

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”
–Revelation 7:9

Official Responsibilities of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2021 edition, p. 117):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America's progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Members of CORE are June Denny, Rolfi Elivo Lopez, Stephen Kim, Young Na, Earl James (secretary), Nathan Pyle (vice moderator), and Kelvin Spooner (moderator). Alina Coipel faithfully serves as Reformed Church in America (RCA) support staff to the commission.

The Reformed Church in America and Racism

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) has long addressed and confronted racism, and the RCA has used many concepts to encounter racism such as fully multiracial and multicultural, multiracial future freed from racism, antiracism, multiracial initiatives, white privilege, cultural agility, diversity, equity, inclusion, and family of God.

Under these concepts, and since 1957, the RCA provided a plethora of statements, programs, processes, and measures to signal and mark progress toward becoming an antiracist denomination. From 2006 to 2008 alone, the General Synods adopted 19 such recommendations. The RCA website recounts that history at www.rca.org/synod/statements. Scroll to the “Racism” section.

Those efforts to transform the RCA have either stalled, or were deficient, or both. Our goal of becoming a fully multiracial and multicultural denomination freed from racism remains unfulfilled. CORE desires to encourage our denomination to combat racism in fresh ways and, in this report, CORE offers fresh thinking about racism and antiracism.

Two biblical narratives serve as a foundation for learning to be an antiracist denomination: Mark 12:28-34 (the Great Commandment) and Luke 10:25-37 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan).

The Great Commandment

A scribe observes Jesus in a debate with some religious leaders. He asks Jesus which commandment is first among all the others. Perhaps he imagined that Jesus would choose one commandment and defend his choice. Instead, Jesus provided two conjoined summaries. One summary captured the commandments related to God, indicating we are to completely love God. Jesus's second summary captured the commandments related to human relationships, indicating that the love that one has for self and life must be given in equal measure to one's neighbor.

Love God and love others. The active verb in both summaries is the word "love."

The Good Samaritan

The parable occurs during a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer. The lawyer, seeking to trap Jesus, asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered: by living out the Great Commandment. The lawyer quickly responded by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" The parable is Jesus's response.

The deepest truth of the parable is not that the Samaritan did something good. Jesus pointed to something deeper. He compared the love not shown by respected Hebrew religious leaders to the love shown by an ethnic Hebrew (a Samaritan), who was considered unclean and inferior. Love made the Samaritan the neighbor.

It was for that lawyer to apply that truth about love, neighbor, and eternal life. It is the same for us today. CORE believes this parable and the Great Commandment are the high mark for us to apply now about love, neighbor, and eternal life.

CORE has explored and discussed people groups we ourselves hold as "not like me" and, therefore, as "not my neighbor." We recognized that all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity, carry biases, prejudices, preferences for people who are even "like me" racially. For "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

CORE recognizes that we need countermeasures to keep our biases from harming our neighbors. Harm involves limiting their freedom to access, resources, and hospitality in the same way that we expect those freedoms for ourselves. To secure these countermeasures, we need to remain accountable to trusted others. In addition, there are times when we need to create policies and enforce them vigorously to fully treat our multiracial and multicultural neighbors as neighbors.

CORE has wrestled with challenges to Jesus's call to love. One such challenge involves freedom. A CORE commissioner recalled a story from one of his undergraduate religion professors. During the 1940s, the story went, a particular world missions conference was held. A young Korean woman spoke on the subject of love. Her entire speech focused on the desire of her beloved Korean people to be free from domination by Japan. The professor said that the woman said no Korean had the right to speak of love without speaking of freedom from the Japanese. Interesting that when she heard "love," she spoke of "freedom," because Japan waged war against Korean culture, language, and history that goes back thousands of years. Strong feelings about that conflict continue today.

Dynamisms between love and freedom do not only exist within the history of Korea and Japan. In the United States and Canada, love and freedom were battered by white people and governments against First Nation people and Native Americans, Black Americans and others of African descent, Chinese, Latinos, and other people of color. Religious institutions, such as the RCA, benefitted from those atrocities. Further, they supported racism overtly or by silence. Historically, too many religionists underpinned, and still underpin, racist agendas with theological and ecclesiological corruptions. Too many refused to oppose them using Scriptures, such as those cited in this report, as bases for direct advocacy and action.

Racism is sin. Sin limits and perverts love. Limited and perverted love batters and hides freedom. Racism is the antithesis of what God intends for us. It is the rejection of the other, which is contrary to the Word of God. Racism is the continuing lie that says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation.

CORE invites delegates and our church to explore the dynamic relationships between love and freedom. Challenge and remove all instances where racism diminishes love and allows freedom to be diminished.

