary or illustrative."²¹ For us, scripture is authoritative in the formulation of ethical principles—principles which flow out of the Christian identity and knowledge of God disclosed in Scripture. We have formulated the following three ethical principles and have made a series of ethical judgments on the matter of full inclusion in the church.

2.a. The Bible is poor rule book for sexual ethics.

The Bible is sorely lacking in admonitions against the world's gravest sexual injustices. There is no prohibition against striking one's spouse or one's child, or abusing them sexually and emotionally. Human trafficking that uses people as sexual prostitutes is not forbidden. Rape has negative consequences for its perpetrators only in some situations. Sexual slavery is encouraged. Consent was never required. While lust is admonished, the Bible offers no justice or restitution for the victims of sexual predation and pornography. Sexual ethics continues to be as highly contextual today. Today's church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though it was practiced by ancient Israel's patriarchs. The church no longer compels a practice known as Levirate marriage, required in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6, where the brothers of a dead man are required to marry his widow and continue his bloodline. The church acknowledges that the Bible is a poor book for sexual ethics when it modifies Jesus' prohibition against divorce to accommodate the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of heterosexual couples.

2.b. One sexual ethic for all people.

As Paul tells the Philippians, we have been left to "continue to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2: 12). In fear and trembling, then, as the woman who dared to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, our faith alone will make us whole (Mark 5:31). The Classis of New Brunswick believes that the Bible alone is insufficient for providing the rules for a modern sexual ethic. Instead, in our 21st century world, we must adhere strictly to the Bible's most important ethical principles: Christ's prescriptions for treating one another with justice, mercy, forgiveness, mutuality and with the infinite respect due to persons created in God's image. Therefore, we call all people to the same sexual ethic of respect, mutuality, and justice. While there is no one universal rule book for all times and all places, Christ expects us to work together to continually uncover the rules that build today's faithful communities.

2.c. Our timeless definition of marriage.

Throughout Holy Scripture, marriage is a social institution that changes and evolves to meet the needs of faithful communities. However, as people of faith, we celebrate holy relationships that are defined by qualities that do not change over time. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another, we see reflections of God and of our own selves. We reflect God's love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. We

²¹ Ibid, 9-10.

experience holiness in such relationships. When two people cultivate these qualities with one another, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, to their friends, and to their community. Thus, The Classis of New Brunswick joyfully extends the blessing of the church to both same-sex and heterosexual couples.

Conclusion

Based on our belief that God created all human beings in God's image and based on our faith in timeless Christian ethical principles including justice, mutually and respect, we can respond to the following ethical questions, as individuals, churches and as a Classis:

- **Does the God we trust expect churches to require faithful lesbian and gay Christians to live celibate lives?** No! The Apostle Paul says we cannot impose celibacy on any person. Celibacy, Paul says, is a gift from God (1 Cor. 7).
- **Does the God we trust, who said, “It is not good for a human being to be alone,” (Gen. 2:18) expect gay and lesbian people to live alone forever?** No! Sexual desire encourages each person to find a suitable life partner. Marriage enables us to consecrate our bodies and our lives to serve one another, our community and God. The church sins by denying this gift to same-sex couples.
- **Does the God we trust leave some sexual and gender identities off the list so that not all people are created in God's image?** No! *Imago Dei* means all people are made in God's image.
- **Does the God we trust love lesbian and gay people while hating the “sin” of same-sex sexual relationships?** No! Our sexuality and gender identity cannot be separated from who we are because they enliven our very being, they draw us into relationships, families and communities and lead us to desire and worship God.

Chapter 5

Scripture as a Whole Supports Our Classical Position

We believe that the Biblical texts that are most highly determinative for our moral judgement are those that talk about the love of God that has been shown to us in Jesus. To reach back to an ancient text that has been corrected by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is theologically irresponsible and simply poor methodology. Those texts are not the determinative texts. The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, Galatians 3 and Jesus' teachings on divorce found in Mark and Matthew provide sources of inspiration for our classical position about the full inclusion of people who express LGBT identities.²²

Creation Stories in Genesis 1 and 2

We believe that "scripture as the word of the faithful God is infallible and inerrant in all that it intends to teach and accomplish concerning faith and life."²³ We believe that it is not the intention of Genesis 1 and 2 to teach about gender roles and procreation. Rather, these creation narratives teach us how God's loving and self-giving creative activity invites us into relationship.

The purpose of these creation accounts is to present the call of the persistently faithful God to the world to exist in fellowship and in the good beauty which God himself created. Walter Brueggemann writes, "The claim made is not a historical claim but a theological one about the character of God who is bound to his world and about the world which is bound to God."²⁴ Brueggemann conceives of Genesis 1 and 2 as a poem that, "does not narrate 'how it happened' as though Israel were interested in the method of how the world became God's world. Such a way of treating the grand theme of creation is like reducing the marvel of any moving artistic experience to explorations in technique. Israel is concerned with *God's lordly intent*, not his *technique*."

Paraphrasing Brueggemann, the theme of gracious commitment is pivotal to the Genesis message: The news is that God and God's creation are bound in a relationship that is assured but, at the same time, delicate and precarious. The relationship is bound in a mystery of faithful

²² More in-depth presentations of a wide range of scholarship on these passages can be found in "Section 5: Interpretation of Biblical Passages Referring to Gender Differentiation and Same-sex Intercourse," pages 46-59 and "Section 6: Section 6: Quotations of Contemporary Authors on Biblical Passages Related to Gender Differentiation and Same-Sex Intercourse," pages 60-84 of the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report, previously cited.

²³ Minutes of the General Synod, June 1963, pp. 264-267.

²⁴ Marlena Graves, "It's Not a Matter of Obeying the Bible," from her interview entitled: 8 Questions for Walter Brueggemann, as accessed on Nov. 30, 2018 online at: <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2015/01/09/walter-brueggemann-church-gospel-bible/35739>

commitment. Everything depends on that commitment. This interpretation requires that we abandon two false assumptions which are alive in the church.

First, the relation of creator and creation is often understood in terms of coercion and necessity because of the power of mechanistic models of reality and tyrannical notions of God. However, the relation of creator and creation-creature in Gen.1:1-2:4 is not about coercion. It is, rather, a relationship of free gracious commitment and invitation. The linkage is one of full trust rather than of requirement or obligation. Second, in the church, there is a common inclination to confine God's grace to individual, guilt-related issues of morality. However, this text affirms that God's graciousness is his transforming disposition toward his whole world. Creation faith is the church's confession that all of life is characterized by graciousness. Well-being is the gift which forms the context for our life of obedience and thanksgiving.²⁵

Genesis 1: Procreation, Blessing and the Image of God

Based on the statement in Genesis 1 "be fruitful and multiply," some would tie reproduction to bearing God's image. James Brownson points out that procreation is preceded by blessing, "God blessed them."²⁶ Procreation flows out of blessing and is not a command which, when fulfilled, results in bearing God's image. The entire discussion of "one flesh" in Genesis 2 takes place without reference to procreation. Further, scripture honors marriages that are not fruitful. First Samuel 1 tells us Elkanah gave to Hannah, "a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." Despite her barrenness, Hannah is held up as a woman of faith (Brownson, p. 115). We find in *Song of Solomon* a celebration of the beauty of sexual union, yet no mention is made of procreation: "If procreation is the essential purpose of sex and marriage, one is hard-pressed to explain its absence from this entire book of the Bible that is devoted to sex and marriage" (Brownson, p. 116). Christian tradition asserts that single people bear the image of God. Tradition does not believe that single people do not bear God's image until they have found a mate of the opposite gender. Nor is bearing the image of God understood to be tied to one's ability to procreate. Brueggemann says, "The confession of Christian faith is that all of God's human creatures are made in the image of God. That means that they are to be treated with dignity, offered maintenance and security, as is necessary."

Genesis 2: Adm and Ashe

Some argue from Genesis 2 that man (in Hebrew, *adm*) and woman (in Hebrew, *ashe*) are created with complementary roles, and, therefore, same-sex unions fall short of God's desired intention for humans. However, the account of Genesis 2 does not begin with an understanding of the man being incomplete without a woman. Rather the emphasis is that he is alone. The passage playfully links the Hebrew word for man with the closely related and very similar Hebrew word for mud or earth. Alone, the man is somewhat dull, and inert, not unlike the mud from which he is made. The solution to this problem is first sought through the creation of "every

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann (2010) as quoted in *Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-sex Marriage*, Classis Grand Rapids East, January 2016, 91-92.

²⁶ All of Dr. Brownson's quotes and paraphrases, including those found in the Classis Grand Rapids East report, are from James Brownson, *Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

animal of the field and every bird of the air” (Gen 2.19). These animals are paraded in front of Adam in search of a helper. The effect is comic as one pictures every bird from a robin to an eagle and every animal from a mouse to an elephant paraded before the man in pursuit of a helper only to reach the obvious conclusion, “but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.” The goal is neither procreation nor a complement to the man. The helper is found when God fashions a creature that is equivalent to man who can function as a helper. The woman provides community and connection. The story is a critical reminder that women are *NOT* to be treated as property or livestock. Rather, created through a “C-section” that God performs on a man, woman is a gift from God, to be honored and respected, and absolutely not to be abused and consumed for the man’s unholy and self-centered purposes.

The holy relationship between woman and man is the site of both human perfection and human disobedience, which produces learning, the hard way. The nature of this relationship is centered around becoming helpers in order to create community and covenant. What it means to be in a helping relationship can be learned by looking to the word “helper” throughout the Old Testament. The word “helper” is most often used to refer to God as our helper. “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1). The goals of a helping relationship include relational mutuality, respect, a far greater fullness of life.

In Genesis 2, according to Brownson, “the procreative meaning of marriage should, in fact, be subordinated to its more essential unitive purpose” (p. 89). This is because “the primary movement in the text is not from unity to differentiation, but from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community” (p. 30). As the first family is run out of Eden, this shared kinship is deadly in the short run, yet their kinship community becomes the integral foundation of the human community, a critical component to salvation history.

Throughout scripture, “one flesh” points not to sexual intimacy, but to familial relationships and kinship. It is used in reference to the relationship of Laban and Jacob and of David and Amasa. While in Genesis 2, the man is said to leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, it was not the practice in the centuries recorded in the Hebrew Bible for the man to leave his parents’ home. In fact, leaving the parents’ home was impossible for financial and security reasons. Brownson points out the meaning behind this statement is “the realignment of primary kinship ties . . . the location of primary kinship moves from the family of origin to the new family constituted by marriage. Only such an interpretation can make sense of the reference to leaving” (p. 33).

As the man and woman unite in a new family, they commit first to each other, “to live beyond one’s own needs and concerns for the purposes of God and for the sake of the other. . . Already here, humans are summoned out of isolation, out of familiarity, into a deeper and more mysterious reality that transcends their lives as individuals and participates in the divine purpose. Already here, life is called out of itself into something deeper and richer” (p. 90).

The partnership and unity of the man and woman is not for the sake of completion, procreation, or complementary otherness. Rather, the first humans fit together because of their similarity and

ability to be companions and partners. The creation stories are not intending to define marriage as solely between members of opposite sexes, but as a partnership in which one deepens one's relationship with another human being, and thereby becomes closer to God.

Galatians 3: New Life in Christ

Pauline theology presents a new view of life in Christ, as Paul boldly proclaims:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28).

This statement sweeps away the distinctions of insider/outsider, powerful/powerless and the pairing of male and female for procreation. Paul shifts his use of the conjunction in the last pairing from "or" to "and." Emphasis shifts from the elimination of contrasting elements to the coupling of male and female, which passes away in keeping with Jesus' words about the absence of marriage in the resurrection. In Christ, we begin to live into the values of God's kingdom. The old distinctions that ordered and structured society are no longer of importance, as all people become one in Christ Jesus. Aristotle stated that two things are essential to any community (1) family and the procreative relationship and (2) the master-slave relationship. Jews add the distinction between Jew and Gentile as essential. All these societal distinctions are wiped away in the new life we have in Christ (Brownson, p. 65-66). Therefore, for Christians, the primary role of coupling and marriage for the sake of procreation alone is de-emphasized. Gender roles and procreation are no longer sufficient conditions to exclude LGBTQ people from the Christian blessing of same-sex marriages.

Matthew 19 and Mark 10, Jesus Teaches about Divorce

When we look to Jesus' teaching on divorce, we gain insight into what is essential to marriage. When asked if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife Jesus' replies, "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery." In Jesus' day, lack of children was a common reason for a man to divorce his wife and leave her destitute. Jesus says lack of children is not sufficient reason to divorce. We learn, "the covenantal obligations of love and loyalty alone are sufficient to constitute a permanent marriage, even if children are not present" (Brownson, p. 116).

In writing about the blessings that grow from a couple who have made a lifelong commitment to each other in marriage, Jacques Ellul writes: "An inseparable couple, a united couple, is an extraordinary force on behalf of the lonely, the suffering, the deprived, those who need a comprehensive and attentive love and who can draw strength from the venture made by this couple, finding in it support, and confidence, and secret riches. This story of love is the opposite of a narrow restriction, an extreme shutting away, an egoism of two. In a joy that cannot be alone, it makes room for the welcoming and understanding of all."²⁷ A same-sex couple, when encouraged and supported in a lifelong commitment, can become an "extraordinary force" for good in God's world.

²⁷ Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 84.

Conclusions

Classis concludes that God's children need not be in a procreative heterosexual relationship to bear the image of God. By becoming one flesh, the Bible intends to teach us about family, relationships and commitment and not only sexual intimacy or procreation. As new creations in Christ, gender and procreation are subordinate to the ways in which we are all one in Christ. The confession of Christian faith is that all God's human creatures are made in the image of God. All people are to be treated with dignity and are to be enabled to thrive in security, peace and justice.

Understanding that the Bible is dynamic, Reformed tradition constantly presses us to embrace new, and challenging truths. Our society is still coming to terms with the implications of all people bearing God's image including women, people of color, disabled people, atheists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, transgender people, refugees and asylum seekers. Paul's statement in Galatians 3, that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Barbarian, slave or free is one of these ultimate challenging truths with which we continue to grapple.

