

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2021 edition, pp. 69-70]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the *Book of Church Order* in this way (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2021 edition, p. 114]):

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed newer ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of "working with all the partners that God provides," as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of *Transformed & Transforming*. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming the world at this point in history.

This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. The first portion of the report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA's formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but on the work and witness of the RCA. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in the church's history, as the church continues to struggle with its response to Jesus's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ."

The WCC gathers its community from 352 churches in 120 countries representing over 580 million Christians worldwide. The WCC's highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years. Although delayed due to the pandemic, the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches will take place in Karlsruhe, Germany, from August 31 to September 8, 2022, under the theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity." RCA delegates to the 11th Assembly include Rev. Eddy Alemán, Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Rev. Carlos Corro, and Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce. The 11th Assembly will bring together over 4,000 participants from around the world for shared worship, learning, and work.

Days before the 11th Assembly, several pre-assemblies will meet to allow deeper connection and discussion in focused areas. The themes of the pre-assemblies are Women and Men, Indigenous Peoples, People with Disabilities, and the Ecumenical Youth Gathering. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce has served the denomination on the planning committee for the Ecumenical Youth Gathering Pre-Assembly as the chair for Spiritual Life. She serves in the role on behalf of the Global Christian Forum.

The Central Committee is the continuing body that implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget and secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies. Rev. Eddy Alemán serves on the Central Committee, continuing the unbroken line of general secretaries of the RCA serving the WCC in this capacity.

Rev. Dr. Ioan Sauca, a priest of the Orthodox Church in Romania, serves as the acting general secretary of the WCC until the end of December 2022.

For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, go to www.oikoumene.org.

World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. The RCA

was a charter member of the former WARC and enthusiastically worked to support the coming together of these two ecumenical bodies into one. This renewed fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, Waldensian, United, and Uniting churches is a network of 230 Protestant churches in 108 countries, with a combined estimated membership of 100 million people.

The 26th General Council of the WCRC took place in June 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, with the theme “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” The council dealt with issues of justice, church unity, and world renewal. More than 1,000 delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests gathered in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, which has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. Additionally, the council celebrated the signing of the “Wittenberg Witness,” a document crafted between the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation that expresses a commitment to Christian unity as Reformed and Lutheran Christians live and work together to further a common Christian witness to a broken and troubled world.

The WCRC is “called to communion and committed to justice.” Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC is always being transformed as it strives for the full and just participation of all. In its diversity, the WCRC seeks to be a living expression of “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As a global *koinonia*, the communion is marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. With all the partners God provides, the WCRC works for the transformation of the whole world, so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

The WCRC may be best known worldwide for the Accra Confession, a groundbreaking statement issued at the General Council held in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates of social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at wrc.ch/accra.

The WCRC is in an interim period of discernment following the conclusion of Chris Ferguson’s term as general secretary on August 31, 2021. Three executives—Hanns Lessing (Evangelical Church of Westphalia), Philip Vinod Peacock (Church of North India), and Phil Tanis (Reformed Church in America)—are currently sharing the responsibilities of the position of general secretary while determining the long-term financial sustainability of the organization. The commission wishes to thank Phil Tanis for continuing to provide leadership in the areas of communication and operations within this new role.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, go to www.wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) embraces a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue drawing for the first time world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches into a new place of relational, rather than structural, fellowship. Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and

growth in the churches in the Global South, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF's work.

The Guiding Purpose Statement of the Global Christian Forum is "to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges." On February 22–23, 2022, the Global Christian Forum's International Committee (its governing board) met in Rome, with some guests joining online. The committee shared faith stories, heard from global speakers, conducted GCF business, and spent time planning for the next Global Gathering of the GCF, planned for April 15–19, 2024. Rev. Dr. Casely Essamuah, an ordained minister in the Methodist Church, Ghana, serves as the secretary of the Global Christian Forum.

Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the GCF Committee and its Facilitation Group (the executive committee). Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as a youth delegate to the extended Facilitation Group.

