

## Report of the President

Fellow elders, fellow delegates, corresponding delegates, staff of the RCA, grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father in Christ Jesus our Lord—words that were spoken yesterday as we gathered in worship of our holy and right God.

First, thank you for making the time for coming and serving here doing church in this 2021 General Synod.

Apparently this presidency thing is supposed to last one year. In my case, two-and-a-half years, maybe even three years. I'm not sure. Whatever it is, we'll probably have to call out Russell Gasero to verify that I did serve over 2.5 years. Russell, we'll call you out of retirement.

First and foremost, thanks be to Christ.

Secondly, I just want to take some time to thank the RCA staff, obviously the ones we see, for us as officers: Liz, AnnAlissa, Andrea, Kris, the communications people, IT staff. You guys have done a wonderful job in putting this synod together—what do you think, Eddy?—in eight, twelve weeks. Round of applause.

The greater RCA staff, which is probably still back in Michigan having a party because Eddy is here, but want to give them thanks. You sometimes wonder, *what do all those people do?* Well, I know when Phil and I walk around, we see what they're doing. And they're serving the church, so we're thankful for them.

I do want to give thanks just ever so quickly to the Owasco Reformed Church who, when I started this journey, they said, "Pastor EJ, whatever time, resources, or needs you have to do this job well, we will give it to you." And so thank you to them.

Thanks also to Classis Montgomery. I spent a little over seven years with them. We wrestled, we discussed, we prayed, we worshiped. I was encouraged by them. I was blessed by them. Thank you. There's a couple representatives here from that classis.

Thanks to James Nakakihara, my friend. He put up with me and also gave me the tools and resources to do this. Lee DeYoung, the predecessor of James. And again, they both have showed me wisdom and also demonstrated in action how to serve the church under the command of love. Thank you.

Thanks to Eddy. I call him my fellow Canadian brother, from a different mother. I guess, you've been a couple more months longer than me. But just a joy to get to know him. Ned, Phil, Russ—Again, thank you. My dear wife, Sharen—not only my partner in marriage, but my partner in the ministry of Christ, my sister in the Lord, someone I will spend eternity with—I'm thankful for her.

You saw my daughter on the screen, my son Cameron, and another son Elijah, and their spouses. [I am] just so thankful for them and the support they've been. I keep getting texts, for the last few days. 'Papa, we're praying for you.' (*Papa* is dad in Dutch, in case you don't know that.) But [I'm] just thankful for that.

As the outgoing president—because Phil, you will be [president] in a few days—it's good to finally get together. Yes, we call this GS 2021. But actually we are catching up for GS 2020. [I have] thankfulness in my heart that we're able to greet each other in the doing of work together.

As president, you might have read in our General Synod workbook, and again, I'm assuming you've read it over and over again, all 300, 400 pages—and if you haven't, guess what you'll be doing tonight? It is expected that the president takes one overseas trip representing the RCA and seeing first-hand her work. Well, I did not take such a trip, but I did have a chance to visit. Visit during this pandemic, visit before, be it on Zoom, YouTube, or Facebook. I didn't realize I could watch so many services on different platforms. But I had the chance to visit with pastors, consistories, churches, classes, regional synods. We had one-on-one discussions with past presidents, recent presidents. I had discussions with various individuals who have a heart for the work of Jesus Christ, who have an understanding of the gospel as brother Eddy has so unpacked for us.

I've seen and heard how our mighty God is at work—yes, here in North America, the United States, the dominion of Canada. We see how wide and far the stories take us outside of North America. One such story, just recently, hearing again, our general secretary, coming out of Nicaragua. Canada opened her borders to help those who were in need. He came to Canada. He was invited to an RCA church plant pastored by Andres Serrano who had come I don't know how many years earlier. But this RCA church plant was used by God to bring Eddy and his family to faith in such a way that Eddy made the choice to study at Western Seminary, to be a minister of Word and sacrament. [Eddy] served the RCA in Ontario, Canada, and in California. Now he serves as our RCA general secretary.

The story of Ned Beadle, my friend, who through the ministries of Crystal Cathedral came to an understanding that he needed a savior. He needed forgiveness of sins. He needed life eternal. And he cried out to Christ as his Lord and Savior.

We heard James's story a year-and-a-half, two years ago.

And there's stories, perhaps, like Phil and myself. We were born and raised in the RCA. I recall when everybody had to line up at 18 years old and do their profession of faith, or their confession of faith. I wasn't comfortable with that, and everyone was shocked. But I do remember Dominae Van Es gave me this little book, *Our Reformed Church*, published when I was born. Actually, I was born two years before this.

I read it, put it aside. Years later, I read it again. One thing I can say about this little booklet, it does remind us that to be part of a church, to be part of a denomination, there are distinctions. In the case of being a reformed church, lowercase R, there are some distinctions. There are some theological differences from other denominations. We'll talk about those in a few minutes.

I want to celebrate with the news that Eddy touched on [with the] Clásis de las Naciones. Yesterday, my daughter and son joined with the Classis of the Nations. [In] the Dominican Republic, where my in-laws have chosen to retire, over 20 churches [are] wanting to partner with the Reformed Church in America.