We are one in Christ: that truth is timeless! The gospel tells us that God's love reaches toward all God's creation. Thus, to sort human beings based on tradition and societal values, to judge that a majority are deserving and qualified, while a minority are not, is to impose a limited, unjust, secular judgment on a God-given and God-ordained human reality. People who express identities that do not conform with society's expectations, therefore, reveal God's intent to make humanity in diverse forms that may continue to surprise our cultural expectations and teach us about God.

To refuse to re-evaluate our tradition of biblical interpretation is to fail to respect the inspiration and guidance of morally determinant Biblical texts; the relevant and overwhelming evidence of general revelation, as God speaks through creation as well as science, culture, art, literature, the movements of history and personal experience; and the testimony of LGBTQ people and their allies who are convicted by the Holy Spirit. The gospel explains that God's saving love works to restore all humanity to full communion. When we affirm and celebrate God's image in all persons, our relational communities stretch and grow, helping us to embrace God's full blessing for all of humanity.

Chapter 6

Ethical Critique of the RCA Position

The Classis of New Brunswick believes that the RCA errs gravely when it prevents churches and ministers from celebrating same-sex marriages and disciplines all sexual relationships between same-sex loving people because it considers homosexual behavior to be sinful. We believe that the RCA mistakenly adopts cultural norms, prevalent in the eras in which the Bible was written, without considering the ways in which, in today's world, they may be unjust, cause harm, and deny the principle of justification by faith.

The Classis of New Brunswick agrees with the RCA's 1978 Commission of Theology paper when it acknowledged that an understanding of sexual orientation is simply missing from the Bible:

As Jesus remained silent on the entire subject, so the biblical writers did not address the human condition now known as homosexual inversion. [Note: in 1978, the term "inversion" is equivalent to today's "orientation."] ²⁸

No position about same-sex relationships can be justified in a single Bible passage or in the notorious 7-10 verses about homosexuality (see Section 7 of this report, Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality, page 32). The 1978 Commission on Theology clearly states this and confirms that it used Christian ethical reflection, informed by doctrine, to interpret a sense of scripture as a coherent whole. Therefore, the RCA position is not derived from scripture alone but on ethical reflection, as the 1978 paper states:

Christian ethical reflection is informed by those key doctrines which present the 'sense' of scripture as a coherent whole.

However, this 1978 paper mistakenly applies heterosexual norms to all people:

It does not follow from this fact [that an understanding of sexual orientation is simply missing from the Bible], however, that the heterosexual norm is less binding, as many in the homosexual context aver, or that any sexual act accords with God's will if it is performed in fidelity, trust, and love. The norm expressed in creation and reaffirmed in Jesus' own teaching is not abrogated by the fact that some persons cannot conform to it, any more than it is set aside because some persons will not live by it.

This 1978 paper errs because heterosexuality is not expressed as a norm in creation. As we learn through general revelation, a wide variety of sexual orientations are expressed among all God's creatures. As the 1978 paper acknowledges, heterosexuality is not expressed as a universal norm in any of Jesus' teaching. In fact, Jesus is silent on the topic of homosexual orientation. This RCA conclusion is a terrible mistake, which has resulted in damaging consequences for countless LGBTQ individuals, as well as their families and communities. The

²⁸ "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," (Minutes of General Synod 1978), 229-240.

Classis of New Brunswick urges the RCA to correct its theological mistakes and repent the harm the RCA has done when it claims: “Heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality,” for the following seven reasons:

1. A just precept must apply to all people.

The RCA position requires same-sex loving people to live celibate lives or to marry people to whom they feel no sexual attraction. Thus, the RCA position compels a sacrifice from same-sex loving Christians that it does not require of heterosexual Christians. However, a precept is just only if it applies equally to all people, as Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow, and that it is willing to follow itself.²⁹

King was echoing the principle that Paul describes in Galatians when he accuses Peter of selectively adhering to Jewish law as a free choice while compelling Jewish law universally on non-Jewish Galatians (Galatians 2:14). In the case of human sexuality, it is unjust for the RCA to compel some people to lives devoid of satisfying sexual intimacy and the possibility of life-long sexual partnerships, if the RCA does not compel all people to live this way.

2. No one can be compelled to celibacy, except by the Holy Spirit.

To compel celibacy is contrary to the guidance of Paul who definitively states that celibacy is a gift of the spirit of God given to some, but not all (1 Cor. 7:7). Therefore, the RCA sins when it compels celibacy upon people who do not experience it as a divine call. Paul cautions that to deny the need of some for sexual satisfaction is to invite sexual immorality. Thus, the RCA sins when it requires same-sex loving people to either be celibate or enter heterosexual marriages. To do so puts people at odds with their own sexuality and God-inscribed need for a like-minded helper. It thereby endangers their health, safety and security as well as that of their partners, families, children, and communities.

The 16th century reformer Martin Luther said that celibacy cannot be imposed because God does not compel us but sets us free: “It is impossible to make vows unless you are led inwardly and wondrously by the Spirit of Christ and are already saved.”³⁰ Therefore any rule that compels celibacy is human in origin. To compel someone to a life of celibacy, as God’s commandment, is a dangerous form of idolatry, according to Luther:

Let us bring this discussion to an end now by reaching the conclusion that lifelong poverty, obedience, and chastity may be observed, but cannot be vowed, taught, or imposed. The freedom of the gospel may still be retained by observing these things (poverty, obedience, and chastity), but as soon as you teach them, vow them, and

²⁹ In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this principle to indict the hypocrisy of white Christian pastors who urged him to cease unlawful demonstrations and wait patiently.

³⁰ Martin Luther, (1999) *Luther’s works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Editors, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 30.

demand them, then evangelical freedom is lost. By the same argument, the saints who observed these things did so freely. They would have observed them even if they had never made vows, even if vows had never been taught or demanded of them. For that very reason their vows, though foolish, did no harm to their faith and their freedom of spirit. It is one thing for something to happen when it has neither been taught nor demanded, but quite a different thing altogether for the same thing to be taught, demanded, and made compulsory. This makes a law out of a single instance, a precept out of a work, a rule from one example, an essential out of the nonessential. What could be more absurd and what could be more harmful? The former is of God; the latter, of man. Therefore, we must abide by the first and let the other go. We do not therefore condemn vows in themselves if anyone should choose to follow them; it is the teaching and the prescribing of vows that we condemn.³¹

3. It is unjust to modify moral precepts for a majority but not for minorities.

The RCA has modified the Bible's ethical rules for heterosexual marriage to promote the well-being of heterosexuals and to allow for historical changes in culture. The church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though it was practiced by ancient Israel's patriarchs. The church no longer compels a practice known as Levirate marriage, required in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6, where the brothers of a dead man must marry his widow and continue his bloodline. The RCA modifies Jesus' prohibition against divorce to accommodate the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of heterosexuals.

Nevertheless, the RCA refuses to adapt its rules for marriage to support the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of people who experience same-sex attraction. By accommodating heterosexual people and failing to accommodate same-sex loving people, the RCA harms the Body of Christ.

4. Paul's conversion provides an ethical principle, Justification by Faith, which Paul applies when a majority threatens to harm a minority.

By restricting marriage to heterosexual couples because of longstanding tradition and the traditional interpretation of scripture, the RCA inflicts suffering on lesbian and gay people. However, this puts the church in a state of contradiction with scripture itself. The importance of re-examining Scripture and tradition in light of one's experience of suffering is emphasized in the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

Paul tells us that as a Pharisee, he embraced scripture and tradition, excelling so far beyond his peers that he violently pursued the assembly of people who followed Jesus, to the point that he ravaged it (Gal. 1:13-14). As a young Pharisee named Saul, he was so pleased with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4) that he became bloodthirsty for more punishment to purify his faith:

Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, Saul committed them to prison (Acts 8: 1-3).

³¹ Ibid., 315–316.

Paul's drive for purity, based on his excellence in scripture and tradition, so blinded Paul that he witnessed Stephen's stoning without pausing to consider Stephen's extraordinary faith or trust in God. To explain how he went from being the persecutor of the church to the church's great evangelist, Paul says, "It pleased God to reveal God's son in me" (Gal. 1: 16). The author of Luke/Acts dramatized this revelation with a stroke of blinding light and an audible voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" and then, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9: 4-5). Jesus identifies himself with Saul's victims. Paul experiences Jesus in the suffering of Paul's victims.³²

To Paul's astonishment, Paul discovered that God was not on Paul's side! God was on the side of Paul's victims, people Paul **justifiably** bludgeoned and **lawfully** executed. Instead of the self-righteous Paul, who aggressively executed the law, God raised as God's son the humble Galilean healer who became a willing victim of lawful persecution. This is the scandal of the cross (1 Cor. 1: 23, Gal. 5:11), the stumbling block that stops Paul dead in his tracks and causes him to re-evaluate his entire moral framework. But there's more. When Paul says, "It pleased God to reveal Christ **in me**," not only does Paul see Christ in the victims of his persecution. But Paul sees Christ, the resurrected victim, in himself. Paul experiences Jesus handing himself over in love for Paul, so that the persecutor in Paul could be replaced and Christ himself could live in Paul. The lawless victim and the lawful persecutor are enfolded together in the love of Christ. This divine embrace—the supersession of moralistic law by God's more foundational law of love—is true Christian atonement. God's law of love is a super-law, Paul says, a law that underlies all other laws:

The entire law is summed up in one Word: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest by one another you are destroyed (Gal. 5:15).

Adhering to religious tradition to justify rules that cause only suffering is exactly opposite the intent of the Gospel. Unlike the RCA, Paul does not increase his persecution but ceases it entirely and then joins those he persecuted. Paul considers himself to be judged by Jesus. Like Jesus, Paul allows himself to be crucified—for his sin of causing human suffering. If changing one's mind because one experiences Christ in human suffering were contrary to the Gospel, we might not **have** a Gospel today.

The story of Paul's divine revelation shows that for Christians, the experience of human suffering must be a ground for re-evaluating our moral positions. Paul first awakened to this

³² Jesus identifies himself as the one whom Paul persecutes, when he asks Saul: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" [Saul] asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5), much as Jesus explains, in Matthew's Judgement of the Nations, "to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25: 41-46).

revelation in his conversion experience. Then, in an entirely new situation, Paul explained how his revelation provided an ethical principle for adjudicating between conflicting moral claims and re-evaluating doctrine in our communities. He wrote his Letter to Galatians to stop Jews who followed Christ from compelling circumcision on Galatians who were not Jews. Later, in his letter to Romans, Paul used the same principle of justification by faith to convince Hellenistic Romans who followed Christ to maintain social solidarity with their Jewish neighbors who were persecuted by Rome (Romans 5:1-15). In the same way, the Classis of New Brunswick seeks to stop the RCA from compelling faithful LGBTQ Christians to life-long celibacy simply because they are not heterosexual.

Reformed Christians who hold the traditional position on homosexuality may be theologically rigorous, faithful people like Paul. Like Paul they may be supremely skeptical about departing from tradition and changing biblical interpretation. That is why Paul tells us that the only way for Christians to be justified in our moral reasoning is to follow Jesus, crucified and resurrected (Gal. 2:16). Paul understood the cross of Christ to be a giant direction marker or billboard, an ethical rule for the Christian application of moral law. Every time we must judge between executing a law and the welfare of people whom the law is to protect, we must constantly privilege our care for the law's victims. **This** is what distinguishes us as Christians in the world. In the resurrection of Jesus, God affirmed that God is always on the side of people who are harmed by our merciless adherence to law.

6. Experiencing the suffering of Christ in the suffering of LGBTQ people requires an openness to revelation.

A conversion like Paul's is a holy and personal experience. Revelation happens when each of us is guided by the Holy Spirit. For some people, the Holy Spirit may move us when we read personal stories of faithful LGBTQ Christians who suffer from the unjust judgments of the Church. But the Holy Spirit is most likely to move us when we are in the physical presence of a person who is suffering, someone who, like Paul, bears the marks of Jesus, the stigmata of the cross (Gal 6:17). When we perceive the marks of our idolatrous punishment etched in the flesh of their body and in the church-endorsed torment of their souls, we must blind ourselves to the requirements of law and tradition. We must suspend our deadly judgments. Blindly we follow Jesus because we Christians are justified by faith alone.

One by one, the power of the Holy Spirit converts us. Thus, we hear about a steady stream of conversions of formerly non-affirming parents after their beloved children come out as gay or transgender. We are moved by the stories of faith leaders like the ministers and elders of San Francisco's City Church. In March 2015, City Church leaders changed their membership rules because they were converted by the suffering of faithful, loving gay couples in their congregation. As people who experience Christ crucified in the church's persecution of LGBTQ people, we in the Classis of New Brunswick need no further justification to disavow any rule, guideline, liturgy, judicial decision or edict that supports the RCA's restriction of marriage to heterosexual relationships.

Sadly, many Reformed Christians do not understand Christ's crucifixion as a divine "Stop Sign" meant to halt our very human trait of destroying people in our zeal to be seen by God as righteous in the law. When people suffer because of church discipline, some Reformed Christians may tell themselves, "This is God's will." Like Saul, they cannot see the crucified Christ in the people they persecute. They judge faithful, same-sex couples to be unrepentant sinners. They refuse to re-examine the biblical interpretation that drives them to confront, disparage, and discipline openly gay and lesbian people and their allies, including the Classis of New Brunswick. They long to purify the church of CNB's perceived defiling presence. They imagine the presence of sinners like us prevents the church from upholding Christ's one-time atonement for all humanity's sins. Tragically, they miss the mark. Jesus handed himself over to be crucified in order to show us how wrong we can be. In his willing crucifixion, Jesus expanded upon the holy truth that each of us is created in the image of God. When we use the law to destroy one another, it is God we destroy. God suffers on the cross. God raised his beloved son from the dead to prove to us that, when it comes to God's mercy, our only hope is to let go of the law and let God take over.

