

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The *Book of Church Order* states that “the commission shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2021 edition, pp. 113-114]).

The Commission on Christian Action (CCA) takes seriously its role of calling the church to faithful and persistent witness and action in the world and so exhorts the church to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-10).

Assigned Work from General Synod 2021

The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtured the 2021 General Synod to increase the RCA’s presence in international organizations. In response to this overture, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business brought forth ONB 21-6, “to encourage the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Action to explore widening the RCA’s presence in non-religious national and international organizations” (*MGS 2021*, ONB 21-6, p. 115). ONB 21-6 was approved by the 2021 General Synod. The reasoning included examples such as seeking membership or representation in UNICEF, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization.

Members of the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Action met to determine how we could proceed with this request. Those members thought it would be prudent to speak with the ecumenical officers of our Formula of Agreement partners, along with Rev. Doug Leonard, the World Council of Churches representative to the United Nations. Without exception, the advice we received was that gaining independent RCA representation in any of these bodies was unlikely (if not impossible), and the best course of action for increasing the RCA’s voice in organizations such as these is to engage with the World Council of Churches, a body which already has representation in the United Nations and of which the RCA is a member. It was determined there was no possible further action at this time.

The Opioid Crisis in the United States and Canada

In 2021, the estimated number of deaths in the United States directly attributable to opioid overdose rose to 75,673.¹ In Canada, nearly 19 opioid-related deaths occurred *per day* over the first 6 months of 2021.² While the church may not be directly responsible for the prevalence of opioid abuse in North America, the CCA believes it is incumbent on all Christians to provide help and access to resources for those struggling with opioids and other addictions. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives has a resource titled “The Opioid Crisis Practical Toolkit: Helping Faith-Based and Community Leaders Bring Hope and Healing” that provides practical guidelines for congregations to start or advance an action plan to meet the needs of families and individuals struggling with addiction in their own communities (www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/the-opioid-crisis-practical-toolkit.pdf). In addition, with modern advancements in medicine, such as the anti-overdose treatment Narcan (naloxone), being readily available to consumers, the Commission on Christian Action recommends the following:

CA 22-1

To urge the congregations, classes, and regional synods of the Reformed Church in America to educate themselves on the history and current state of the opioid epidemic in North America and seek to serve their communities by providing resources and keeping at least one dose of emergency treatment options such as Narcan (naloxone) on hand at all times; and further,

To instruct the general secretary to distribute the document “The Opioid Crisis Practical Toolkit: Helping Faith-Based and Community Leaders Bring Hope and Healing” from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to classes and congregations of the Reformed Church in America for their study and use as a guide for logical and practical ways to serve those suffering from addiction in their communities.

Hunger and Food Justice

Nearly 1 in 5 people (about 60 million) in the United States³ and about 1 in 28 (1.3 million) Canadians⁴ rely on food pantries to supplement or completely make up their access to adequate food. This is expected to continue increasing due to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the globally rising costs of grocery items, and shipping delays. Bread for the World notes that since 2008, nearly 175 million people have been displaced around the world due to climate crisis–related food scarcity and malnutrition.⁵ In the United States, access to school lunches and adequate nutrition to sustain students during the school day is an increasing problem. While children in the United States are required to be in school, 1.54 million children cannot afford the school lunches they need during that time, totaling an average school lunch debt of \$170.13 per child.⁶

As Christ followers, the Commission on Christian Action believes it is imperative that the Reformed Church in America seek to live into the words of Christ in Matthew 25:35a: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.” To help feed God’s children in our regions, the Commission on Christian Action makes the following recommendations:

CA 22-2

To include a question on the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) regarding whether each congregation offers a food pantry or other hunger program; and further,

To direct GSC staff to use this information to create and maintain a database on the RCA website of hunger and food programs in RCA congregations.

CA 22-3

To direct the general secretary to encourage congregations to take action regarding food justice, including but not limited to:

- 1. Developing programs in conjunction with local school districts to provide food or grocery essentials to lower-income students**

and families on weekends and during holiday breaks and summers.

- 2. Holding a Sunday offering at least once annually for those items most needed by their local or regional food banks, including necessary items not eligible for purchase with food stamps (i.e., menstruation sanitary products, toilet tissue, soap, etc.).**
- 3. Holding a separate financial offering, at least once annually, to help pay off or reduce the amount of school lunch debt held by students in their local public schools or in the nearest school in which there are students with school lunch debt.**

Disability Access

With each passing year, the buildings of RCA churches and offices get older and more out of date. It's not uncommon for church buildings of a certain age to have inadequate facilities for those with disabilities, whether it be stairless access for those with mobility difficulties, accessible restrooms, hearing loops for those with partial or near-total hearing loss, access to braille or large print signage for those with impaired vision, etc. One in five people in the U.S. and Canada lives with a disability, visible or invisible, and churches with finite budgets are not always able to adequately provide the necessary updates or repairs to welcome all who desire to participate in person in a church's ministries. Religious organizations in the United States have limited legal obligation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)⁷ but that doesn't mean they don't have a scriptural obligation. Jesus regularly interacted with people with disabilities, healing or curing many along the way, and never denying them access to him or the Word. We see this clearly in Mark 2:1-5, where a paralyzed man in Capernaum is unable to reach Jesus, and his friends go to extraordinary lengths to get him there (eventually cutting a hole in the roof and lowering their friend to be healed by Christ!).