I was with a group of pastors in Florida before the pandemic. What was interesting there: I heard their desire of serving in the RCA, not asking for stuff, but they said, we want to serve under that umbrella. Why? Because as they read Scriptures, they came to a conviction that it was not about them. They came to a conviction that the historical Reformed theology was the most consistent with the full testimony of the Word.

And there I see Andres Serrano showing them how the *BCO* actually is a tool, a resource, to do ministry. I'm thinking, give your head a shake. I heard him unpacking the Heidelberg Catechism in such a way that they celebrated its truths because it forced them back into the Word.

The stories go on and on. I encourage you to share your stories with each other around your table, perhaps even asking stories of those that you might meet on the floor or perhaps at breakfast, dinner, or supper. Hear the stories of many of our staff people—the good stories of faith, of how Jesus the Christ has worked, and how he has planted the seed, yes, in the power of the Spirit, yes in the testimony of the Word.

God is at work. God is in our midst. We don't pray Jesus down. He is here. And thanks be to him that he is here, and that he is a sovereign God, and that he is in control.

Well, you might have heard last night at our opening worship, as the General Synod invited us to continue on in our worship with our tithes and offering. We hear the work locally of Highbridge Reformed Church in the Bronx. Neat things [are] happening, and yet a need, not just only for the physical building, but a need for the ministry. Church plants [in] Hamilton, Ontario, church plants in the Dominican, church plants in Lupeni, Romania. The Spirit is at work.

These greater stories bring us back perhaps to this story here at the 2021, or 2020 General Synod. The *BCO* reads that the president is to state and explain the work of the church during the synod. Obviously, I've been doing that. If not, don't tell me. But I'm trying to do that as well as I possibly can over these next few days. But it also states that I am to report on the state of religion in the classes and make proposals for future action. I plan not to make proposals but to piggyback on our former presidents but also on the work of our Vision 2020.

I believe the process, if bathed in the Word, will bring glory and honor to God. So let me talk a little bit about the state of religion in the classes. We the elders are responsible for the affairs of the church. We got that last night, I hope. It's not that we don't do it all, right? We're not perhaps doing all of the things of the church, but we are responsible in the gathering of the saints in corporate worship of our God.

We're responsible to ensure that the right preaching and teaching happens from behind the pulpit and around the table. We're called to administer the sacraments—as Calvin calls them “a good aid to the preaching of the Word.” We're called to practice discipleship, discipline. How do we walk beside each other when we see err? How do we open our own hands when others bring error to us? It's called discipleship, sanctification. Some theologians call it progressive sanctification. What does that mean? It means becoming what we are declared to be. Do you know that in Christ we are holy and right? And that you look at yourself and there's no evidence to that?

It's interesting. The preamble of our *Book of Church Order* unpacks the work of the church, unpacks the work of disciples, of elders, of pastors. “The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of people by preaching, teaching, and proclaiming, or proclamation, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works.” It tells us what the mission of the church is: to announce the good news of saviorhood and extend his lordship throughout the world.

So as we gather to do church, we gather in such a way that we are equipped to do this better, announcing the good news of the gospel that in Christ, we have been made alive. That in Christ, there is nothing of greater value but him. So again, I encourage us as elders, it's not corresponding delegates, it's not fourth office bearers, it's not PhDs, it's not prime ministers, or presidents, or healthcare professionals. It's not feelings, emotions, experiences. Now, do you hear me? I'm not saying these are bad. We can learn, we can talk, we can ponder, we can receive insights. But these are always put against the lens of Scripture. Emotions [and] experiences are real, but we need God's Word to make sense of them, God's Word to help and

guide us. And I pray that, be it in our discussion groups, be it in our times like this, we open up the Word of God and let the Word of God so guide us so that we can do church together.

We need to be reminded, myself included: Scripture is truth. Early reformers had what's called the five solas: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, glory to God alone. Would that not be a good reminder of what it means to be Reformed? Would they not be tools in helping us make some of these decisions going forward today?

Let me read a quote from our past president, elder James Nakakihara. He writes, "I've been pondering that perhaps part of our trouble is that we do not realize how great is the divide that separates us." I believe that James rightly observed the RCA is divided. This is nothing new, right? If you read your workbook, the Vision 2020 report's the same. COSE reported the same. You see other reports in your workbook. You even have a history of the past divisions of the RCA.

Perhaps I'm to blame for some of those divisions. I know that I have observed and experienced some of these divisions. I was in a classis meeting, and a number of individuals in that classis wouldn't sit within the bounds of classis because they said, "We don't feel safe. That guy EJ is here." God, forgive me.

There are theological differences. The divide that brings us today is human sexuality. Apparently it's the elephant in the room. But I believe that James rightly noted that it's a hermeneutical divide, a theological divide. Maybe even a completely different worldview divide.

So I'm not here to lecture us on that, but I am here to give you a state of the union address. What is it that I see—a state of religion in the classes? I've heard reference to this divide, be it in church services, be it in consistory meetings, be it in regional synod meetings, be it in the reports of the Vision 2020 [Team]. But yet at the same time, I hear a call for unity, unity on both sides. But I wonder, can there be unity when there is such a divide, when there is such a large elephant in the room? Especially in how to address and how to bring comfort. Right? What is our only comfort in life and in death? That we belong, body and soul, to our faithful savior, Jesus the Christ.