7. Church discipline that produces no benefit or fruit of the spirit is unholy.

In the RCA's Book of Church Order, the RCA considers its authority to discipline to be divinely bestowed to the church by Jesus, "to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ." But any church rule or discipline that results in the systematic destruction of human life is an abomination against our Lord Jesus Christ. The RCA has ample reason to abandon it. It does not at all benefit offenders if the threat of church discipline makes people miserable and destroys families and communities.

God's Holy Spirit yields love, joy, peace, willingness for patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). However, Christians who are LGBTQ people and their allies testify that the RCA's traditional position on homosexuality is a kind of church discipline that produces no spiritual fruit in their lives. Instead, in their lives, as in our denomination, this position creates enmity, strife, anger, divisions and sects.

Faithful LGBTQ people and their allies who are long-term members of the RCA's sister denomination, the CRCNA (or Christian Reformed Church in North America), contributed personal narratives to a 150-page report that supports same-sex marriage in the church.³³ They describe the heartbreak the traditional position on homosexuality causes them, their partners, family members and communities even when they are faithful, even when they **comply** with the position of the church.

They say the church hurts them in five ways.

- **PERSONAL CONDEMNATION.** The simple fact that their church holds the traditional position on homosexuality causes them pain, as they say: "To be told in strong terms that God does not approve of you acting out a primary drive that comes naturally is

³³ "Section 9: Psychological Issues Involved in Considering Full Inclusion Versus Non-inclusion," 106-19 of the "Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage," Christian Reformed Church.

devastating.” Reformed Christians have been known to claim they “love the sinner but hate the sin of gay sex.” However gay and lesbian people do not feel their love but their hatred of the sexuality that God has woven into their personal identity.

- **COMPELLED CELIBACY.** Celibacy, says the Apostle Paul, is a gift from God and compelling someone to be celibate who does not experience that call puts them at grave risk of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7: 7). Gay and lesbian Christians in the CRC say they do not experience a divine call to celibacy, they never experience an end to same-sex attraction, and they find no spiritual benefit in church-compelled celibacy, at all—only deprivation.
- **PERSECUTION BY OTHERS.** Lesbian and gay CRC members say they find themselves subject to the traditional position not only by official actions of church discipline, but also by *all* church members. They say: “All [church members] fear God’s judgment on them for not calling a person they know to be actively sinning to repentance, as stated in Acts 20.” Therefore, families and friends must choose between standing with the church and supporting one’s family member or friend: “Parents mourn over gay children who are condemned and ostracized by the church. Marriages are damaged when one parent remains loyal to a gay child while the other disowns the child out of loyalty to the church. Gay people choose between their church and their partner. Loss of a faith community takes a heavy toll.”
- **LIFE-THREATENING MENTAL HEALTH.** Lesbian and gay people say enforced celibacy causes them, “pervasive loneliness and low self-esteem. They experience deep-seated longings for the love, touch and affirmation that are fundamental to their identity. All around them they see viable partners, opportunities for life-long partnerships of mutual love and service but the church requires them to sacrifice these for the sake of membership.” These CRC members experience numerous cases of depression, addiction, and suicide. They cite alarming national statistics that correlate family rejection with astronomic rates of homelessness, anxiety, depression and suicide.
- **DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES.** CRC members explain how the traditional position encourages gay people to hide behind a heterosexual marriage though they may be caught indulging in forbidden, same-sex affairs. Paul advocates marriage to help people avoid this very same temptation (1 Cor. 7:5). Thus, their perfectly human inability to forego satisfaction in sexual intimacy—the same kind of intimacy that churches endorse to fortify the fabric of heterosexual lives—damages the lives of their children, spouses, and parents; it destroys families and caring communities.

Conclusion

Based on the five ways our CRC siblings tell us the church’s restriction of marriage to heterosexuals harms LGBTQ people, and based on the seven points of our ethical examination, the Classis of New Brunswick concludes that Reformed Christians who restrict marriage to heterosexual relationships harm people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

intersex and queer. Sadly, this firmly held RCA position prevents its proponents from experiencing conversion in Christ whose suffering we find exemplified in the suffering of LGBTQ Christians.

As Saul sought to destroy the early church, the RCA position encourages its proponents to discipline people in same-sex relationships and to discipline ministers, consistories and classes that enable the blessing of same-sex weddings, thereby destroying the unity of the RCA.

The Classis of New Brunswick strongly disavows the RCA position as abhorrent to the Gospel and holds the RCA responsible for all harm this position causes. Classis calls the RCA to disavow this position and repent the harm it has done. We call Reformed Christians everywhere to do all we can to restore wholeness and healing to people, families and communities whom the church has harmed.

Chapter 7

Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality

On January 29, 2005, the Classis of New Brunswick held an open discussion about homosexuality and Christian faithfulness, reviewing the perspectives and passages that inform our Christian life as individuals, church leaders, and as churches. The Classis prepared the following study document about the passages that have traditionally influenced decisions about this topic.³⁴ Each passage is presented along with two conflicting perspectives, described below. We state **Perspective Two** more fully than **Perspective One** because the verses cited by Perspective One have dominated debate in the Reformed Church in America. The verses cited by Perspective Two are not included in this examination (but are provided throughout this Affirmed + Celebrated report).

Perspective One

One perspective on homosexuality and Christian faithfulness is that the biblical affirmation of heterosexuality, the seven or so pronouncements against homosexuality, and the absence of any positive statement about homosexuality show that scripture is against all homosexual relationships and sexual acts. The command to be fruitful and multiply, and the sense that in heterosexual relationships each partner is “complemented and [completed] by the other” bolster this perspective.

While affirming that heterosexual union is God’s desire and preference for human sexual expression, this perspective recognizes all human sexuality suffered in the fall (Gen. 3:16). Many who hold this perspective believe that some are oriented toward people of the same sex, and that orientation, in and of itself, is not something that one can control. Therefore, Christians are called to show compassion when addressing homosexuals, even while maintaining a stance that all homosexual acts are sinful. While the many documents of the RCA concerning homosexuality are nuanced and give credence to some other views, this perspective is the one that best represents the RCA 1978 paper on homosexuality, found in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1959-1984*. “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal.”

³⁴ PLEASE NOTE: this section presents a 2005 document, edited for clarity and additional scholarship by the editors of this Affirmed + Celebrated report. More in-depth presentations of a wide range of scholarship on these passages can be found in “Section 5: Interpretation of Biblical Passages Referring to Gender Differentiation and Same-sex Intercourse” pages 46-59 and “Section 6: Section 6: Quotations of Contemporary Authors on Biblical Passages Related to Gender Differentiation and Same-Sex Intercourse” pages 60-84 of the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report, previously cited.

Perspective Two

A second perspective also turns toward scripture but looks beyond particular verses and even beyond the topic of sexuality, instead emphasizing a framework that might be called, “the growing understanding of God’s ever-widening circle of love and salvation.” God’s work began at creation. God’s love worked specifically through Abraham and the nation of Israel, with a promise that, one day, all the nations of the world would be blessed through that covenant. Even before Christ, the expansion of that promise began as the prophets called God’s people to consider “the stranger within one’s gates.” As examples of God’s widening love, we can point to non-Israelites and women who had been traditionally considered “unclean,” whom God used in the course of salvation history (e.g., Tamar, Rahab, Ruth in the Hebrew Bible; the Roman centurion in Matthew 8, the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7, in Luke 10, the Good Samaritan and in Luke 17, one thankful Samaritan leper; Gauls and Greeks in Paul’s letters to Galatians and Romans). In Jesus, through his unlikely table companions, his willingness to touch the people whom his society and tradition deemed to be untouchables, we come to understand his reinterpretation of the law in pursuit of a wholeness deeper than the letter of the law provides. Jesus displayed that when the kingdom is at hand, it is a place of incredible inclusion.

The book of Acts states that “what God has called clean, let no one call unclean.” What law once excluded is now welcomed in the Christian church. Even before the debate and council over Peter’s Gentile mission to Cornelius, Phillip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. By Hebrew law, this foreign treasurer and student, both because of his ethnicity and because he was a eunuch, should have been excluded from fellowship with the devout followers of the Hebrew Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

At this time in history, the Spirit is calling the Church to widen the circle to full and equal inclusion of homosexual people. Perspective 2 holds that we should not hinder the work of the Holy Spirit and instead embrace the ever-widening circle of God’s love and saving work and continue the radical inclusiveness of Jesus and the practice of the New Testament Church.

Importantly, those who hold Perspective Two believe that the cultural context of biblical passages needs to play a large part in biblical interpretation. It is right to condemn what the Bible clearly condemns about the same sex activity it names: violent rape, temple prostitution, and idolatrous self-indulgent sexual expressions. These activities must be condemned when they occur between individuals of different genders as well. However, it is a grave mistake to condemn homosexual expressions of love that are in the context of relationships that exhibit mutuality and respect. It is unlikely that ancient Middle-Eastern biblical cultures understood in-born, same-sex desire and orientation, or loving and respectful same-sex relationships. Therefore, there can be no certainty that any biblical passage condemns homosexual expressions of love, mutuality, and respect.

There is a grave possibility that the RCA has not sufficiently examined the extent to which its condemnation of homosexuality rests on the requirements of faithful people in ancient biblical cultures that are not valid today. In particular, those who hold Perspective Two remind everyone in the RCA that none of its women would be ordained if the RCA did not re-examine the intent of

the Holy Spirit in light of differences in cultural contexts between the ancient Middle East under Roman Rule and the modern era.³⁵ Even when the Bible demands women’s silence in the church, states the RCA’s 1957 Report on the Ordination of Women, its demand is about social accommodations—not essential differences in how male and female believers participate in the life of Christ. Women are instructed not to teach or have authority over men and to keep silent in church (1 Tim. 2:12) in order to “avoid publicly embarrassing their husbands and prejudicing an unsympathetic public against radical expressions of Christian freedom. Rules such as this protected vulnerable Christians in a hostile Roman environment but are not essential to the meaning of the gospel in modern contexts.”

Those holding Perspective Two believe it is relevant to look at other cultural practices that were accepted in scripture which the church has challenged on cultural grounds: slavery; women as unworthy to lead or teach; first born sons inherit all rights. Therefore, this perspective urges that we look beyond heterosexual behavior itself and ask “what does scripture value about the coming together of male and female?” Ethicists have proposed that we value (1) relation between two who are different, (2) enduring commitment, (3) the ability to create new life, and (4) a humble selflessness. Individuals of the same gender will always remain distinct and mysterious individuals to each other. Two people of the same sex can make enduring commitments. New life need not (and ought not) be limited to reproduction: i.e. new life can be found through surrogacy, adoption of children, renewed life and career directions, new art or music, healing through recovery, participation in a faith community, etc. Along with heterosexual couples who do not have obligations of child-rearing, same-sex couples without children are able to uniquely contribute in a creative and nurturing way to their Christian community and the wider neighborhoods. Same-sex couples are as capable of humble selflessness as heterosexual couples.

Scriptures Often Referenced in the Discussion on Homosexuality

We turn to the verses that have often been used in the formulation of church position papers that condemn homosexual relationships as sinful and hinder the ordination of openly gay

³⁵ In 1979, General Synod opened the door for the RCA’s official approval for the ordination of women by adopting a report of its Judicial Business Committee. The report dismissed the complaints against the two ordinations of women and upheld the complaint of the Albany Classis in support of Rev. Joyce de Velder’s ordination. The report ruled that the central point of all the complaints was the definition and interpretation of the word “person.” The only support it found for restricting “person” to male candidates for ministry was long-standing tradition, “custom and practice,” which is not binding on the church today: “In a church such as ours, reformed and reforming according to the Word of God, custom and practice cannot take precedence over the declaration of the General Synod regarding the meaning of the Scripture.” For the committee, the scriptural and theological question about women’s ordination was closed with the actions of GS1958. In 1957, a General Synod study committee submitted a groundbreaking report in the form of four essays. The committee concluded that “there is no sufficient scriptural reason for insisting that the nature and function of the office is such that women should be excluded from eligibility.” In 1958, after re-examining the intent of scriptural passages previously considered to exclude women from church office, General Synod declared, “Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence and equal status with men in the church of Jesus Christ (See The Office of the Stated Clerk of the Reformed Church in America, *Report on the Ordination of Women, Submitted to Consistories for Study and Report in June, 1957, 58-59, 74*).

ministers. Below each verse we state the traditional perspective and a revised perspective. Unless otherwise noted, page references are to: "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," found in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1959-1984*. All bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Hebrew Scripture Texts

Genesis 19 and Judges 19

Genesis 19:4-11: But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

Judges 19:16-26: (Tells the story of Gibeah, a city that like Sodom and Gomorrah desires to rape male visitors to the city. In this telling the men of the city rape the man's concubine.)

Perspective One: While there is violence in this passage and there are a number of other sins elsewhere attributed to Sodom, the sin that is predominant in this text is a homosexual sex act. "The text stresses the reprehensible nature of the violation as strongly as the fact of the violation itself" (p. 245).

Perspective Two: The prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), when referencing the destruction of Sodom, focus on the sin of inhospitality. The intent of this text is to condemn the violence of actions and inhospitable behavior. "This text . . . may be interpreted as a clear condemnation of persons who would force homosexual acts upon unwilling partners. The text by itself will not justify a blanket condemnation of homosexuality" (p. 246). Condemnations against rape cannot inform or judge a nurturing, loving, consenting sexual relationship between adults.

Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20

Leviticus 18:22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13: If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Perspective One: The laws regarding homosexual practice are part of an extensive list of laws regarding sexuality and associated penalties. This section of Leviticus is about holiness, indeed it is often called “the Holiness Code.” Since all of God’s word, from Genesis to Revelation, is revealed truth, these pronouncements need to be obeyed. Mercy can call for Christians to not seek capital punishment for homosexual behavior. Deeper understandings of the commitments and intimacy of marriage teach us not to tolerate polygamy (which is shown to be acceptable in the same section of scripture). Biology and a clearer understanding of reproduction and the nature of blood would teach us not to shun women in menstruation. There is, however, no comparable valid argument for removing the strong prohibition against homosexuality.

