

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.