

Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of *The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America* (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod.” The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is our 56th report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history. To review a list of such transformations, please see previous reports to General Synod.

The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God’s faithfulness and allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective that is not *just* a historical perspective, but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.

To do this work faithfully, the commission met electronically (via Zoom) on Friday, November 5, 2021; Friday, January 28, 2022; and Thursday, February 24, 2022; as well as communicating regularly via email and phone.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 54th year, has recently produced the following book:

- *An RCA Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in Seventy-Five Documents*, edited by James Hart Brumm

The following books are in progress:

- *Collecting Chronicles, Maintaining Tradition, and Preserving Acts of Disciples: Essays in Honor of Russell L. Gasero*, edited by James Hart Brumm
- *Shepherding a New Generation of Leaders: Essays in Honor of Cornelis G. Kors*, edited by Bradley Lewis
- *Rivers of Living Water: Essays in Honor of James V. Brownson*, edited by James Hart Brumm

- *The Canons of Dort: God's Freedom, Justice, and Persistence*, by Eugene P. Heideman, edited by Donald J. Bruggink
- *The Church Speaks, vol. 3*, edited by David Komline

The book *Called to Serve: Essays on RCA Global Mission*, edited by Charles Van Engen, Jean Van Engen, and Sally Tapley, is currently being translated into Spanish. Also, in collaboration with RCA Global Mission, the Commission on History is working to expand the Missionary Memoirs Series and hopes to find a new general editor of that sub-series.

The Commission on History, working with the RCA Archives, continues publishing the *Historical Series* under Reformed Church Press, which allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has been serving as general editor of the series since July 1, 2018. As of June 2018, Donald J. Bruggink serves as general editor emeritus. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of the Altamont, New York, Reformed Church and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the Congregational History Series.

The June 2000 *Minutes of General Synod* reflect that the Commission on History's responsibilities were successfully revised. One of commission's responsibilities is to actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America through means it may find effective. In addition, the commission shall inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination's history and traditions to its programs and regularly review denominational resources that present the church's history. We also provide instrumental advice to the General Synod concerning the denomination's archives.

Recently, your commission launched the RCA 400 Series in celebration of our upcoming 400th anniversary in 2028. Like the Congregational History Series, this is a sub-series of the *Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America*. Steven Pierce serves as the general editor, and Corstian Devos, Russell Gasero, and Matthew Gasero all serve on the RCA 400 Series team. The books in this series will help educate the church on how our Reformed past informs the present and grows us into the future. Many of the authors will draw from the deep well of our RCA Archives and attempt to answer several questions: What is the Reformed Church in America? How is it distinctive from other Christian communities? Which beliefs, values, and practices stand at the heart of this communion? What challenges has it overcome, and how is it being challenged today? How is it structured and governed? What biblical principles undergird and vitalize its ministries? How can its rich heritage help it move into the future?

In January 2022, the RCA 400 Series produced the following books:

- *Why Do We Have Archives? An Answer Through Illustrations from Reformed Church Footprints #1 to #25*, by Russell L. Gasero
- *Foundations of Reformed Church Polity: The Rhyme and Reason of the Order*, by Matthew J. van Maastricht

Forthcoming books in this series include:

- *Pursuing Unity in a Divided World: The History of Ecumenism in the Reformed Church in America*, by Monica Schaap Pierce

- *The Reformed Church in America and the Reign of God: The Dilemmas of a Denomination*, by Daniel J. Meeter
- *Our Reformed Church: Four Centuries of a Living Faith*, by Steven D. Pierce

Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the *Historical Series*, your commission works with the RCA digital archivist, Matthew Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee, which is formed of commission members, and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the Archives. Matthew also serves as managing editor for the *Historical Series* and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries.

We have had a professional archivist since May 1, 1978. Prior to that, we had, through the Commission on History, the New Brunswick Theological Seminary faculty, and the Sage Library staff, people caring for the Archives going back for decades before this.

The offices of the Archives are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened in 1875. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the Archives be not just a Dutch-American history resource, but a well of information for all of the cultural expressions that now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management; with over 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing needs of the Archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the Trustees of NBTS pledged an annual grant of \$10,000 from Lilly Endowment Inc. to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC), for each of ten years, to expand the work of the Archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. These resources help transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Advancement office and the Archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the Historical Series Revolving Fund and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. There are virtues in thrift; however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

There are creative ways to help fund the work of the Archives. For example, when Aberdeen Reformed Church closed within North Grand Rapids Classis, the executive committee of the classis voted unanimously to tithe a significant sum of the sale of the property to the RCA Archives. By taking such an action, it will allay the ever-growing expenses of transporting, storing, and preserving these important church records. Your commission strongly encourages other classes to consider doing the same.

Your commission has requested that the RCA Archives investigate the full digitization of the *Christian Intelligencer*, *The Mission Field*, and *Mission Gleaner*. The goal is to produce quality, legible digital copies of these publications that are searchable. Your commission will also seek the help of General Synod Council to assist with funding for this project. In addition, your commission has requested the RCA Archives procure Quark Express to prepare PDF versions of the *Church Herald*.