Perspective Two: The prohibitions are listed with other prohibitions that we, as a Christian community, chose to reject. We are inconsistent when we lift up only one of many sins named in the holiness code. To be consistent, we should advocate capital punishment for male homosexual behavior, shun women in menstruation, accept polygamy, ignore lesbian behavior, and never wear a garment made of two different materials! While other passages more directly speak to the issue of sacred prostitution, “In the Hebrew mind, homosexuality was inextricably linked to the . . . practice of sacred male prostitution, one of the ongoing threats to the integrity of Israel’s worship” (p. 246). Whether temple prostitution is named or not, the Hebrew culture associated same-sex intimacy with pagan worship practices. This condemnation is informed by this bias. There was no concept of loving, enduring homosexual relationships or same-sex orientation, therefore this condemnation does not speak to such relationships.

Deuteronomy 23, 1 Kings 14, 15, 22

Deuteronomy 23:17: None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute.

1 Kings 14:24: There were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.

1 Kings 15:12: He put away the male temple prostitutes out of the land, and removed all the idols that his ancestors had made.

1 Kings 22:46: The remnant of the male temple prostitutes who were still in the land in the days of his father Asa, he exterminated.

These four texts relate to temple prostitution and the fertility cults of Israel’s pagan neighbors. It is generally agreed that they do not inform a discussion of homosexual behavior in current society. However, they support the thesis that eliminating temple prostitution was a major cultural concern of the Hebrew Bible that is irrelevant to today’s culture.

Christian Scripture Texts

Jude 5-8

This passage makes reference to the destruction of Sodom. Please, refer to the discussion above of Genesis and 1 Kings.

Romans 1

Romans 1:16-2:8: ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error...

We note that, in order to study this passage, it is helpful to have a sense of the movement of Paul's argument. He is discussing the human condition. He points out that humans are condemned before God, and are slaves to sin. Salvation comes through faith. Apart from faith, humanity stands under "the wrath of God." Paul demonstrates the consequences of human separation from God by showing the moral failure of Gentiles. General revelation (i.e., knowledge of God all people can see in the natural order) should lead to grateful obedience and faith. Instead, humanity glorifies itself. Because the human relationship with God is distorted, human relationships are distorted. This idolatry is seen in sensual vices (24-27) and antisocial vices (29-31). Homosexual acts are listed under sensual vices.

Perspective One: Paul's language points to a perversion of the divine-human relationship leading to a perversion of human relationships. Our perverted relationship to God "is parallel to and occasioned by the" act of self-willed rebellion on the human level. This self-willed rebellion has been compared to the first act of rebellion in the garden of Eden. "One who dishonors God will dishonor [his/her] . . . own body as well" (p. 248).

While homosexual behavior is named as a sin, we must recognize that it is not singled out. Homosexual behavior is one of many consequences of humanity's sinful state. It is listed with covetousness, malice, envy, gossip, disobedience to parents, and others sins of the mind and heart. Paul goes on to condemn all those who would judge others. Recognizing homosexuality as one of many sins leads to humility and compassion for those with a homosexual orientation, but scripture still names it as a sin to be renounced.

Perspective Two: Paul's concern is a distorted relationship with God. Paul is concerned about many sexual and antisocial sins that result from a distorted relationship with God. However, in ancient times, there was no sense of in-born sexual orientations, either heterosexual or homosexual—neither of these terms existed. In Paul's mind and the mind of his culture, there was no understanding of human sexual diversity. The perceived natural order led to male/female sex and reproduction. Sexual acts among people of the same gender were prevalent in the domain of temple prostitution or other pagan practices. Paul argues that heterosexual people reflect a faulty relationship with God when they engage in same-sex behavior in cultic practices and where there are unjust power imbalances. Paul's prohibition

does not speak about the nurturing, loving, and consenting same-sex relationships to which God has called many men and women.

Historians of ancient Rome advise us that applying this passage to any group of Christians today may be a grave misuse of the passage. By “those who suppress the truth” (1:18), historians believe Paul meant a very specific set of people: the most recent Roman emperors. They note that, in Rome at this moment, everyone was living with a huge, open lie—the current Emperor had poisoned his predecessor/stepfather and then DIVINIZED him—there were sickening statues of the dead victim in the streets of Rome. Historians say that Paul could not write about this openly—though everyone in Rome was forced to live in daily obeisance to such open lies, including the open knowledge of emperors who sleep with their mothers and sisters, which is deviously unnatural by all accounts. God’s beloved in Rome would have no problem identifying the utter depravity of a notorious group of people whose “wickedness suppress[es] the truth.” Quoting ancient historians in detail, historians can show the extent to which it was public knowledge that the emperors Augustus, Caligula and Tiberius “exchanged the glory of immortal God” for their own images and have been given up “for degrading passions”, “debased minds” and every kind of wickedness (Rom. 1:18-32).

Ignorance of Paul’s implicit intention to elicit public outrage at blatant abuses of emperors has enabled Christian exegetes to misuse this passage to accuse modern-day people who experience same-sex attraction of the highest level of evil.³⁶

1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1

1 Corinthians 6:9-10: Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:9-10: This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.

Perspective One: These are more instances of those who engage in male homosexual behavior being condemned along with other universally accepted sins.

Perspective Two: There is great debate about the meaning of the Greek words used here (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*). It is not clear they were ever *intended* to refer to homosexual behavior. While these terms may include sexual activities between people of the same sex, they also carry connotations of sex trafficking, pedophilia, and subjugation.

³⁶ This summarizes Neil Elliot’s argument on pages 75-86 of *Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

Chapter 8

Life Stories

Introduction

Despite the limits on our knowledge, the Classis of New Brunswick has found that God has given us deep convictions when it comes to affirming and celebrating all people into the life of God's church, including those of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. The preceding pages offer the expression of our Classical understanding of the biblical and theological support for our position to affirm and celebrate the full inclusion of persons with LGBTQ identity in the life of Christ's church.

Our position did not come without wrestling with scripture, and indeed, such wrestling continues. But this wrestling with the scriptural texts and the development of theological arguments has never been prompted by the mere goal of developing an abstract theory or philosophy of ministry. No, these were both prompted and informed by people whose stories and experiences give witness to the presence and the movement of the Spirit of God; whose experiences prompt *them* to ask, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8: 36) and from encounters with whom *we* have been left to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10: 47).

And while these questions may have originally arisen in the context of people *newly* coming or returning to faith in Christ, the Church's questions around inclusion of LGBTQ people often center on people who have been raised in the Church; whose baptismal covenant was made long before their sexual and gender identity was known to anyone other than God. Their confession of faith in Christ is sincere; their discipleship is dedicated; their desire to serve is inspiring; their longing to be recognized in and use their gifts for Christ's Church is unmistakable. They serve as our living reminders that the complete meaning of baptism from a Reformed perspective encompasses not only cleansing from sin, and newness of life, but also full inclusion in the household of faith.

The Classis of New Brunswick has learned firsthand that people who wish seriously to engage the discussion of the place of LGBTQ persons in the life of Christ's church must hear their stories in their voice. We encourage you to listen to stories of personal experiences and stories of faith to see if indeed you see evidence of the Spirit of God at work within them. As with Phillip and with Peter, and eventually with the whole of the first-century church, from these stories of exclusion, eventually, we will all discern a clear movement of the Spirit leading us to embrace a wider trajectory of inclusion and celebration in Scripture.

Room for All shares many stories of Gay Christians and those who are allies to the LGBTQ community here: <https://roomforall.com/resources/stories/>

Love Will Ultimately Win: The Life Story of a CNB Deacon

I grew up in the church. Since I was a child, it has been a part of my life and has shaped and molded me. It is where I learned to sing and where I fell in love with music. It is where I learned about God and this beautiful world, and where I came to see God's presence and love in everything around me. It is where I learned to love others because we are all God's children, even those that appear to be different than me. It is where I learned to think of others more than of myself.

As I grew older, however, the church of my youth became less relevant to me because in many ways I felt the church was straying from the teachings of Jesus and had sadly and strangely aligned itself with the Republican party and had become more political. I saw how my church (the Roman Catholic Church) as well as many other churches that were considered part of the "religious right" had given in to the allure of political power, of prestige, and of money. The church rarely aligned with my convictions of helping the poor, the stranger, the dispossessed, the suffering. As a gay man, the church also by its own choice became my adversary and, along with the religious right and the Republican party, fought hard to keep me and those like me down and to keep us in the margins of society.

I left the church.

I was fortunate after many years to find an RCA church that is open and affirming, but more importantly I was fortunate to find a church community that is truly fueled by God's love – one that finds ways to unapologetically express that love through service to the community and service to each other. I was humbled, honored and blessed to be elected a deacon of the church and to have the opportunity to serve others.

It saddened me greatly that the 2016 General Synod recommended a change in the Order for Christian Marriage in order to preclude same sex couples from marrying in the church on the very same day that a deranged person murdered many innocent LGBTQ people in Orlando, Florida. At the same time, GS passed a resolution "*rejecting all forms of mockery, degrading words and thoughts, economic oppression, abuse, threats, and violence made against members of the LGBTQ+ community...*" The irony of this statement and the actions of GS to withhold the joyous union of two loving adults is stark, cold, and heartless. What many in the RCA have completely failed to realize is that preventing two people who are in love from sanctifying their love through the dignity of a religious marriage is in itself *an act of violence* to the LGBTQ+ community. It is a small, insidious act of violence that, like a little white lie, can grow and fester into something far worse. It is an act that is both *degrading* to same sex couples as well as one

that *makes a mockery* of the couple's relationship. It is an act that *seeks to oppress* their love and therefore *to abuse* the love that they have for each other. I fear that the RCA has damned itself with its own words and conflicting resolutions.

Perhaps the church as a whole has truly lost its way. The Reformed Church in America in particular has left "reformed and reforming" by the way-side. The RCA is closing its heart, and is closing itself off from God's greater love by not supporting loving same sex couples and all the wonderful gifts they can bring to God's community.

The church has so much to learn – *or perhaps to re-learn* - from the LGBTQ+ community. This is a community that is strictly built on Love and respect, despite all of our differences. This is a community that has fought so very hard for love, and has fought against all sorts of opposition from churches, political groups, and those afraid of change. This is a community that has continued to face all sorts and forms of violence, fear and hatred at every turn. This is a community that has learned that Love wins.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that churches like the RCA learn from the LGBTQ+ community and accept and welcome the Love of God that comes through people like me. When Love Wins, God Wins. However, as a Christian I have been taught that our ways are not God's ways, and our thoughts are not God's thoughts.

As one who looks forward to the time when God's Kingdom will be fully realized "on earth as it is in heaven," I am confident that Love will ultimately win, whether or not the greater church is there to help take part in God's victory.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: The Life Story of a CNB Church Member

I grew up in the Episcopal Church, and while I always appreciated the pageantry, ritual, and drama of the Episcopal Church, I never felt I made a real spiritual connection through the Church. It wasn't until the summer after I graduated from high school, when I spent a week or so at Frontier Ranch (a Young Life camp nestled in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains) that I really established a relationship with God. (That's also when I realized I felt much more connected to God sitting by myself on the side of a mountain than I did sitting in a church full of people.)

Although I was raised Episcopalian, my belief in God isn't rooted in the teachings of a specific denomination. Maybe that's why my faith never caused me any inner turmoil when I realized I was gay or later when I decided to come out as transgender. I didn't have any heartfelt struggle. I didn't think I was going to hell. (Mainly because I don't believe in hell, but still...) I didn't think I was an abomination in God's eyes. I really didn't think about God at all when it came to my

sexual orientation and then later to my gender identity. (Though my dad definitely did. The first person he called when I told him I was transgender was his priest.) I was confident in my relationship with God and I was confident in myself. And I know that not everyone who comes out as gay or as transgender is so lucky.

There are two quotes regarding God, Jesus, faith, etc. that have stuck with me over the years. When I was at Frontier Ranch, one of the counselors told me after a long heart-to-heart, “It’s not the ‘don’t do’s’, it’s the ‘get to’s’ that make having God in your life such an amazing experience.” And when I was in college (I went to The University of the South, a small Episcopalian liberal arts university), there was a poster on the wall of our bookstore that had an illustration of Jesus with the headline, “He died to take away your sins, not your mind.” Those two sentiments definitely helped me create my own personal theology.

My God is a God of justice and a God of mercy. My God has a great sense of humor. My God doesn't judge based on race, sexuality, gender identity, economic status, educational level, etc. My God not only doesn't judge based on these things—he doesn't care about these things. He's got way more important things to worry about, like if you're a good person, if you're happy, if you're kind... My God has helped create some pretty cool stuff. I believe my God hears my prayers, but I honestly don't know if he's able to do anything about them. I think that sometimes my God has to watch some really terrible stuff happen and sit by helplessly just like we do. My God is a really good listener. My God is a really good friend.

I know God is fine with me being a transman. I have no doubt he wants me to be a better parent, a better partner, a better sibling, a better son, a better friend. But I'm confident he has no problem with me being transgender. I am confident that I am “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

We Reflect God’s Love in Relationships:

The Life Story of a CNB Choir Director as Told to an Elder

One Sunday in 2014, Cameron listened to the message at his place of worship, Abundant Grace Church, whose pastor preached: If you're Christian, you shouldn't post anything that is un-Christian on social media. After service, a church leader pointed to a picture that Cameron had posted online of him and his partner together the night before. The Abundant Grace leader asked, “Are you and this gentleman together?”

“Yeah,” Cameron replied. “We’re planning to get married.” And that was it. Cameron was told he could no longer serve as one of the main soloists on the pastor’s elite praise team. A few minutes later, on the sidewalk outside, Cameron googled “gay friendly church NJ” and his current Reformed church popped up.

Cameron found the Reformed church the most racially and culturally mixed congregation he had ever worshipped in. He appreciated its different musical styles. The second time Cameron and his partner attended service the Reformed co-pastor approached them. He said, “I noticed you guys have been here before. I want to connect with you. Do you think we could sit down sometime and have a conversation?” Right then and there, Cameron said, a lightbulb went on for his partner. This pastor treated them like they were a couple.