In conversation with both the interim director of the Church Growth Fund (CGF) and the RCA's coordinator for Disability Concerns, members of the Commission on Christian Action learned that a rough estimate of about 70 percent of RCA congregations wouldn't be compliant with the ADA if they were required to be. We also learned that the Church Growth Fund offers a loan program for accessibility building projects at a reduced interest rate⁸ and there is currently a Flourishing Churches Grant program that offers grants of up to \$50,000 to congregations. While these funds could be used for accessibility building projects, they're limited and carry strict parameters.

Efforts over the years by the coordinator for Disability Concerns to create a permanent endowed fund (solely for the purpose of offering grants, interest free, to congregations seeking to make these accessibility updates in their buildings) have gone unrealized. A grant funded with a seed gift or gifts totaling about \$50,000 is estimated to be necessary to start a fund that could become viable and sustainable enough be used for this purpose—and would not be contingent on the restrictions or parameters the other options have. While the CCA celebrates the opportunities that will be provided through the existing Flourishing Churches Grants and CGF programs, we recognize that these could leave out a significant population of the RCA. If Jesus had said “only those who can afford to pay me back with low interest, or those who can meet certain success metrics are eligible for access to me,” the story of the man in Capernaum would likely be very different.

The CCA is therefore asking the General Synod to direct the creation of a contribution-based fund that would provide grant funding for congregations that need financial assistance to improve the accessibility of their facilities and for whom existing grant and loan programs may be out of reach. Once this fund is set up, churches and individuals could make donations and estate gifts could be sought to help grow a fund that is specifically designated to help congregations make needed accessibility improvements.

The Disability Concerns section of the RCA website currently lists “8 themes in faith and disability: becoming a church of belonging for people with disabilities.”⁹ These themes provide an excellent resource for congregations and church leaders to begin learning what life is like for those who navigate the world and our churches while living with disabilities. One of these eight themes is “removing barriers.” This section says, “addressing the barriers that hinder persons living with various impairments in their day to day lives paves the way for greater participation.” Removing these barriers in a way that allows ALL congregations access to funds and ALL congregants access to church facilities is the CCA’s goal.

With this goal in mind, the Commission on Christian Action offers the following recommendations:

CA 22-4

To instruct the general secretary to create a contribution-based fund for use by the Office of Disability Concerns for the purpose of providing grants to congregations for accessibility improvements; and further,

To instruct the general secretary to report back to the Commission on Christian Action and the General Synod of 2024 regarding the state of the fund.

CA 22-5

To add a question to the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) that asks congregations to identify barriers in their facilities and how they are working to improve accessibility and their hospitality to people with a variety of disabilities.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Church

Given the long-term divisions in the RCA relating to human sexuality that have recently culminated in the formation of the RCA Restructuring Team, the CCA has been cautious in offering recommendations on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the RCA, noting the volatility of the topic. We cannot deny or ignore, though, that LGBTQIA+ persons are members of our churches, in our pulpits, in our denominational offices, and listening to the often-hurtful things the church says. While the church debates what is often ungenerously characterized as an “issue,” we are also talking about and debating the lives of real people whom God has called “beloved.”

The CCA laments the ways in which the church has been ungracious and unloving to our LGBTQIA+ siblings, even as we seek to navigate our various understandings of God’s intentions for human sexuality. We also lament and reject the incorrect notion that the RCA has a “stated position” on the topic of human sexuality, when in fact the positions that have been

taken are not part of the Constitution of the RCA and thus are not constitutionally binding on the narrower assemblies; rather, they are positions taken by a particular General Synod. The CCA further recognizes that while the General Synod statement of 1978 on sexuality states “the denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology,”¹⁰ the RCA and many members of her congregations have been actively involved in denying or seeking to limit the human and civil rights of LGBTQIA+ folks (noting that “homosexual” is a relatively clinical term that is not in use as often as it was in 1978) such as same-gender marriage.