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include over 40 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC, and our general secretary, the Rev. Eddy Alemán, serves on its governing board. The RCA is also represented on the NCC's Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations, Christian Education, Faith Formation and Leadership, and Faith and Order. Among others, the commission would like to acknowledge the work of Kitt Jackson, Jeff Lampen, and Rev. Laura Osborne at these Convening Tables.

For the past eight years, James Winkler has been the president/general secretary of the NCC. Under his leadership, the NCC continued to offer an important witness to the power of a shared voice among Christians. The NCC recently completed a project to publish an updated version of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the NRSVue.

As Mr. Winkler ends his last term in this position, an interim general secretary will be named while a search for new president/general secretary begins. Meanwhile, the NCC's current multi-year focus on ending racism (which began in 2018) dominated the presentations at their 2021 Christian Unity Virtual Gathering. The Faith and Order Convening Table has formed study groups around three areas related to ending racism: Awakening to the Reality of Racism as the Original Sin of the U.S.; Confronting White Supremacy as the Defining Myth of the U.S.; and Transforming the Church and Humanizing the Public Square. The NCC responds to other urgent issues as well, most recently the invasion of Ukraine.

The website of the NCC is www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us.

Christian Churches Together

Formed in 2001, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations, such as Bread for the World and Sojourners. It is this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes the CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. One of the distinctive characteristics of CCT is its intentional focus on relationship-building and mutual understanding instead of theological consensus-building. This feature has created the ideal context for Christians from very diverse communities, and often with very different convictions, to come together in a unique and holy manner.

At CCT's last in-person meeting (Montgomery, Alabama, in 2019), speakers and participants engaged in dialogue on the nature and purpose of the church in a culture still plagued by racism. The group prayed over historic sites in the United States' history of enslavement and toured the deeply moving Legacy Museum and lynching memorial. CCT participants also enthusiastically approved a new vision, mission, and values statement, by which they committed to three guiding principles:

1. Forging loving relationships among Christians, who are bound together by the Spirit of God through Christ Jesus (Loving Relationships)
2. Humbling ourselves and learning theologically from each other (Learning Theologically)
3. Leading Christians in the U.S. into action together that will transform the world (Leading Actions)

The CCT process (based on Loving Relationships, Learning Theologically, and Leading Actions) is a way for CCT members to commit to working together in discernment to engage in steps that lead to beloved community.

In 2020 and 2021, the annual forum moved online, addressing the theme of "Called to Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly" as well as the challenges produced by the pandemic and the urgency of unity in a divided world. Well-known leaders from each family group (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal) spoke on the designated topics, led worship, and facilitated conversation across difference through Bible study and theological reflection.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, the annual forum serves as an opportunity to build personal relationships with people across the church to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace. The model of receptive ecumenism is foundational to this work, which means that at the CCT table, we approach the other with humility and with the goal of receiving as a gift a better understanding of each other's theologies, histories, missions, and practices. This is consonant with CCT's goal of increasing the religious literacy of Christians in the U.S.

In 2021, CCT saw a change in leadership. After eight years of faithful service to CCT, the Rev. Carlos Malavé stepped down from his position as CCT's executive director. Dr. Monica Schaap

Pierce (from the Reformed Church in America), who had served on the CCT Steering Committee and as the organization's treasurer, has taken on the role of interim executive director. CCT is currently in the process of launching a national search for its next permanent director.

CCT's website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its mission and activity.

The CCT portion of this report was prepared by Monica Schaap Pierce, Ph.D., interim executive director of the CCT.

Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the RCA, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. Leaders from within the RCA have historically served in positions with the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on the ecumenical committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Rev. Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula's provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a revised guide in "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament" document: images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories that are considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

For over 50 years, the RCA has participated in an ongoing theological dialogue with other Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives. In 2017, the Roman Catholic–Reformed consultation concluded its eighth round of dialogue. Included in the dialogue were representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the RCA. The dialogue focused on ecclesiology and, in particular, on the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, and unity and diversity in the life of the church. The dialogue also examined ecclesial ministry and oversight and uncovered a unifying affirmation that ecclesial ministry and oversight are undertaken personally and collegially in service to the church, not just for the church's own sake, but for the sake of the world God so loves. The

commission commends the report of the eighth round, titled “The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World,” to churches for study. The text can be found at images.rca.org/docs/synod/TheOneBody.pdf.

The ninth round of dialogue will commence in Chicago in 2022 and will focus on the relationship between justification and justice. Representatives from the RCA include Rev. Eddy Alemán, Monica Schaap Pierce, Rev. Laura Osborne, and Mark Veldt. The prospectus for the ninth round can be found at images.rca.org/docs/synod/ProspectusNinthRound.pdf.

Action Taken in Response to General Synod 2021

The 2021 General Synod voted “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).

This action was revised from the original overture stated below.

...to direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary, in consultation with the Commissions on Christian Unity and Christian Discipleship and Education, to appoint people to serve as the RCA representative to international organizations (*MGS 2021*, Overture 6, p. 115).

In response, the Commission on Christian Unity contacted the Commission on Christian Action to investigate together the possibility of “widening the RCA’s presence in religious and national and international organizations.” As a first step, our commissions reached out to our Formula of Agreement partners and inquired as to their level of involvement in such potential partner organizations. Secondly, our commissions contacted a past United Nations (UN) representative to investigate the plausibility of delegating RCA representatives to non-religious national and international organizations. While some of our Formula of Agreement partners do have offices (and therefore staff) at the UN to represent their denominations, our Formula of Agreement partners mentioned that these connections are also naturally in place through our ecumenical connections with the WCC and the WCRC. Furthermore, in reaching out to a past UN representative, our commissions learned that the process of obtaining a place or voice at an organization such as the UN requires so much time and effort that it would take the work of a full-time staff member to lobby for such a position. It is the opinion of the Commission on Christian Unity that, should the RCA desire to increase contact with non-religious organizations, the best course of action would be to continue that work through the already existing relationships of our ecumenical partners.

Blessing in a Time of Gracious Separation

Following the decision of General Synod 2021 to adopt terms that would allow for the gracious separation of congregations from the denomination, the commission recognizes the hard work of blessing and lament being done by many classes. These classes lovingly, yet sorrowfully, send congregations into denominations and networks in which it is hoped they will find what they need to live more fully and faithfully into Christ’s call.

In an effort to fulfill its mandate to “engage in interchurch conversations” and “advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships,” the commission encourages members of the Reformed Church in America to maintain fraternal relationships characterized

by a deep and abiding love for those individuals and congregations who go out from our midst. We desire to be bridge builders rather than bridge burners.

As an example of our continuing affection for those to whom we have said goodbye, the commission recommends efforts to formulate liturgical blessings within classes to be given following classis votes to transfer congregations out of the Reformed Church in America. Additionally, the commission recommends the establishment of relationships of mutual love, support, and cooperation with denominations and networks that have welcomed congregations formerly found within the Reformed Church in America.

Response to the War in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Commission on Christian Unity began to take steps to express our solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Ukraine. Reflecting on experiences in Ukraine and relationships with beloved Ukrainian brothers and sisters in Christ, the commission determined the need for proactive action on the part of the RCA as it continued to engage with its partners in the area. The following relationships were noted as key to the support of the RCA for people of Ukraine:

- The Reformed Church in Hungary (Magyarországi Református Egyház) which has several member churches in Ukraine.
- Our missionaries in neighboring Hungary and Romania.
 - Doug McClintic, who is working with Hungarian Reformed Church partners to determine means by which we can support them and their churches.
 - Felipe and Janelle DeWaard-Silva, missionaries and church planters in central Romania, who are partnering with a Baptist church near the Ukrainian border to assist refugees and are willing to provide temporary housing within their facilities.
- The organizational leadership of our ecumenical partners in Europe (PC[USA], ELCA, Church World Service, etc.) as we continue to coordinate our efforts together.