From the time he was a child in his uncle’s Jersey City congregation, Cameron had been taught homosexuality was wrong. Hearing his uncle’s condemnation was hard because Cameron knew he was gay from the time he was four-years old. By the time he was 12, his mom figured Cameron was gay. She told him, “I’m not going to not love you. I’ll still love you and you’re still my son. But it’s wrong.” But Cameron knew he could not marry a woman. He also knew he couldn’t bear to live alone for the rest of his life.

Today, Cameron loves leading a Gospel choir at the Reformed church. But the African American worship experience Cameron was raised in is different. There’s more emotion. When he’s hungry for that kind of expression, he returns to services at Abundant Grace. He has friends there. He joined Abundant Grace when his high school choir director invited him to come along. After college, though Cameron moved 30 minutes north, he kept worshipping at Abundant Grace. Every so often, the message was about the sin of homosexuality.

While serving as a soloist, Cameron decided to ask his Abundant Grace pastors for help. When they heard about his struggles with same-sex desires, they sent him to an ex-gay counselor who works with clients who wish to disavow their homosexuality. Cameron hoped it would help. Cameron respects people of faith, even when he disagrees with them. Cameron respected the counselor because the counselor believed what he was saying. The counselor asked Cameron to talk about the thoughts he was wrestling with. The counselor gave Cameron reading materials about men who had left the gay lifestyle behind. He encouraged Cameron to try dating a girl. Cameron spent Valentine’s Day with a girl he dated, though they were just friends. He felt he had to be honest. It wasn’t right to be with a woman if he truly wasn’t interested in her.

Cameron and his husband met in 2012, through an online dating site. Like Cameron, his soon-to-be-husband was looking for a companion. (His profile read, “if you are looking for something else, move on.”) When the two men met, Cameron realized he did not want to live his life alone. Cameron felt, wow, this is exactly what I am looking for. “I felt so much more joy when I finally decided to be me,” Cameron said. “The Church is wrong—you can’t say, hate the sin, love the sinner.” If part of you is sin, then God hates you. To Cameron, that just didn’t make sense from what he had come to know about God.

At Cameron’s request, before his wedding, his Reformed co-pastor met with Cameron’s mother and four of his friends because they could not imagine how a same-sex relationship could be sanctified or holy. This pastor, too, had grown up with a more conservative view. Over the

years, he had come to see that the definition of marriage progressively changes throughout Holy Scripture, and so the following definition was used at the celebration of Cameron's same-sex marriage:

The definition of marriage changes throughout Holy Scripture. For Abraham and King David, marriage meant polygamy. The practice of Levirate marriage obligated a widow to breed with her dead husband's brothers to continue his bloodline. First century marriage in the days of Jesus also differed radically from our modern-day religious arrangements. However, what does not change throughout history are the kinds of holy relationships that God calls us to celebrate. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. We reflect God's love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another we see reflections of God and of our own selves. In such relationships we experience holiness. When two people cultivate with one another these qualities, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, their friends, and their community.

Note: Names have been changed to respect privacy.

Chapter 9

Worship Resources

The following liturgy was written for use in worship at the Reformed Church of Highland Park on June 6, 2016, immediately following the actions of General Synod 2016. The Call to Confession could be changed to reflect current events. In worship, this was led by 2 people: a pastor and an openly gay deacon, with the openly gay person reading the section from Psalm 139. It was meaningful for our community that he read that section in worship.

Call to Confession

Pastor: We live in a beautiful and broken world, where glimpses of God's grace can be seen, and where unthinkable violence can shatter lives. Many of us gathered here on Monday and on Tuesday for vigils to mourn the killing of 49 people at the Pulse dance club in Orlando. We have held the victims and their loved ones in our thoughts this week. We acknowledge the real fear felt by many within the LGBTQ community. And we lament a world in which such evil actions can be directed toward the gay community. Over the past week, many of us have also felt sadness and outrage as we watched the actions of our Denomination, the Reformed Church in America, at its annual meeting. These actions included making statements and requesting policy change that do violence to the souls of our LGBTQ members by attempting to deny them the right to Christian marriage in the church.

We bring to God our grief and our outrage, our pain and our fear, our lament and our desire to work for a better world. Let us turn to God, first in silence and then by joining in prayer:

—Silent Meditation—

People: Listening God, we cry out to you over the shattered lives and shattered hopes of so many of your beloved children. We denounce hatred and violence. We ask that you would be close to those who are grieving and those who fear for their personal safety. Work through all of us, we pray, and help us to end a culture of violence and a climate of hatred. Work through us, together with all people of good will, to create a safe home here on your blessed earth. May your will be done here and now so that justice and righteousness may embrace, so that each person may be seen as your beautiful creation. Amen.

Choral Response: *Nada Te Turbe*
[Or *O Lord Hear Our Prayer* or *Kyrie Eleison*]

Assurance of God's Grace

Deacon: God hears our cries of anguish and anger. God sees the broken-ness in this world and, by the Spirit, works to heal and make lives whole again. God meets our despair with a powerful reminder of who we are, and who ALL people are: God's beloved. Psalm 139 tells of the great care and tender mercy of our God who created ALL people as beautiful works of art. May these words be an affirmation, even a celebration, of the greatness of the work of God's hands. May we heal as individuals, as communities and as a world, so that all might be seen as fearfully and wonderfully made.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.
Amen. (Psalm 139:13-18, NRSV)

When looking for a confession and a call to faithful living, Classis churches may wish to consider using the text formulated for CNB's Overture to GS2015 on God's Sovereignty.

Leader: We believe that each person's identity, including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—is revealed in an intimate relationship between each person and God. We find such intimate relationships in Biblical stories where God calls people of great faith out of their ordinary lives to take up an extraordinary role in God's story of salvation. God calls Abram out of his father's house in Chaldea, rebukes Sarah for her laughter, enflames Moses from a bush, confounds Hannah's prayers in the temple, confronts Zechariah with his disbelief, and impregnates Mary with her mission to serve as the mother of humanity's savior.

These ancestors in faith experienced a holy fear or terror when God challenged their pre-conceived notions about themselves and called them to act in ways their own limited imaginations could not fathom. We know God because they trusted God. ***Their***

personal relationships with God form the foundation of **our** faith. Therefore, we believe that personal identity is the holy ground where each person encounters God.

This personal relationship is the foundation of our faith and joyfully we make the following confession of faith in God's sovereignty in determining our personal identity.³⁷

**People: "We praise God because each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made!
For it was you, Lord who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, Lord, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139).**

**Therefore, we proclaim that God alone prescribes who we are to be.
As God determines whether we are right or left-handed,
God weaves our gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation into our very being;
No elements of our personal identity are more inextricable!
People whose identities do not conform to dominant societal norms—
 lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, and
 gender non-conforming identities—are gifts of God to humanity!
They reveal that God's astonishing and diverse creativity surpasses
 our limited human understanding.
Therefore, it is a sin to disparage people because they do not conform to
society's heterosexual norms and binary conceptions of gender
 (either male or female based on biology at birth).
The Bible affirms that God alone has primary authority over the gender,
 sexuality, and sexual orientation God has ordained for each of us."**

Leader: Based on our confession, we embrace the following as our call to new obedience in a life of transformation in Christ:

- We respect that each person's unique expression of our God-given identity reflects the mysterious perfection in which we were made.
- In our Christian witness, we believe it is fitting to proclaim God's primary authority in determining each person's gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.
- No human being should attempt to prescribe personal identity for another.
- We acknowledge that it takes tremendous faith in God for people to express God-given identities that diverge from societal norms.

³⁷ This text, from the confession to the call to faithful living, was developed as CNB's overture to GS 2015: The Sovereignty of God in Determining Personal Identity.

- The pastoral role of the church is to affirm each person's God-given identity and to uphold our faith in God's primary authority over who we are to be.

With fear and trembling, God challenged our forebears in faith to discard their preconceived notions about themselves in order to prepare them to become leaders who usher in God's kingdom. In the same way, God calls each of us to faithful lives that are unique, individual and terribly significant.

A Confession Adapted from the Colts Neck Reformed Church (2015)

We Confess to Believe:

"For it was You (God) who formed my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (Psalm 139:13-14).

We believe that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) and that God has equipped every member of the church with gifts for ministry (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). In the history of the church, some of God's people have not been welcomed and affirmed. For example, the gifts of people of certain races, of women, of divorced persons, and of those with differences of physical or mental ability have been discouraged or discounted in the service and membership of the church. We make clear our beliefs concerning the rightful inclusion of all people in the life and ministry of God's church.

In particular, we welcome and affirm people of various gender identities and sexual orientations. We understand that no one chooses their gender identity or sexual orientation, but instead we experience these identities as inherent parts of who we are as individuals.

The National LGBTQ Taskforce sponsors the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), founded by Mark Bowman and Ann B. Day. Mark is the founder of Reconciling Ministries Network (United Methodist) and Ann was the spearhead of Opening and Affirming Program (United Church of Christ), both founded in the early 1980's. These two pioneering programs were joined in cooperative efforts by More Light Presbyterians, Open and Affirming Ministries (The Christian Church/Disciples of Christ), Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, Reconciling in Christ Program (Lutheran Churches/North America), Affirming Congregation Programme (United Church of Canada) and Supportive Congregations (Brethren/Mennonite). Together they published an award-winning journal, *Open Hands*. This was followed by the publication of the study program, *Claiming the Promise*, and a volume of worship aids, *Shaping Sanctuary*. Together in 2000 they sponsored the largest gathering of welcoming church supporters ever. After the highly successful WOW 2000 gathering in Dekalb, Illinois, the

leadership of the cooperative welcoming programs decided a formal organization was needed to facilitate the growing movement. Howard Bess, an American Baptist, and Peter Barbosa, an active member of the United Church of Christ, led the effort to bring the organization into reality. IWR was incorporated in 2002 under the name Welcoming Ministries Incorporated and attained its 501(c) (3) federal tax-exempt status. A seven-person board of directors was drawn from the sponsoring welcoming programs. Six programs became the formal sponsors of IWR.

An excellent collection of worship resources (be sure to scroll all the way to the bottom) can be found at:

<http://www.welcomingresources.org/worship.xml>

The IWR page above includes a link to another collection of resources that we highly recommend called, "A Place in God's Heart... A Place at Christ's Table." A preview and a complete download are available at:

http://www.welcomingresources.org/A_Place_in_Gods_Heart.htm

Many Voices: A Black Church Movement for Gay and Transgender Justice has an excellent collection of worship resources:

<http://www.manyvoices.org/resources/?/worship/>

Out in Scripture, offered by the Human Rights Campaign, is lectionary-based resource primarily for sermon preparation, but it also includes prayers that might be suitable for worship:

<http://www.hrc.org/resources/out-in-scripture>

The United Church of Christ offers worship resources here:

<http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/lgbt/>

Music resources can be found on the Room for All website:

<https://roomforall.com/resources/room-for-all-songs/>

A song written by Mark Miller, called "I Choose Love" can be found here:

<http://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/122296683625/i-choose-love-mark-miller>

Chapter 10

Timeline of Our Classical Position

The church of Jesus Christ has a long history of failing to fully affirm the sexual orientations of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, a-sexual, queer, and the non-binary gender identities and expressions of people who identify as neither simply male or female. In the Classis of New Brunswick, awakening to our error and the pain caused by the church has been a process that has taken place over decades of pastoral experience, theological discussion, and prayerful congregational discernment. Our work has been fueled by our faithful response to repeated ecclesial litigation in the Reformed Church in America against our classis and our allies in the denomination.

Here is a **partial list** of milestones in our walk of faith, affirmation, celebration, and litigation beginning in 2003.

2003

The Buchanan Group Formed. United Methodist Pastor, C. David Buchanan (son of the Reformed Church of Linden and former pastor at The Reformed Church of Highland Park), took a tithe of his inheritance to found The Buchanan Group, an ecumenical group of pastors and scholars in association with New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey in order to advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQ people within the church. The Group developed the Holy Relationships Conference, co-hosted by First Reformed Church of New Brunswick in 2005.

2004

In January, at its stated session, two overtures were brought to classis regarding the inclusion of people who express LGBTQ identities in the life of the church. One of the overtures was approved.

Classis also agreed to:

“. . . set aside time in a stated meeting of Classis to be given to explore issues related to homosexuality: to share our experiences relative to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people, to explore the pastoral implication relative to LGBTQ people within our congregations, and to gain a better understanding of scripture, theology, and our role as a classis within RCA polity.”

In September, at its stated session, Classis approved a letter addressed to the Classis of New York encouraging them to move forward with the ordination of an openly gay NBTS seminarian, Ann Kansfield, as Minister of Word and Sacrament. While it is questionable polity to involve ourselves in the dealings of another classis, it was known that letters had gone to New York

Classis discouraging them from approving the ordination of Ann Kansfield. The letter was brought forward and approved in order to provide an alternative voice from within the Reformed Church in America.

2005

In January, the Board of Trustees of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary announced the conclusion of the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield's presidency. The Seminary affirmed the Rev. Dr. Kansfield's work and endowed the Mary and Norman Kansfield Chair in Old Testament in their honor. At the same time the board announced that the Board of Trustees reprimanded the Rev. Dr. Kansfield for taking a controversial public action while President by officiating at the same sex marriage of his daughter in Massachusetts without prior Board discussion or approval. However, in announcing the Rev. Dr. Kansfield's retirement, the board emphasized its commitment to continue the ongoing dialogue as it relates to the presence and participation of gays and lesbians in the Church. Signers of the letter affirmed a series of convictions that guided the Rev. Dr. Kansfield in his performance of his daughter's wedding and therefore affirm the place of LGBTQ people within the church of Christ.

In January, at its stated session, classis members engaged in a dialogue process around homosexuals and their place in the Church, as a result of the January 2004 motion. Topics on this day included biblical matters, personal experiences, and pastoral perspectives. Out of this arose a commitment to continue the conversation at three more stated sessions.