In short, the Commission on Christian Action does not find that, on the whole, the Reformed Church in America has dealt with the issues of LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage with much sensitivity over the years, often stemming from frustration or fear. To this end, the CCA offers the following recommendation as a statement of affirmation:

CA 22-6

Regardless of our individual understandings of human sexuality, the RCA’s General Synod, meeting at Central College in Pella, Iowa, on June 9–14, 2022, affirms the worth and human dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons as unique individuals and beloved children of God; and further,

To lament the ways in which the RCA and church universal has failed to consistently recognize the worth of these persons and has often resorted to fear or frustration when speaking *about* human lives in our midst, rather than speaking *to* them with love and compassion.

Areas of Continuing Concern

The Commission on Christian Action regularly studies and reports on a broad variety of topics, many of which we make recommendations on. Below are the issue areas the CCA is continuing to study and seeking to understand how we can encourage the church to take action.

Income Inequality and Environmental Justice

The CCA has been concerned with the ways in which lower socio-economic communities and communities of color are disproportionately the areas in which heavily polluting industries build their factories.¹¹ In the United States, New Jersey is alone in having active legislation that prevents this practice¹², which is called “environmental racism” and “environmental classism” in some sources.¹³ Efforts to incorporate similar laws in some Canadian provinces are underway. When this is coupled with the troubling facts that over 2 million people in the United States don’t have access to clean drinking water¹⁴, and that the air that Black, Latino/a, and Asian Americans across North America breathe is 40 percent more polluted on average than the air in predominantly white areas¹⁵, the CCA is gravely concerned and urges the church at large to be so as well. We look forward to continuing researching this topic and presenting ideas in the near future for how the RCA may seek justice on these matters.

The CCA has also been in conversation with the denomination’s chief financial officer regarding participation in an advisory meeting seeking to study how fossil fuels funds and funds generated

from other environmental polluters may be added to the list of funds the RCA seeks to divest from or limit financial investment in.

Spiritual Abuse

The notion of abuse being perpetrated at the hands of the church and her leaders is something by which the CCA believes all should be horrified. While the notion of spiritual abuse is not new, it's an area of concern that researchers are uncovering more of than ever¹⁶ and is something that affects people across a variety of spectrums: men, women, old, young, straight, queer, cisgender, transgender, elders, deacons, congregants, and pastors. The Commission on Christian Action is gathering resources on how congregations can educate themselves regarding spiritual abuse, how survivors of this abuse can seek healing and justice, and how the church can work to prevent this tragedy from escalating further.

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 - 2 "Opioid and Stimulant Related Harms in Canada," The Public Health Agency of Canada, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants>.
 - 3 "Feeding America Estimates at Least 60 Million People Turned to Charitable Food Assistance in 2020," Feeding America, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press-room/60-million-turned-to-charitable-food-2020>.
 - 4 "Hunger Count 2021," Food Banks Canada/Banques alimentaires Canada, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://hungercount.foodbankscanada.ca>.
 - 5 "How to End Hunger," Bread for the World, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.bread.org/climate-change>.
 - 6 "School Lunch Debt," Education Data, accessed February 28, 2022, <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>.
 - 7 Veronica Rose, "Churches and Handicapped Accessibility Requirements," The National Organization on Disability, <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2006/rpt/2006-R-0756.htm>. December 8, 2006.
 - 8 "Affordable Loans for Churches," Reformed Church in America, accessed March 1, 2022, www.rca.org/church-growth-fund/church-loans.
 - 9 "8 Themes in Faith and Disability," Reformed Church in America, accessed March 4, 2022, www.rca.org/equipping-congregations/disability/8-themes-in-faith-and-disability.
 - 10 *MGS 1978*, p. 239.
 - 11 Tashauna Reid and Alice Hopton. "The movement to address environmental racism is growing. This bill could provide the data it needs," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, March 23, 2021, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/environmental-racism-bill-c-230-1.5954082>.
 - 12 Michael S. Warren, "Landmark law to protect N.J.'s poorest communities from pollution signed by Murphy," NJ.com, September 18, 2020, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.nj.com/news/2020/09/landmark-law-to-protect-njs-poorest-communities-from-pollution-signed-by-murphy.html>.
 - 13 "Environmental Racism and Health," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/JSSHOAenvironment.pdf>.
 - 14 "Closing the water gap in the United States," Dig Deep and US Alliance for Water, accessed March 3, 2022, http://uswateralliance.org/sites/uswateralliance.org/files/Closing%20the%20Water%20Access%20Gap%20in%20the%20United%20States_DIGITAL.pdf.

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- ¹⁵ Hiroko Tabuchi and Nadja Popovich, "People of Color Breathe More Hazardous Air. The Sources are Everywhere," *The New York Times*, updated September 7, 2021, accessed March 2, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/climate/air-pollution-minorities.html.
- ¹⁶ Scot McKnight, "What is 'Spiritual' Abuse? A Working Definition," *Jesus Creed/Christianity Today*, December 2, 2020, accessed March 3, 2020, www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/december/what-is-spiritual-abuse-working-definition.html.