

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.