In spring, General Synod received charges against the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield for officiating at the same-sex marriage of his daughter, Ann Kansfield to her wife Jennifer Aull, graduates of NBTS. In response, a CNB minister prepared a letter, endorsed by at least 17 members of the Classis, entitled, "Engage in Dialogue or Hold Us Accountable, Too."

In June, at General Synod, the Rev. Dr. Norman J. Kansfield was tried and found guilty of acting "contrary to our faith and beliefs as affirmed by the Holy Scriptures and the decisions of General Synod concerning the relationships of active homosexuality, having failed to uphold the vow stating, 'I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace,' the Rev. Dr. Kansfield failed to submit himself to the counsel and admonition of the General Synod, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of my understanding of the Christian faith." General Synod voted to exercise discipline of the Rev. Dr. Kansfield by deposing him from the office of General Synod Professor of Theology and suspending him from the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

On October 16-18, "Holy Relationships: A Conference on Theology and Sexuality." Classis churches helped to sponsor this important conference, held in New Brunswick, NJ. Featured theologians and church leaders included Psychologist and Educator, Dr. David Myers, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, John Selders, Miguel De La Torre, and Mel White. The conference was sponsored in part by New Brunswick Theological Seminary, which had gained attention in January for reprimanding its then-president, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield,

and not renewing his contract after he officiated at his daughter's wedding. Asked if the seminary's participation contradicted that action, trustee Larry Williams said it is in keeping with the board's interest in "continuing conversation" and dialogue on the subject.

In December, the First Reformed Church of New Brunswick took steps to become the first of many Classis churches to establish their congregation as open and affirming. FRC New Brunswick described this historic step on their website: "Our leading board, the Consistory, received an overture signed by four women who are members of the church. The overture asked Consistory to declare the church welcoming and inclusive 'regardless of our differences in understanding particular texts of the Bible.'" It also asked for an amendment of the church's bylaws to include a statement that "candidates for the ordained offices of the church (Deacons, Elders, Pastors) will not be discriminated against on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or physical ability." This overture was preceded by several months of meetings of a task force on inclusiveness, and a congregational meeting that discussed the process of becoming open and affirming. Consistory adopted the overture, published it in the newsletter of January 2006 and invited more comments from the congregation. One month later it amended the bylaws in accordance with the overture.

2006

In September, at its stated session of Classis, the first of three dialogues on the place of LGBTQ people in the church was held. A focal point of the session was time spent at table discussions, hearing one other's voices.

2007

In January, at its stated session of Classis, the second of three dialogues took place. A focal point of this session was hearing the voices of LGBTQ people, family, and friends.

In May, at its stated session of Classis, the third of three dialogues took place. At this time, classis members were invited to submit position statements. These statements were sent out in advance of the meeting. Conversations around these statements took place at the classis meeting.

An invitation was extended to classis members to write and distribute their positions on the inclusion of LGBTQ people as well as their theological reasoning. Succinct statements of views were encouraged, no more than 15 pages, and included the implications of the positions, in order to help Classis understand how each position would impact church life. It was asked that respondents include how they would answer the following questions:

- Is "gay marriage" legitimate?
- Are "civil unions" good public policy?
- Should we ordain gays and lesbians in committed relationships?
- May committed gays and lesbians come to the Lord's table?
- Should LGBTQ people be adoptive guardians?
- May we baptize children of LGBTQ guardians?

Should LGBTQ persons be ordained as elders or deacons?
How should we respond to LGBTQ youth in our churches?

Throughout these three dialogues it was emphasized the goal was understanding and dialogue and not a judicial process.

2011

The Reformed Church of Metuchen, 150 Lake Ave, Metuchen, NJ 08840, www.rcmetuchen.org joined the Room for All roster of Open and Affirming Churches at:

<https://roomforall.com/welcoming-and-affirming-congregations/roster-of-affirming-congregations-in-the-rca/>

Other Classis churches that have joined the Room for All roster include:

- Colts Neck Reformed Church (2015), 72 County Rd 537, Colts Neck, NJ 07722
www.coltsneckreformed.org/
- Reformed Church of Highland Park (2007), 19-21 S 2nd Ave, Highland Park, NJ 08904
www.rchighlandpark.org
- Community Church of Keyport, Warren St, P.O. Box 562, Keyport, NJ 07735
www.communitychurchofkeyportnj.org
- Middletown Reformed Church, 121 Kings Hwy (2016), Middletown, NJ 07748
www.mrchurch.us
- First Reformed Church of New Brunswick (2005), 9 Bayard St, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
www.firstreformedchurch.net
- Second Reformed Church of New Brunswick, 100 College Ave, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
www.secondreformednb.org

On September 28, 2011, the Classis received into its membership the Rev. Dr. Ursula Cargill, and ordained her to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

On November 4, 2011, a complaint was filed with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic Synod against CNB by CNB ministers David W. deForest, Ben Lin, Allan Conover, Samir Youssef, and Mark Vander Meer. It alleged, among other things, that the Rev. Dr. Cargill “is a practicing homosexual” and that the action of the Classis “is contrary to the teaching of Scripture on the matter of homosexual practice, and in violation of the stated position of the RCA as expressed over the last three decades which affirms that the practice of a homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture. It is inappropriate that a person living a homosexual lifestyle should hold office in the RCA.” On May 5, 2012, the Regional Synod, acting on the findings and recommendations of its Judicial Business Committee, voted to “to confirm the action of the Classis of New Brunswick.”

2013

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to repeal its 2012 reaffirmation that “homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures, and therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense.” MGS 2013 p. 176-7, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2013MGS-Overtures.pdf>

- In June, GS adopted this overture in part, acknowledging that it usurped the authority of the classes.

On May 21, the Appellants in Lin and deForest appealed the action by the Mid-Atlantics Synod to the RCA’s Commission of Judicial Business (CJB). The CJB stated: “Based upon the record before us, which we find incomplete, particularly because of the lack of any scriptural argument to rebut the position of the Appellants, the commission believes that Scripture has been put aside in the Synod’s review of the New Brunswick Classis’s examination of the Rev. Dr. Cargill. Given the incomplete record before us, the commission believes our polity is best served by returning the case to the Mid-Atlantics Synod and requesting the Synod to reconsider this case according to the findings herein.”

- GS 2013 voted on the appeal of “Lin and deForest” to remand the decision of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics for further hearing to resolve whether the Classis of New Brunswick properly examined and approved the installation of the Rev. Dr. Cargill, giving full recognition to the importance of Scripture as central to the faith and life of an ordained minister of Word and sacrament.

2014

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to state publicly that throughout the Reformed Church in America, classes, churches, theologians, and members hold a wide array of positions about same-sex relationships; and to confirm that the constitution of the RCA includes no statement about same-sex marriage and to re-emphasize Christ’s love in all human relationships.

MGS 2014, pgs. 133-4, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2014MGS-Complete.pdf>

- In June, GS2014 denied this overture.

In April, CNB’s Justice and Mercy Committee participated in a community workshop led by the Reformed Church of Metuchen called, “Jesus Christ in the LGBTQ Community: An Open Conversation.” The goal was to transform area churches and people’s hearts into places where our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are received and affirmed as equal members of the body of Christ. Presenters included members of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Metuchen; Marilyn Paarlberg, Room-for-All workshops & DVD series, *Body & Soul*; James V. Brownson Ph. D., Western Theological Seminary, author of *Bible, Gender and Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*; Michael C. LaSala Ph.D., Rutgers School of Social Work, author of *Coming Out: Coming Home*.

On the “Lin and deForest” complaint:

- Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics again found that the Rev. Dr. Cargill had been properly examined and denied the charge.
- Complainants Lin and deForest appealed the ruling to General Synod.

In December, CNB submitted a supplement to its defense of the transfer of the Rev. Dr. Ursula Cargill into our classis, pleading that General Synod statements and reports are not constitutional and therefore do not restrict the classes, citing a report of the Commission on Church Order, adopted by General Synod 2014, that stated that statements and papers of General Synod are binding on GS staff, but not on the classes, its ministers and congregations who are bound only by the constitution of the RCA.

2015

In January, CNB voted to send two overtures to GS2015. The first, asking GS to proclaim God’s Sovereignty over Personal Identity, was referred to the Special Council on Human Sexuality. The second overture request was that Synod denounce the RCA’s ongoing support for reparative therapy, and in the meantime to remove all references to reorientation/reparative therapy from the RCA website. Then, upon that committee’s report, this overture was subsequently adopted by GS2016.

MGS 2015 pages 83-89 <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2015MGS-Overtures.pdf>

- GS2015 removed all references and papers that advocated for reparative therapy from its public Web pages.
- GS adopted a recommendation to denounce reparative therapy, after the Committee on Christian Action submitted a report based on this overture.

In May, at its stated session, CNB adopted its welcoming statement and introduced its non-discrimination bylaw.

CNB Welcoming Statement: "As Classis of New Brunswick, we affirm the great diversity of God’s creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."
(adopted at 5/27/15 Stated Session)

CNB BYLAW 3: The Classis is an open and affirming body that does not discriminate against its candidates, members and delegates on the basis of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or disability. Recognizing that in our classis as in our denomination there is a diversity of perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the church, Classis does respect the right of individual candidates, members and delegates to follow their conscience and permits their dissent on matters pertaining to the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. (Approved on 5/27/15, adopted on 9/26/2015).

In June, after nearly two hours in judicial session, GS2015 affirmed the role of the classis in receiving ministers of Word and sacrament into membership. The ruling was a response to the “Lin and deForest” complaint. Synod ruled to affirm the decision of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, which affirmed the action of CNB in receiving the Rev. Dr. Cargill into membership.

Because the matter was filed as a procedural complaint against an assembly and not as a charge against an individual, neither the synod nor the Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) was provided with evidence about the Rev. Dr. Cargill’s lifestyle. On questions of whether she is celibate or “practicing,” the CJB report noted that in RCA polity the classis is charged with the supervision of its enrolled ministers and is the only assembly in close enough relationship with each individual minister to make definitive judgments concerning character and morality:

“It is only the local classis that is fully capable of discerning the theology, life, and moral character of a particular minister so as to determine whether he or she is fit for ministry. By the time a judicial case reaches the General Synod it is often so far removed from the facts on the ground that the prospect of supplanting the reasoned view of a local classis with our own determination is troubling.”

In presenting the CJB report to delegates, commission member Jonathan Gundlach said the seven voting members of the commission hold differing perspectives on the subject of same-sex relationships. Yet, they were unanimous in affirming that procedural requirements were followed. “Our recommendation is not a moral affirmation of the position of New Brunswick on the matter,” Gundlach told delegates. “Several on the commission would not want to affirm the position. The decision is rooted in our polity.”

An amendment to CJB’s original recommendation proved helpful to delegates who struggled to reconcile the judicial procedure with the RCA’s stated position that homosexual practice is sinful and contrary to Scripture: “This affirmation only affirms that the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics followed the procedural requirements of the *Book of Church Order*.”

- GS2015 approved the amended recommendation 134-77.
- Though the Commission on Judicial Business was swayed by CNB’s arguments from polity, they pointed to the fact that CNB provided scant theological and scriptural support.

In September, President Hartmut Kramer-Mills formed an ad hoc committee to address theological issues as they arise in the life of Classis, including the committee’s first issue: the full inclusion and affirmation of people who do not conform to heterosexual and gender binary norms, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, and queer people (LGBTIAQ, shortened to LGBTQ in this report).

2016

On June 14, a vigil to remember the victims of the Orlando, Florida, nightclub shooting early Sunday was conducted on a Tuesday night in the borough of Highland Park at the Reformed Church of Highland Park social hall, organized by the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale and the Rev. Stephanie Kaper-Dale, the church's co-pastors, and Pandora Scooter, co-chair of The Pride Center of New Jersey's LGBTQ social justice group. A vigil also was held the night before.

In summer, Classis formed a committee to investigate the benefits of dual-affiliation with the United Church of Christ, in light of the RCA's increasing enforcement of the position of its majority on homosexuality, ordination of openly gay ministers, and same-sex marriage.

2017

CNB congregations voted to seek dual-affiliation with the UCC.

2018

In January, CNB voted to overture General Synod to affirm that LGBTQ persons are fully included and welcomed in the offices, commissions, positions, synods, classes, consistories, ministries, and operations of the Reformed Church in America. The main reason stated was that the purpose of the Reformed Church as stated in the *Preamble* of the *Book of Church Order* reads, "The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works." The meaning of the word "all," necessarily includes LGBTQ people.

- GS2017 denied the overture, deferring it to the work of its 20/20 Vision Team.

In November, at a United Church of Christ congregation in Cedar Grove, dual affiliation was celebrated among some CNB churches. Two and a half years earlier, churches in the Classis started exploring opportunities to connect with the United Church of Christ. This decision was driven by serious disappointment over the direction of our RCA denomination, in terms of their ongoing General Synod statements on homosexuality being sin.

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Appendices

Changing Views on Scripture

As Reformed Christians, we approach scripture with reverence, trusting that the God whom we encounter in faith is beyond the limitations of the written word. Our relationship with God, mediated through the word, is dynamic and guided by the Spirit. Within scripture, in the history of the ancient church, and in the contemporary church our understanding of God's work in the world, God's desire for us, and God's desired response from us has developed with the guidance of the Spirit. Scripture mediates our encounter with God through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In different times and places the Holy Spirit has led God's people to new interpretations of scripture and new ways of faithfully walking with God.

Scripture tells the story of the relationship between God and God's people. Within scripture itself we find that faithful responses to God have varied in different times and places. For Adam and Eve, a faithful response meant not eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Noah's faithful response was building an ark. Abraham's faithful response was stepping out time and time again based on God's promise. For Moses and the Israelites, the ten commandments became central to their faithful response. The prophets reminded God's people the desire of God's heart was for humanity, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8b) Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, "love one another." (John 15:12) The early church expanded from a Jewish enclave to a ministry that welcomed gentiles. The Holy Spirit has guided communities to varied faithful responses in circumstances as unique and varied as God's creation.

