

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

As we stand in the midst of the year of our Lord 2022, no matter where you are in the world, your life, your surroundings, and your mission has been impacted in some way by the realization that change comes forth for us, with or without our permission.

This past February brought forth the tenth anniversary of the killing of Trayvon Martin in Stanford, Florida. This unarmed young Black man, making a quick trip to the store for snacks to feed his soul, was met with an altercation from an armed white/Hispanic man, George Zimmerman, who decided that his power, from the guidance of a pistol, provided him and allowed him with the privilege to protect those he felt he needed to guard. This altercation resulted in Trayvon's death, but it also resulted in an acquittal of George Zimmerman, leaving many to ask themselves, are we not tired of the status quo? Are we not tired of the same old song?

The anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death reminds us, especially people of color, that in full retrospect, things have not changed. There have been and continues to be numerous acts of injustice toward people of color. Yes, occasionally, we do hear the positive signs of justice, but for every movement of justice, injustice continues to rise up as a constant reminder.

It is important for us all to understand that the battle for justice continues, calling us to stand strong and push forth with the hopes and the dreams to know that, as Martin Luther King Jr. would say, "We shall overcome some day." For many of us, we are hoping that the "someday" becomes reflective in the areas of racial justice, affirmative action, equality in the work force, equality in the education field (kindergarten through sixth grade and beyond), and equality as we stand fast as the children of God to live out and proclaim together God's Holy Word, for such a time as this.

As an integral part of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the changing aspects of the denomination, several years ago, the African American Black Council (AABC) began to review and revise its role, not only in the overall church, but also in the vitality of the life of the members of color within the denomination. To that end, the council came forth with the following mission statement:

The AABC celebrates God's love by empowering, educating, and encouraging its members to partner with their communities and the RCA to develop ministries and policies for:

- Church growth
- Leadership development
- Social and racial justice
- Economic development

"What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." –Micah 6:8

The members of the council felt that it was necessary and essential for the AABC to not only focus on what is going forth in the life of the denomination, but to spend a larger amount of time investing in what is going forth in the local church communities. This would include providing

support, assistance, training, and guidance for church leaders and members of the overall community to not only embrace what they are doing on the inside of the church, but what God is calling them to do in the surrounding communities, lifting up church growth, church revitalization, and new church starts.

To move forward in embracing our mission and vision, the AABC held a variety of virtual learning opportunities for the AABC community. These learning opportunities came forth in such areas as understanding and taking part in RCA commissions, young adult ministry in the life of church, grant information and writing workshops, and two conferences in conjunction with Fresh Expressions, Inc.: “The Future Black Church Convocation” and recently our “Ministry Breakthrough Conference.”

These virtual sessions and learning opportunities gave our members the opportunity to not only enhance and enrich their knowledge on a variety of subject matters, but it also encouraged them, individually and collectively as church communities, to step out and hear God’s calling in the places they are called upon to embrace and guide.

The AABC continues to review and evaluate its current structure as it moves forth to provide better support for our individual members and member churches. We desire to have a more fruitful communication with all of our AABC constituents.

As it relates to the denomination, the AABC was excited that most of the previous recommendations that came forth in our 2020–2021 report, bringing forth a greater emphasis on race matters and inclusivity with the RCA, were passed at the 2021 General Synod.

Some of the highlights include:

1. An Annual Day of Prayer and Fasting for Justice and Reconciliation for the RCA.
2. Ongoing meetings with the AABC coordinator, the AABC president, the general secretary, and members of the RCA leadership team to discuss our recommendations and the RCA’s response to the matters of race and social justice.
3. The council leadership is working hand in hand with members from the other racial/ethnic councils and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) on its second in-person/virtual joint racial/ethnic council gathering, which will be held this upcoming August.
4. Regional gatherings and virtual worship and prayer sessions.

These are positive signs of movement and change within the denomination, but additional pieces are needed if all of God’s children are going to stand side by side in all matters and areas of life within the denomination.

To that end, we would like to support the RCA Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in its work in developing an antiracism policy for the denomination. Truth be told, this is a long time coming and it is essential and necessary for going forth in challenging the denomination to hold fast to their truth of becoming a denomination free from racism.

This past October, during General Synod 2021, which was held in Arizona, we began to see lots of changes on the horizon for the denomination, especially as it relates to the impact of churches that are leaving the denomination. This is a deep and concerning matter for the denomination, but we must recognize, as children of God, amid the change, we must continue to press forth.

