

## 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