Within scripture itself human circumstance and divine expectations in conversation led God to alter what was required of God's people. The book of Numbers records the story of Abraham's descendants being shaped into God's people prior to entering the promised land. God's expected faithful response was renegotiated between the first and second generation of freed Israelites. Initially, inheritance of the land was the exclusive right of sons. Because Zelophehad died without a male heir his daughters came forward and objected to the inheritance laws. They asked, "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?" (Numbers 27:4) Moses took their concern to the Lord and the Lord revised what was allowed among God's holy people, and the daughters of Zelophehad inherited land. Before the first draft of the laws are put into practice, the laws were adapted to the needs of a second generation of Israelites. Dennis Olson, in his commentary on *Numbers* reflects on what is different in this new generation of God's people. He writes: "The new generation honors the tradition of the old generation. But they seek to be faithful to that tradition through a process of dialogue, compromise, and negotiation, whereby new circumstances and factors may be accommodated in a spirit of obedience and creativity. The tradition is not a dead letter but a

living spirit.”³⁸ (Olson, 1989, p. 192-193) Even in the days of Moses we learn that the practice of our faith is guided toward new responses through faithful dialogue between human need and God’s expectations.

In the life of the early church we discover that the Holy Spirit challenged and expanded what it meant to be God’s holy people. Peter, while experiencing a heavenly vision, resisted a call to touch food that was once called unclean. A voice stated, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15) The Spirit called Peter to a new understanding of God’s expectations, and he proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to a “profane” gentile soldier occupying the promised land. Recognizing the gospel of Christ had been proclaimed and received, and flourished among gentiles, the Jerusalem Council wrestled with what God required of a faithful people in a diverse multi-cultural environment. The Jewish Christians speaking about the gentile converts recognized “that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:11) An unclean gentile people and the chosen people of the law were both understood to be saved by grace, not by works of the law. As Paul tells us in Galatians 2:21, “if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” The Holy Spirit led the early church to a new understanding of the practice of their faith as human need and God’s call remained in dialogue.

Church history tells us that our understanding of scripture has changed as God’s call and human need have remained in dialogue. The role of women in the church has changed. There was a time when it was not permissible for women to preach and teach in the church. Recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in calling women to ministry, equipping women for ministry, and ministering through women, the church recognizes the gifts of women for ordained ministry.³⁹

For much of church history, Christians who divorced—even those who bore little responsibility for their divorce and who worked to prevent it—were told that they should not remarry but should remain single and celibate until their former spouse died. Those who did remarry were often marginalized or expelled from their churches as they were judged to be living in adultery (Mt. 19:9, Mt. 5:31-32, Rom. 7:2-3, 1 Cor. 7:10-11). In recent decades, much of the church has changed its views on remarriage. It is not that divorce is viewed as a good thing, or even as a trivial thing. But the church has also seen the good that can emerge in the lives of some individuals through remarriage—good for them as individuals, good for their children and extended families, and good for their ability to serve God’s kingdom.

Interracial marriage was opposed for centuries by many Christians who interpreted Scripture to support their views (Gen. 28:1, 2 Cor. 6:14). As the suffering caused by racism became more visible to the church as a whole,

³⁸ Dennis T. Olson, *Interpretation: Numbers* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996) 192-193.

³⁹ see footnote 35

simultaneously, Christians began to see more examples of the good that came from interracial marriages—good within families, good within the churches, and good within society as a whole.⁴⁰

Scripture, traditions, memories, and experience tell us our God is a living God, and our living God invites new ways of living faithfully. Responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit includes an openness to reconsider our practice based on deeper values and convictions embedded within God's relationship with humanity. In light of this, New Brunswick Classis has re-examined dominant teachings about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people within Christ's church. Within our context in this time and place "we affirm the great diversity of God's creation as it is manifested in our churches. Our congregations include persons from various ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, gifted with a variety of abilities, gender expressions and sexual identities. We live in many forms of individual or family life, including same-sex relationships. Therefore, as Classis, we strive for inclusive congregations that celebrate the gifts and ministries of all."⁴¹

Scripture and Moral Discernment:

Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches

Background and Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2010, the Formula of Agreement churches experienced notable controversy and dissent over issues involving human sexuality and church order. Disagreement over these matters is not new and occurs within most Christian bodies. The character of this controversy, however, raised significant questions more generally about the viability, focus, and function of the Formula of Agreement itself as different partners took a range of approaches to these questions. As Formula partners reflected together on these issues, several expressed interest in initiating a conversation centered ecumenically and broadly on the use of Scripture in moral discernment. The need for this conversation involved not only issues of sexuality, but reached more broadly. The practice of scriptural interpretation in moral discernment stands at the heart of many of the controversies faced in Formula of Agreement churches, and that

⁴⁰ *Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage*, January 2016, p. 15.

⁴¹ The **1975** General Synod stated that: Where the one flesh relationship has been irreconcilably shattered, there one has divorce (*de facto*) and it must be recognized. In fact, where a marriage has been destroyed, the Christian community may even counsel severance to prevent further damage to persons involved.

question had not been directly and comprehensively addressed in previous Formula of Agreement conversations.

In the summer of 2010, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America voted to invite Formula partners to join in a conversation on these issues and all agreed: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. These partners also invited three additional communions to participate and offer their insights on the topic due to close working relationships with members of the Formula of Agreement churches: the Christian Reformed Church in North America; the Moravian Church in North America, Northern and Southern Provinces; and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. Each of the Formula of Agreement churches sent a specialist in Bible, one in Christian ethics, and an ecumenical officer to the consultation. Several experienced pastors contributed as well. Other communions sent one or more representatives who could bring their own distinctive perspectives and experiences to the table. The goal was not necessarily to produce a statement to which all denominations would subscribe, but rather to explore common ground that would strengthen the capacity of churches to walk together in relationships of mutual affirmation and admonition around these issues and questions. This document is the result of these efforts.

As the conversation worked through a wide range of issues in three meetings (fall of 2011 to fall of 2012), those of us gathered in consultation discovered several things. First, we discovered that we had significant areas of substantial agreement, as well as areas where we used different language and took account of distinctive emphases and questions. We also discovered a deep resonance between debates inside our various communions and those among ecumenical partners. In engaging each other ecumenically, we also were engaging the variety of perspectives often found within our own communions.

Most importantly we discovered in greater depth and richness the bonds that unite us to each other. These discoveries are reflected in the major sections comprising the remainder of this document.

- The first section articulates our shared commitment as followers of Jesus.
- The second section explores our shared commitment to embrace the testimony and guidance of Scripture in our lives.
- The third section probes our shared commitment to shape our moral discernment, both individually and collectively, in ways informed by salutary practices under the guidance of the Spirit.

In the pages that follow, we bear witness to these discoveries. It is our hope and prayer that in offering these pages to our various communions, the unity of the church will increase and our capacity will grow in the use of Scripture for deepening our moral discernment.

“Jesus Is Lord” as the Starting Point for the Use of Scripture in Moral Discernment

As ecumenical partners discussing the use of Scripture in Christian life, we quickly identified a common theme that emerged in many of our denominations’ decision-making processes, particularly in areas of complex moral and ethical discernment. That common theme focuses on our shared reception of God’s gracious salvation in Jesus Christ, mediated through Word and sacrament, which awakens in all of us a recital of the core Christian confession, “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3). This confession is a central Christian response to the call of God’s grace, around which our unity is most clearly evident. This shared experience and confession also provides the common foundation for our various processes of moral discernment. We recognize each other as ecumenical partners, first and foremost, because we are co-recipients of the same grace, and therefore follow the same Lord, witnessed in the same Scriptures, whose reign encompasses every arena of our lives.

Together we recognize and affirm that the confession “Jesus is Lord” occupies a central place in the core theological frameworks that shape our use of Scripture in moral discernment. As this confession functioned in the first century, so it functions today. It is both an expression of resistance against the powers that enslave human life (“Jesus—not Caesar—is Lord”) and an expression of an allegiance that transcends all others (“We must obey God rather than human beings” Acts 5:29).

This confession grounds our moral decision-making because it stands at the heart of the witness of Scripture itself. This confession also provides a broad context or disposition that shapes all our attempts to interpret Scripture in ways that can inform our moral lives. It becomes a critical point of orientation in the application of Scripture to complex contemporary questions. The authentic and deep recognition of the Lordship of Christ in every area of our lives constitutes the goal of all our attempts at moral living. These considerations shape, in important ways, how we read and apply Scripture to our lives. They provide a positive criterion to center our moral interpretation of Scripture, and a boundary marker that warns against any attempts to interpret Scripture in ways that conflict with this confession.

We also can be more specific about the ways in which this confession shapes the moral life of Christians. To say that Jesus the Savior is Lord is to say that human beings stand in need of salvation, that they are alienated from the love and justice of God. It is to say that the person and work of Jesus Christ is the means by which God intends to set both our lives and the whole world right again. To make this confession is to recognize that creation and human history do not proceed in random fashion. Rather, this confession looks in hope toward that time when Christ will be the judge and redeemer of the whole creation, restoring the cosmos to God’s intention.

To say that Jesus is Lord is to become his disciples, living by his example and teaching, and centering our moral vision in his dual command to love God and to love our neighbor as the fulfillment of the whole law. This confession leads us to trust continually in Christ’s gracious

mercy when we fail to follow Christ as we should. For some of us, to say that Jesus is Lord is to acknowledge the place of both the gospel and the law, a recognition that transforms how we engage ethical and moral questions. Others of us are more cautious about differentiating gospel from law too sharply but agree that the lordship of Christ provides the proper context within which to address these questions.

For all of us, to embrace the confession “Jesus is Lord” is to embrace in hope an upside-down world in which the crucified one is exalted. It is to accept, in trust, that life is found by giving it away. It is to accept, in faith, that God is at work where the lowly are lifted up, the sick are healed, the outsiders are welcomed, and agents of oppression are brought low. To confess Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge him as the one through whom all things have come into being (John 1:3), the one by whom all things are reconciled (Colossians 1:20), and the one in whom all things find their fulfillment in God’s redemptive purpose (Ephesians 1:10). This is the grand narrative framework within which we seek to exercise moral discernment and the end toward which our moral effort is rightly oriented.

Indeed, the confession “Jesus is Lord” and the Christian commitment to Scripture are intimately interwoven with each other. We embrace the Hebrew Scriptures and the apostolic testimony of the New Testament because of their unique place in bearing witness to God’s purpose, culminating in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Together, we celebrate and affirm this testimony, and seek God’s grace to live into it more deeply. But as we remember why we embrace Scripture, we also are guided in how the Word of God comes to bear upon our lives in processes of moral discernment, never divorced from the context of following Jesus.

We share the common conviction that the confession “Jesus is Lord” needs to be heard and lived out in the context of a robust Trinitarian faith. To confess Jesus as Lord is the central and most important step toward the great confessions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which recognize one God in three persons. As we seek to discern how our shared confession of the Lordship of Christ must inform our interpretation of Scripture in making moral decisions, we agree that we must be informed by the leading and experience of the Holy Spirit, who continues to guide us into all the implications of Christ’s embodiment of God’s mission to the world (cf. John 14:25 ff.). Moreover, these explorations must be informed also by the will and purpose of the Triune God, revealed in Scripture and discernible to the eyes of faith in the texture and fabric of the creation itself.

These profound areas of agreement do not always lead us to complete agreement on specific moral issues. Differing emphases and different perceptions, both of the Spirit’s leading and of the will of God as it is revealed in the created order to the eyes of faith, help to frame and interpret many of the differences in how we use Scripture in making moral decisions.

For example, disputes over the church’s response to committed, same-sex intimate relationships can be viewed through this lens. Some Christians point to what they believe is the work of the Spirit in disciplining and sanctifying these relationships. They believe the Spirit is bringing them under the Lordship of Christ as we live toward the new creation to which Scripture

bears witness, fulfilling the old creation in wonderful and surprising ways. Other Christians object that their understanding of the Creator's will and purpose manifested in the created order necessarily excludes such relationships from the Lordship of Christ. They point instead to the transforming power of the Spirit to bring lives into conformity with what they see as God's original created purpose for human life. Still other Christians view this disagreement through the lens of law and gospel, regarding the disagreement as arising outside of core gospel affirmations. In these disputes it is often difficult to sort out the boundaries between Scriptural interpretation, perceptions of the leading of the Spirit, and one's construal of God's self-revelation in the created order.

We see similar patterns of difference in ecumenical dialogue surrounding other areas involving the interpretation of Scripture in moral discernment. These areas include, for example, a Christian vision for economics, the interplay between justice and freedom, and the appropriate Christian use of the legal codes of the Hebrew Scriptures. Our common experience in conversation has demonstrated that deeply shared affirmations of Christ's Lordship and the foundational testimony of Scripture do not in themselves guarantee consensus on particular moral judgments. We are keenly aware of a divergence of opinion on contested issues among sincere Christians both within and between our various churches.

These disagreements are often real, substantive, and painful. They need not, however, prevent Christians from recognizing each other as authentic followers of Jesus. Those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord remember how Jesus prayed that his followers would be "perfected into one" (John 17:23). Jesus' prayer makes it clear that this visible unity of Christ's disciples is the central means "by which the world may know" that Jesus has been uniquely sent by God. This unity among Christians is a reality we share as followers of one Lord and, at the same time, a goal toward which we strive in obedience to that one Lord. We are common recipients of God's mercy in Christ, and we therefore share the same confession, "Jesus is Lord." We share a common and ecumenically affirmed Trinitarian framework of understanding that shapes in profound ways our moral commitments even amidst our differences. We share a common Scripture that forms our imaginations, inspires our discipleship, and guides our lives and witness. These common frames of reference help to shape and inform our continued dialogue and engagement when we encounter differences in understanding of Scripture and its relationship to Christian moral living.

We are convinced that the more deeply we embrace the core confession, "Jesus is Lord," in the context of a robust faith in the Creator and a deep reliance upon the leading of the Holy Spirit, the more deeply we shall find our common ground in the use of Scripture in moral discernment and move toward deeper insight and consensus. Our shared confession of Christ's Lordship kindles the hope that a deeper moral understanding, a more profound obedience, and a richer unity still lie before us. Indeed, we believe that dialogue over our ecumenical differences in moral discernment can be, in God's design, the occasion where the church is led more deeply into all the truth that God intends to reveal to us.