Considering these and other vast changes, the RCA is in the process of restructuring the denomination. As a council, the AABC is very concerned about the voices that are coming forth in this restructuring and where our churches and members fall into the plan. We, the AABC, do not want the plan to affect us and place us on the sidelines. We want to be engaged in the development of the overall plan, so that all cares, concerns, and aspects of the denomination are included when seeking to restructure. To that end, the AABC would like to bring forth the following recommendations for consideration.

The AABC recommends the following to the General Synod Council (GSC):

1. To direct the General Synod Council, to provide a visible and reflective membership from individual AABC members and churches on all committees involved in the development and implementation of the RCA restructuring plan. This is essential so that all voices and communities can be part of the overall plan and changes that will come forth.
2. To direct the General Synod Council, in connection with the AABC and the regional synods, to provide attention, guidance, and support to churches, especially African American churches, who are remaining in the RCA. At present, we hear so much about those churches that are leaving the denomination, as it relates to the numbers, regions, etc. Yet, it is equally necessary to address and ensure that there are adequate resources for churches that remain, within the existing classis as well as guiding transfers to classis where churches may have a better fit. (I am happy to say that after a letter to the GSC from the AABC, discussion has begun on this topic, and it is our hope that a blueprint will come forth for going forward.)
3. To direct the General Synod Council, in conjunction with the AABC and RCA Church Planting and Transformed and Transforming staffs, to establish a committee for discussion and strategic initiative for financial support, assistance, and guidance for struggling AABC church communities, with specific emphasis on those churches with buildings in desperate need of repair.

The AABC continues to go forth and celebrate the legacy upon which we stand, as well as the past and current achievements of our members and communities. We continue to lift up in prayer and praise the election of our own Rev. Dwayne Jackson, co-pastor of Second Reformed Church of Hackensack in New Jersey, the AABC Eastern Regional Convener, and a member of the AABC executive committee, to the office of General Synod vice president. Praise God!

My sisters and brothers in Christ, as we go forth, we continue to celebrate the movement of the AABC in the life of the Reformed Church in America and the kingdom of God. We know that through the engaging of our mission statement and vision, we can not only offer greater support and guidance to our members and churches, but we can also have a greater impact in the denomination where God has called us for such at this time.

Submitted by Rev. Sharon Atkins
AABC President

GSC Response to the AABC's Recommendations

At its March 22–23, 2022, stated meeting, the General Synod Council (GSC) discussed the recommendations made to GSC by the AABC.

With regard to the first recommendation, since the makeup of the restructuring team does intentionally reflect the ethnic diversity in the RCA and includes several members who are Black, along with members of a number of other racial and ethnic groups that make up the RCA, the GSC believes that the requested “visible and reflective” membership of the AABC is present on the restructuring team. (GSC was informed that the AABC report and recommendations were written prior to the public announcement of the members of the restructuring team, and thus GSC believes that the AABC is not asking for a change to the composition of the existing team.) GSC also recognizes in the AABC's recommendation a request and a reminder to be continually aware of the intentional inclusion of the voices of our racial and ethnic councils in any teams or task forces that are discussing future plans for the RCA. Should there be working groups or committees that develop out of the work of the RF 21-1 task force, GSC agrees that it will be important to intentionally ensure that the voices of our racial and ethnic councils are also represented in all of those groups or committees.

With regard to the second recommendation, GSC received a report at its March 2022 stated meeting on the discussion referenced in the AABC's report. That report highlighted the felt need for classes (especially those with a large number of congregations potentially leaving the denomination) to be in good communication with their congregations that are staying and provide them with support and guidance. In some areas, congregations that are staying in the RCA are feeling neglected, and feeling as though their classes are focusing on congregations that are leaving. The group's report conveyed to GSC that communication is key—both communication between classes and their congregations and also communication between GSC and regional synods/classes; that there is a need for care and guidance for congregations staying in the RCA, particularly in areas where a large number of congregations have expressed an intent to leave; and that there is a felt sense of urgency in creating plans for the future sooner rather than later among congregations staying within the RCA. While GSC recognizes that care for congregations is a matter under the authority of the classis, and that the potential re-formation/reorganization of classes is a matter under the authority of the regional synod, GSC voted to communicate encouragement to classes and regional synods to provide support to congregations remaining in the RCA:

GSC 22-24

To direct the moderator of GSC to send correspondence to the regional synod and classis stated clerks, encouraging them to provide care and support for churches that are remaining within the RCA.

In response to the AABC's third recommendation, the GSC took the following action:

GSC 22-21

To establish a committee for discussion and strategic initiative for financial support, assistance, and guidance for struggling AABC church communities, with specific

emphasis on those churches with buildings in desperate need of repair, in conjunction with the AABC and RCA Church Planting and Transformed and Transforming staff.