The work of the Archives is mandated by the General Synod in its Policy and Purposes statement. Since 1978, the Archives of the Reformed Church in America has grown tremendously, both in quantity of records and in scope of responsibilities. For the first three decades, it struggled with a single staff person as it increased in complexity and scope. In the last decade, it was able to add an additional part-time staff person. Yet, the volume of materials and the scope of responsibilities increased rather than diminished. In the last two years, the staff has been cut in half, and if we include the total hours committed by the staff, that cut is closer to eliminating two full-time staff.

Matthew Gasero handles all aspects of the Office of Historical Services now. This is on top of his previous responsibilities as digital archivist. He has the full support of your commission and has done a tremendous job promoting and enhancing these essential ministries.

Being Informed by Past Transformations

In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes that “biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously.”⁶ History is so important to God, according to Buechner, that God initiated it, entered it, and has promised to one day “bring it to a serious close.” In order to understand our past, which informs our present, the study of history becomes paramount. This is certainly true of Christian history as well as denominational history. The past affects the present, and ultimately the future, confirming the age-old wisdom that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”⁷

Your commission acknowledges that not everyone enjoys reading history. Depending on the subject, it can feel distant, tedious, and irrelevant. And yet Christianity is a history-moored faith, instructing us and helping us gain perspective. Buechner, contrasting biblical faith with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, says, “history is not an absurdity to be endured or an illusion to be dispelled or an endlessly repeating cycle to be escaped. Instead it is for each

⁶ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 38

⁷ George Santayana. *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner's, 1905), p. 284.

of us a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere.”⁸

While the “somewhere” has been debated over the centuries, Christian history points to God’s unbending faithfulness and the reality that life has a direction—one where we are being led back to God, to our life’s source, and ultimately to wholeness. Life and faith are rooted in the mystery of God’s love, merging in surprising ways throughout history. What’s needed are eyes that see and ears that hear. “We want,” mused Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, “only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ.”⁹

Without question, discerning just how God operates throughout all of human history is a difficult discipline. It requires honest humility since we “see in a mirror, dimly”¹⁰ and have only a glimpse into the spiritual realm. We wait with eager anticipation for the time when we will see and understand and know God fully. Until then, we recall those haunting words spoken through the prophet long ago: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”¹¹

Historically, ours is a faith that’s more interrogative and less doctrinaire.¹² In the Reformed tradition, we’ve grown accustomed to dancing with our doubts, and we attempt to tackle those nagging existential questions that encompass a wide range of subjects. This work is always done best in community. Together, we accomplish these things while also affirming those tenets that have traditionally united us as a Reformed church, as the body of Christ in North America:

- The wonder of creation
- The humility of God in Jesus Christ
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit
- The miracle of forgiveness of sins
- The gift of new life in communion
- The call to the ministry of reconciliation
- The promise of the consummation of God’s reign¹³

We are confessional Protestants who adhere to a Trinitarian theology, and since the Protestant Reformation, we have stressed the belief that salvation is by grace through faith alone. When someone comes to faith, it is God who initiates that saving work. In addition, our churches are, and have been, non-hierarchical, self-governing congregations. The decision-making power resides primarily in the local church, in various times and places of relative autonomy. Our common beliefs and shared practices far outweigh the things that seek to divide us.

⁸ Buechner, p. 38. He adds, “True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people, including the one whose soul is at stake, are looking the other way.”

⁹ Paul Tillich. *The New Being* (New York: Scribner’s, 1955), p. 18.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV.

¹¹ Isaiah 55:8, NRSV.

¹² Daniel L. Migliorie. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 2.

¹³ Migliorie, p. 3.

Your commission is fully aware of what's at stake as we consider our future as a Christian denomination. We are holding this tension with the rest of our brothers and sisters. The fracturing of the Reformed Church in America would be one more ecclesial tragedy. We remain hopeful—and pray—that it can be averted. After all, for 394 years we have had a continuous ministerial presence in North America—148 years before the colonies gained independence from Great Britain. That is a remarkable fact. It means we remain the oldest operating Protestant ministry in the U.S., without any interruptions since 1628.

Our history wouldn't even be possible without our willingness to tell it. We are people of a story, of an *experience* (Tillich), and we keep those cherished memories alive when we share our stories with others. The person who loses touch with their story is like the candle that has lost its wick, essentially losing purpose and significance. "Despite their individuality," writes historian Ronald Wells, "Christians find their true identity firmly rooted in a collectivity: We are not alone in this life but members one of another. . . . Our collective membership in [God's] kingdom rests on a common affirmation of a story. Christians *are* Christians not solely because they made a 'decision for Christ' but because they became 'members incorporate' of Christ's Body" (italics added).¹⁴

We may have our differences, but those differences pale in comparison to what has united us over these many years. We overcame our quarrels during some very tense moments in our denomination's history. While some have left for new adventures, others have stayed the course, keeping their promise to "walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."¹⁵ The same can be said of many faithful churches. They too have made a similar promise during the installation of elders and deacons to "encourage and pray for them, to labor together in obedience to the gospel for the unity, purity, and peace of the church, the welfare of the whole world, and the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁶

Our differences need not tear us asunder. Sailing together as a fleet of ships ("classis") through turbulent waters is something we have a long history of doing. It's what we are called to do with humility and grace. Ronald Wells elucidates this point:

Knowing the 'author of truth' gives us an advantage in knowing truth over our secular neighbors, but it does not ensure that we know the truth, which surely exists in the mind of God but comes ambiguously to us. Once in a while we experience moments of clarity, and for these we are grateful. But, since the images remain blurred, we should practice the Christian virtue of humility in what we claim to know and to have "right" in our historical perspectives.¹⁷

Recommendations for Accountability and Permanence

¹⁴ Ronald A. Wells. *History Through the Eyes of Faith: Western Civilization and the Kingdom of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁵ *Book of Church Order*, Appendix: The Formularies, 3, p. 132.

¹⁶ *Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, p. 49.

¹⁷ Wells, p. 3.

The RCA Archives was formally established for the RCA in May 1978. Prior to that, there were various volunteers working on records. Those records were stored in several locations at the staff office on Riverside Drive and in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The program began with the hiring of Russell Gasero to be archivist on a part-time trial basis for three years. He transitioned into a full-time staff member during that period as the RCA struggled to find funding for a permanent program.

Originally, the archivist was a direct report to the general secretary and was part of the General Synod Office. With the restructure from the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) and General Program Council (GPC) to the General Synod Council (GSC), the archives shifted both in supervision and placement, but always reporting to the Commission on History twice a year. On many occasions, the archivist was instructed to “fly under the radar” in order to keep the program funded. While it was accepted as a vital and essential responsibility for the General Synod, it was always underfunded and understaffed as the workload grew.

With the renovation of Sage Library from 1984–1985, the RCA Archives received increased storage room and better climate control as it began to lease the needed space and pay rent to New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In 1997, further expansion was made in the basement of Sage Library with the installation of nine movable storage units. As the RCA entered the twenty-first century, it leased underground storage space at Information Managers & Associates in Grand Rapids as the Archives began receiving more congregational records from both disbanded and active congregations.

For the last four decades, the Archives has struggled with changing leadership, structural rearrangements, and increased responsibilities. The Archives receives records from around the world: congregations, classes, regional synods, General Synod Council staff, mission areas, and RCA boards and agencies. Its policy and procedures statement from June 1980 require all official RCA records to be reviewed by the Archives prior to disposition. In recent years, this has become more difficult as the Archives is often ignored.

The commission has insisted that all assemblies and current staff assure compliance with the policy and procedures statement to assure the long-term legal, financial, and administrative well-being of the denomination—especially as it enters a period of rapid change and potential litigation and restructuring. To assure compliance and ongoing operation and preservation of our memory, the commission makes the following recommendations:

H 22-1

To place supervision and authority for the RCA Archives and its staff directly under an Archives Supervision Subcommittee of the Commission on History consisting of two representatives of the General Synod Council and two representatives of the Commission on History and chaired by the moderator of the Commission on History.

Reasons:

1. The General Synod Council task force exposed a conflict of interest issue between requiring compliance with the records policy and the subordinate-level archival staff enforcement of the responsibilities of the higher-level General Synod Council staff.

2. The difficulty of subordinate staff-level requiring compliance by higher-level staff puts a problematic and undue burden on the subordinate-level staff.
3. The RCA Archives must acquire records from congregations, mission efforts, agencies, and subsidiary boards of the General Synod, including the staff teams of the General Synod Council, and the General Synod Council itself.
4. This proposed new structure provides a remedy by removing the archival staff from the direct staff structure and allowing the RCA Archives to gain compliance for the whole of the RCA.
5. Two bodies directly accountable to the General Synod will supervise as agents of the General Synod.
6. This solves the problem of General Synod Council staff members being assigned archival supervision outside of their natural staffing portfolios.

H 22-2

To authorize the establishment and incorporation of a Reformed Church Historic Trust as a 501(c)(3) organization to support and benefit the RCA Archives, and that the structure will be determined by the Commission on History in consultation with the RCA's general counsel, the RCA's chief financial officer, and others as needed, and reported to the 2023 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. A separate agency will provide for proper supervision and operation of the Archives in accordance with the commission's first recommendation, H 22-1.
2. As a 501(c)(3) organization, the Trust will be eligible for grants and other funding for such projects as a permanent archives building, digitization of records, preservation assistance, and fundraising. (The digitization of the *Christian Intelligencer*, published from August 7, 1830, through June 30, 1920, is one current example.)
3. Currently, the Archives is ineligible for state and federal grants. Incorporating separately, like the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) and the Church Growth Fund (CGF), makes the Archives less dependent on the annual General Synod Council budget and assessment income.
4. With the Archives holding almost 400 years of our history, heritage, denominational identity, and detailed agency records, it is a good time, approaching our Quatercentenary, to make permanent its foundation and to provide for its growth.

Respectfully submitted,
Steven D. Pierce, moderator