Interpreting Scripture in Moral Discernment

We receive Scripture as a gift from God, mediated to us by our forebears in the faith. The Holy Spirit, active in its writing and transmission, remains at work in the church that reads and hears Scripture. Our reading of Scripture has, as its primary subject, God and God's gracious ways in the world, central to which are the life, death, resurrection, and saving grace of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Through it we come to know, love, and serve the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Scripture invites us into the long and ongoing history of God's creative, reconciling, and redemptive work with humanity and all of creation. We celebrate the manifold settings in which we encounter it, including personal devotions, group study, common worship, and theological discernment. Scripture's authority and normative status reside in its Spirit-given capacity to form, instruct, and challenge the people of God, an authority demonstrated when the church encounters the living Word of God. The church encounters the words of life in Scripture, as the Holy Spirit calls, sustains, empowers, guides, reforms, admonishes, comforts, queries, critiques, and inspires the people of God.

We acknowledge that Scripture does not always shed direct light on contemporary questions, but it always illumines our Christian vocation. As individuals and in community, we confess that Scripture shapes and forms our identity, our imagination, our language, and our moral development.

Scripture is best read and understood in community, in conversation with other followers of Jesus across time and around the world. While disagreement in interpretation sometimes requires loving critique and dialogue as the church moves toward greater clarity, diversity in interpretation is often a gift from the Holy Spirit. As we read in community with each other, we gratefully claim its power to speak to us and to shape us in diverse times, places, and cultural contexts. Just as we each have differing gifts of the Spirit, that Spirit graces our ecclesial traditions and individual lives with different gifts of interpretation. These different ways of hearing and understanding it do not diminish but often enrich our shared biblical heritage. This is not surprising because, as Scripture itself attests, God speaks to the community of faith in diverse times and ways (Hebrews 1:1). For instance, we cherish four Gospels, not one. When we read and understand Scripture in different ways, our common engagement with it nourishes our relationship of mutual affirmation and admonition, a commitment that demonstrates the Bible's authority in communities of flesh and blood. Scripture continues to speak to us in fresh ways, addressing unanticipated contexts and kindling ongoing and common reformation.

Scripture is always and necessarily interpreted. Whenever anyone reads the Bible, he or she always brings a framework of interpretation, whether recognized fully or not. While some want to believe that Scripture can be read at face value, more is always involved in discerning its truth. Sometimes these frameworks of interpretation are constructive and necessary, arising from original language research, confessional frameworks, historical reconstructions, Christian experience, and our location within broad Christian traditions. Sometimes they are unhelpful,

springing from prejudice, limited experience, or narrowness of vision. No theory of inspiration, no method of interpretation, provides in itself unmediated access to divine wisdom.

The Spirit continues to lead us into all the truth of Scripture, but the fullness of this leading ordinarily comes to those who persistently seek to deepen their grasp of Scripture in conversation with all of God's people, over time, as the church continually reforms itself according to the Word of God. At the same time, to say that we all always interpret the Bible does not imply that all interpretations are equally valid. We therefore treasure relationships of mutual affirmation and critique. With humility, we rely on the Holy Spirit to work in and through us as we read it in community.

Moral discernment in the light of Scripture calls forth both devotion and art. We read the Bible with the understanding that every passage was written in a particular genre and for a specific audience, time, and place. Scripture's meaning for us is not limited to what it meant in its original contexts, nor can its meaning be entirely sundered from those contexts. The dynamics of Scripture as a word from God at particular times and places open our imaginations for discipleship in our particular time and place. Faithful interpretation includes attention to text and translation, to literary form and genre, to larger literary contexts and rhetorical aims, and to social and historical contexts ancient and contemporary. We pray for humility, trusting God's grace to foster repentance, reconciliation, and life where we may err.

Rarely does a single verse, phrase, or passage from the Bible constitute an adequate guide for moral discernment. Even less often does Scripture directly dictate specific approaches to matters of public deliberation. Rather, every passage and phrase stands within the entire wisdom and arc of Scripture. In seeking to understand God's Word to us in Scripture, all of us acknowledge the church's ancient wisdom regarding the rule of faith and the rule of love toward God and neighbor. We also honor the distinctive criteria to which our respective traditions appeal. Whether these traditions begin with an appeal to law and gospel, salvation history, or the teachings of Jesus Christ in framing moral discernment, their wisdom guides response to Scripture and informs our ecumenical conversation.

We affirm that the sciences and other contemporary sources of wisdom can illuminate our reading of Scripture. We affirm that scriptural interpretation occurs in the flow of human experience. We acknowledge among our respective communions' diverse heritages, practices, and traits regarding how we take account of science, experience, and other contemporary wisdom in the reading of Scripture. We agree that Scripture grants us wisdom for understanding, appreciating, and questioning contemporary assumptions and experience.

Turning to Scripture for moral vision and ethical guidance at once calls forth and nurtures Christian character and virtue. Discerning God's will among the pressing moral issues of the day requires the fruit of the Spirit. Through God's grace, those gifts come alive in our practice of mutual affirmation and admonition.

In the midst of diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Scripture, we rejoice in Christ's promise that the Holy Spirit will continue to work in and through the church, drawing the community of Christ's followers into fuller appropriations of the truth (John 16:13).

Practicing Moral Discernment in Christian Community

Life in community is never easy and the Christian community is no exception. While we may say, "They will know we are Christians by our love," too often we fall short of that adage despite our best efforts. This is particularly true when one considers the process of moral discernment in the Christian community. Experience and time have taught us that successful moral discernment is as much about the process of discerning as it is about the outcome. The process needs to be intentional, thoughtful, grounded in trust, and guided by mutually agreed upon guidelines and practices. The process of moral discernment must be rooted in the rule of love and in the call of all Christians to be "reconcilers in Christ" (Matthew 22:36-40 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

The church's unity in Christ is a gift of God that calls us forward to seek relationships of reconciliation and trust with one another. Such relationships are essential for any process of discernment. In moral discernment we rely upon the church's unity in Christ because we all see through a mirror dimly and all of us rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Sometimes trust springs from hope rather than experience. At times the horizon of trust seems extremely distant, particularly when injustice and ill will have fractured the fellowship of Christ's body. Differentials of power, particularly when they are not clearly identified, can subvert unity and trust. Together we commit ourselves to nurture repentance, unmask injustice, seek reconciliation, and build trust and mutual respect.

Building trust requires time and commitment to shared values, including the Lordship of Jesus Christ and Scripture's foundational role for the life of the church. It also requires attention to practices that foster mutual respect, fairness, inclusion, and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A number of common practices contribute to the building of trust and the enterprise of moral discernment. Specifically, we would encourage the following practices: prayer and worship, articulating statements of common ground, negotiating ground rules and practices, and determining the exact nature and status of disagreement. These all can take on a different tone or character from one tradition to another. Despite the diversity among various communions, each provides structure and context to facilitate moral discernment in difficult and charged situations.

Prayer and Worship. A context of prayer and worship situates our moral discernment in relationship to God. God calls together the Christian community, and prayer and worship are primary contexts for Christian community. Authentic worship is not a means to an end; it keeps us ever mindful of God's presence in and through us and our neighbors. Worship reminds us

that we all stand as individuals accountable before God. Worship and prayer should permeate the process of moral discernment.

Articulating Statements of Common Ground. When we gather in conversation, we remind ourselves of the already-proclaimed beliefs and values that we hold in common. We remind ourselves that everyone present is a Christian who adheres to common beliefs and values that bind the community together. Chief among these beliefs and values is that everyone present takes the Scriptures seriously. In the heat of discussion, it is all too easy to accuse others of being less than fully Christian. An agreed upon list of common beliefs and values, or community-forming practices, prominently displayed, serves to frame the conversation for everyone.

Negotiating Ground Rules and Practices. Christian moral discernment calls us to create a climate of civility. Establishing ground rules helps communities to move beyond the faulty assumption that everyone shares a common approach to conversations that involve strongly held beliefs and opinions. We cultivate a common understanding of what a climate of civility looks like and what behaviors foster healthy conversation. These understandings may vary from setting to setting and from context to context. Different types of conversations may call for different ground rules. A clear set of ground rules, tailored for the purpose and context of the discussion, promotes healthy and beneficial conversation. Ground rules may include processes for discernment, the use of silence, and the need for periodic prayer and reflection. Communities may further consider the roles some individuals may play in facilitation, calling the body to prayer, and other contributions to the process.

Determining the Exact Nature and Status of Disagreement. The body of Christ gathers for discernment at multiple levels, including small groups, local congregations and communities, regional, national, and global denominational assemblies, and ecumenical gatherings. When disagreement occurs, participants often hold divergent understandings concerning what exactly lies in dispute. Moreover, some discussions may lead to specific action, including legislative action, while others do not. In all settings we find it helpful to clarify the nature and status of the matter at hand.

Among the many approaches available to them, communities should seek those methods best suited to the purpose and context of the discussion. Discussions that may result in legislative action may require one set of methods and ground rules, while non-legislative discussions may call for another. In some instances we may conduct a non-legislative discussion prior to moving into legislative session to allow for types of conversation not usually found in a legislative setting, a process that may occur within one day or over a period of several years. When issues have grown contentious, communities will seek criteria for assessing whether an issue rises to the level at which participants regard faithfulness to the gospel to be at stake and how seriously the issue at hand jeopardizes Christian fellowship. We extend every effort to maintain visible unity in Christ and the bond of peace.

Conclusion

Since the advent of the Christian church, the use of Scripture in moral discernment has resulted both in joyful confessions of common faith and in painful struggles in areas of dissent. This is still the case today. Yet we have hope.

We have hope because by the grace of the Triune God we are made members of the body of Christ and thus of one another. While maintaining the wisdom of our various traditions as guided by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, we are empowered by this grace to enter into ecumenical dialogue that enriches each of our confessions.

We have hope because those of us who gathered in consultation quickly discovered that the Formula of Agreement churches and those other churches with whom we have consulted share significant points of consonance and commonalities in our ecumenical expression of Christian faith and practice. Together, we were able to articulate some of the affirmations that marked our common ground and guided our deliberations.

We affirm together that salvation is an unmerited gift of God's grace and favor, received by faith alone apart from any consideration of human righteousness.

We affirm together that so-called "cheap grace" falls short of God's intention for our new life in Christ. We understand cheap grace to be "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, chapter 1).

We affirm together that the church must be prepared to stand over against the values and mores of popular culture when those values conflict with the call of Christ.

We affirm together that God's call from Scripture rings through contemporary life with an invitation to work for justice and the rights of the oppressed.

We affirm together that God's claim upon human beings includes the call to honor God in the sphere of bodily life, including our sexuality. "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We affirm together that the claim of Christian love includes loving admonition and mutual up-building in faithfulness among the members of Christ's body.

We have hope because, in mutual discernment and admonition grounded in worship and prayer, Formula of Agreement churches have found that our diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Scripture challenge and mutually enrich our ongoing communion. We bear witness that, in regular, broad-based, ecumenical conversation, we are given glimpses of that day when we will all understand fully the will of God, even as we have been fully understood,

that day when all of creation will be redeemed and reconciled to God through Christ Jesus our Lord (1 Corinthians 13; Romans 5:10).

In this hope we claim our shared confession, “Jesus is Lord.” This confession rests at the heart of Christian theology and shapes our use of Scripture for moral discernment. This confession calls us to live as citizens of heaven within the God-beloved world, knowing that this call will sometimes put us at odds with the ways of the world. Shared affirmations of Christ’s Lordship do not in themselves guarantee consensus on particular moral judgments; our disagreements can be real, substantive, and painful. Yet we believe that dialogue concerning our ecumenical differences in the context of our common confession and Scriptures can be an occasion for God to lead the whole church more deeply toward living into our radical confession of Christ’s Lordship.

In this hope, we embrace the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament as foundational to our understanding of God’s creative, reconciling, and redemptive work with humanity and all of creation and to our life together under the Lordship of Christ. We all strive to interpret Scripture faithfully, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its interpretation requires attention to text and translation, to literary form and genre, to larger literary contexts and rhetorical aims, and to social and historical contexts ancient and contemporary. Faithful interpreters relying on the Holy Spirit may reach differing conclusions, and these differences may lead to conflict. Yet we celebrate the call to read Scripture in community and in conversation with followers of Christ around the world. We honor the distinctive criteria to which our respective traditions appeal, even as we wrestle with the different interpretations at which we may arrive. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, God uses Scripture to strengthen the church’s moral vision, obedience, character, and its varied expressions of our common Christian vocation.

In this hope, we celebrate that the body of Christ enters into intentional times of moral discernment for the mutual affirmation and admonition of the believers (Romans 12:1-2). To be effective, this process of moral discernment must be intentional, thoughtful, grounded in trust, and guided by mutually agreed upon guidelines and practices.

Christian moral discernment is shaped by guidelines such as the affirmations above, the rule of love, and the call of all Christians to be “reconcilers in Christ” (Matthew 22:36-40; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). It is strengthened by regular prayer and worship. It is guided by the intentional articulation of our common beliefs and honest, ongoing negotiation of rules for us

life together. It is bounded by a clear determination of the nature and status of our disagreement, remembering our common call to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). It is careful not to turn unexamined differences of power and privilege into an opportunity for injustice. In Christian moral discernment, God calls the church to nurture repentance, unmask injustice, seek reconciliation, and build trust and mutual respect.

In this hope, we commend this document for use in the wider Christian family, whether gathered as a handful of members of a local parish or in global, ecumenical assembly. We hope that it will contribute to the deepening of our shared communion, both within and beyond the Formula of Agreement churches. Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we hope that this document will strengthen the use of Scripture in moral discernment. We hope that the body of Christ may be nurtured in Christian practice and virtue, continue to live together in mutual affirmation and admonition, and press on to know, love, and serve our Triune God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God alone be glory

Representatives of the Formula of Agreement Churches

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