Efforts are ongoing to present a united and prophetic voice against the aggressive and violent actions of the Russian government and especially against the complicit and antagonistic rhetoric of key leadership within the Russian Orthodox Church. Fearful of the encroachment of a western worldview within the milieu of the *Ruskiy Mir* (“Russian World”), Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has emboldened the thrust of Russian forces into Ukraine in an attempt to insulate the Russian people against liberal values. This commission stands firm against the belief that such violence is an appropriate response to such fear, urging submission to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, who reprimanded Peter for drawing his sword and striking the servant of the High Priest, saying, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:42).

REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE

Missional Mandate

The missional mandate for the work of the Interreligious Subcommittee of the Commission on Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America is found in the 2018 report of the Interreligious Task Force:

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God's saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. We are, in this sense, a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God's renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while also embracing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) (*MGS 2018*, p. 92).

Where We Are and Where We Are Going

Laura Osborne was hired as coordinator for interreligious relations in June 2019. The Interreligious Subcommittee was formed in August 2019. In the fall of 2018 the recruiting for the team began.

The subcommittee met via Zoom five times in 2021. During three of the meetings, we were joined by the Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee. We made a joint commitment to work together and share resources.

There is an urgency to share Jesus with others and to love our neighbor. With those urgencies at hand, our team is working on a few items with the team from the CRCNA:

1. A shared database of interfaith "champions" to show which locations in the U.S. and Canada have the most connections. With that information we can help resource churches that have these champions in their area and help find resources in the areas that don't.
2. Communications: We are working with the CRCNA to help create a joint website for our work to better resource churches. These resources would include but are not limited to webinars, books, curriculum and study guides, and videos.

The RCA team is working on these goals:

1. As mandated by General Synod, we have worked on the joint statement with the CRC and are tweaking it as needed.
2. Resourcing churches that are trying to connect with their neighbors of another faith and elevating the stories of churches that already are connecting.
3. Collaborating with Local Missional Engagement, refugee coordination, and other departments that intersect with other faiths to be a resource.
4. Observing how our colleges and seminaries are training the next generation of leaders in world religions. If this isn't being done or can't be done, then we can find a way to work more closely with the churches nearby to help equip students. The subcommittee is working now to add a seminary student and an undergrad student to the subcommittee.
5. Reading volunteers to help love their neighbor of another faith as they serve at home and abroad.
6. Partnering with the Al Amana Centre in Oman to help bring more groups to be trained in interfaith work, scriptural reasoning, and interfaith dialogue.

Interreligious Work in 2021

This past year brought great challenges and also deep connection. The coordinator for interreligious relations has the opportunity to work together with many people. In conjunction with the Commission on Christian Unity's Interreligious Subcommittee, work is done to connect churches and individuals to their neighbor of another faith. This takes shape in many ways: through partnerships, a rich history of interfaith work, and new initiatives.

For a fuller summary of interreligious work in 2021, please see the General Synod Council's report on Transformed & Transforming on pages 114-129 of this workbook.

Most of our shared interreligious work is with our CRCNA partners. There are many joint communities of practice and sharing of resources. The largest project is called Journeys into Friendship, which is a place for connection and for mutual encouragement, prayer, and learning. We work together to develop a library of resources, to invite more people to join us, to walk alongside congregations stepping into ministry with refugees, immigrants, or international students, to support church planting movements among our new neighbors, and to promote a Reformed approach to interfaith dialogue that balances openness with an authentic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Along with our other ecumenical partners, Rev. Laura Osborne serves on the steering committee for Shoulder to Shoulder, our strategic partners in countering discrimination and violence against Muslims.

Working with folks from other faiths is such a blessing, though such relationships can be tricky to navigate. We start in different places with regard to faith but are committed to trying to meet each other at the places we have in common.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Laura Osborne on behalf of the Interreligious Subcommittee