This is where again all I can do is encourage us as Eddy encouraged us with his speech that will go a lot longer than mine. We need hermeneutical rules, maybe the five solas. For sure Scripture alone. Interpreting Scripture. I implore you, myself included: please go to the Word. Yes, these next couple of days will be heavy. Perhaps we've had some fun. Perhaps we have enjoyed humor. Perhaps we've even watched some baseball games. Right, Ned? I've never heard of a moderator take time out of General Synod to watch a baseball game.

We need to have these discussions, but I believe we also need to have *the* discussion to close us in our understanding of how we will serve together in the unity of the proclamation, the affirmation, of Christ.

Another past president sent me an email with some of his thoughts that he had shared. And he quoted Malachi 2:17. It says, "You have wearied the Lord with your words. ... 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.' Or ... 'Where is the God of justice?'"

I'm not trying to say, hey, we're all evil people, but I am trying to say we might be wearying the Lord, constantly having the same, same, same debate and discussion. I hear now the call of let's move [beyond the conversation] of human sexuality. People of God, we will never move

beyond it because it is in our churches, it is in our communities, it is in our homes. The question and the encouragement that we need to do is, how do we go beyond the rhetoric and begin the discussion of offering the means of grace to those who wrestle with all kinds of sin?

Do we go to pop psychology? Do we go to the therapist in the sky? Or do we go to the Word, the Lord himself?

There's an elder who sent me this email: "I, like so many in the RCA, have been struggling with what's happening at the heart of the denomination. It saddens me deeply. I was born and raised in her. And now such division." He says, "As part of the process, it's easy for me to look back and point fingers and look at the mistakes done by others. But by God's grace, I began looking at my own heart and crying out to the Lord: Lord, how can I be used? My relationship with Jesus, the fact that Christ died on the cross for me, allowed the Spirit to so raise me up. That in the grace and mercy I can be used by him."

So my only recommendation—I guess I can't even say it because then it has to be voted on—my only encouragement, that yes, this will be a heavy discussion. But do take the time to consider the Vision 2020 report. Do take the time to consider the divisions. Do take the time to consider the Word of God. Because the truth is in there. And how will the Lord equip and empower us?

If Eddy is right, and I believe he is, how will we take the good news to everyone?

What's interesting in Canada now, there are more missionaries being sent into Canada than Canada sends out. We are a mission field. Will we be known as a mission group, a church? Eddy says the RCA is changing—ethnic diversity, I would agree. Are we ready? Are we ready for new believers, new converts? Are we ready to disciple and mentor, and walk and be walked beside?

Eddy referenced John 17:11 before. Shortly before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus prayed for unity among his followers: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

This is from a podcast I was reading online. This is not my material, but I'll paraphrase it. Jesus is asking that we be one as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one. May they also be in us. Jesus says, "I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they may be one as we are one, as I am in you and you in me so that they may be brought to complete unity."

Obviously we would all agree that Christian unity is important to our Lord. But why? Romans 15 tells us, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus so that together you may with one voice glorify the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ." Again, back to the solas. Sola Deo gloria.

Christian unity is a virtue. But there are some things that can and should limit that unity. We don't pursue unity simply for the sake of unity. It's Christ in his truth that unites us. Does Scripture not encourage us to separate from professed brothers versus unprofessed? There is a sense that yes, we are in the world but we're not. There's an understanding of unrepented sin. Did Patricia not talk about that this morning?

We hear often the quote, perhaps from Richard Baxter, or even further. "[In] essentials unity; [in] non-essentials liberty, [in] all things charity." I'm not too sure if I've bought into that, but obviously I think we understand what it's saying. We need to understand that we have to, have to build the fences around our doctrine. We are called to play in the sand field, called to play in

the sandbox. And there are boundaries around that sandbox. We cannot begin to invent new theologies and new doctrines. That's where Titus—again a pastoral epistle—1:9 encourages us. Elders are responsible to discern, teach, and safeguard what is essential and what is non-essential. And how do we do that with charity?

We need to make some clarity regarding God's boundaries for human sexuality, regarding God's prohibitions becoming his provision for us. We need to now move the discussion from whether it's welcoming and affirming to the discussion that is welcoming and discipling. The past church has done wrong and needs to cry out for forgiveness. But now is the time to say, Lord, how will you use us?

How do we walk beside a young girl, 12 years old, who comes out of her bedroom and has her hair all cut off and tells her mother—apparently this group on TikTok, I don't even know what that is, some kind of social media—but this group told her that she was now a boy? Walking beside a 25-year-old who had her body parts removed at 13 and crying out, how did that ever happen to me?

We need to be courageous people of God, as our sister denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, so put together a study committee and put together this paper, a biblical theology of human sexuality. We have such papers as well. Perhaps could we not again reaffirm our historical position and then continue the dialogue of "Lord, equip us and empower us that under the command of love, we can offer the hope that is ours in Christ our Lord."