Accountability

Erroneously, there are times when we equate the “kingdom of God” with “the church.” The kingdom of God is better understood as encompassing the church, the world, and nature. Taking this kingdom of God view, the Holy Spirit is at work in both the church and the world to reconcile both back to God, which includes God’s justice. CORE recommends that accountability recognize what the Spirit is doing in both the church and the world. To ensure accountability for racial diversity, equity, and inclusion, the church and the world use different tools.

The church uses tools that tend to be word-focused. The church relies on sermons, joint worship services, resolutions and statements from assemblies and institutions, and trainings. The church emphasizes that love and heart-change are our means and ends. Yet many people of color remain frustrated with the slowness for achieving denominational or ecclesiological racial equity and justice. Clearly, the church’s tools highlight the need for change. However, they do not penetrate status quo practices, systems, and culture to secure and sustain change.

The world uses additional approaches and tools to combat racism. Public advocacy and public policy advocacy are potent tools. Legislation with enforcement capacities has been used. Judicial processes have been used. CORE believes such changes of equity, inclusion, and justice are examples of the Spirit reconciling the world to God and God’s justice. CORE also knows that this work is by no means completed in the world. The Holy Spirit continues to reconcile the world to God.

CORE believes that many of our people of color are RCA members and leaders, and that they participate in leading the RCA, at least in part because of the reconciling changes the Holy Spirit is crafting in the world. As we strive for the kingdom of God in the world, the Spirit continues to create racial equity and inclusion work in the world, and the church can benefit from that work and from using some of the biblically based advocacy practices that have helped craft those changes.

Ways Forward

Many churches in the RCA are in locations that are racially homogeneous. Many churches are racially homogenous themselves. In ways we might not be aware of, homogeneity can shape what we see as “treasures” or define things we value from the heart. Some of those “treasures” bear fruit in culture, polity, and racial preferences. (See Matthew 6:21.) Do people, congregations, and assemblies in such locations not need to oppose racism? No, all need to oppose racism. However, CORE believes that currently, some do and others do not. The Great Commandment and the Good Samaritan parable do not exempt factors like location and homogeneity.

Proximity matters. However, lack of proximity does not inhibit us from growth. People anywhere can contribute to the RCA becoming a fully transformed multiracial, multicultural denomination. There is a plethora of web-based and virtual capacities available to us. Many congregations have profitably employed virtual worship, fellowship, and teaching.

Antiracist cultures and practices can be nourished virtually. We all can:

- Select blogs and books to read and discuss
- Find influencers to follow
- Study documentaries and videos
- Chat with online groups and communities
- Engage antiracist networks
- Support antiracist and multicultural events
- Visit antiracist churches
- Join or launch advocacy actions

Also, many towns, cities, and rural areas across North America have multiracial pasts. Visits to nearby libraries, colleges and universities, and historical societies can yield treasure troves of information about the influences of race and racism in those locales. Studying histories of some of our congregations can yield similar valuable information. In addition, many towns, cities, and rural areas offer excellent historic exhibits, art displays, cultural events, etc. Observing both how race is presented **and** how it is absent from presentation can yield helpful insights.

The more we ask others who do not look or sound like we do and the more we engage people who have preferences different from ours, the less we fear them, and the more we will stand with them. Our love will support, and not suppress, freedom.

CORE encourages all of us to engage our imaginations and participate in fresh ways to learn about, grow in, and deliver for a multiracial, multicultural world.

Again, there are times when we need to create policies and enforce them vigorously to fully treat our multiracial and multicultural neighbors as neighbors.

RE 22-1

To direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary to strongly urge all entities of the Reformed Church in America (racial/ethnic councils, assemblies, commissions, institutions, boards, and agencies) to adopt the following antiracism policy:

The Reformed Church in America shall:

- 1. Build on the 2009 General Synod declaration that “racism is a sin because it is an offense to God” and declare that the sin of racism is expressed as a policy, behavior, and/or belief against a person or people based on their identification and/or membership in a particular racial or ethnic group that is considered a minority.**
- 2. Define antiracism as the practice of confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.**
- 3. Confess that our sin has led us to erect religious, cultural, economic, and political barriers along racial and ethnic lines and that these barriers have separated us from one another and deprived many of us the right to develop our personal and corporate identities.**
- 4. Respect the rights and freedom of all people of color regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality where the cries of people who have become victims of racial injustice and/or discrimination are to be taken seriously and are given full voice and opportunity to make their complaints, without retaliation, to their appropriate judicatories; and inform the Office for Advocacy and Race Relations as well as the Commission on Race and Ethnicity.**
- 5. Support allies who speak out against persons and systems that perpetuate racial injustice.**
- 6. Commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional synods, and General Synod).**

Intensive Immersive Experiences

CORE recommends that General Synod 2022 provide a strategy of intensive, immersive experiences rather than training events to underpin these antiracism recommendations. We recommend up to three Sankofa journeys a year for three years, and up to three Institute for Healing Racism learning communities a year for three years.

Training provides meaningful methods to disseminate information. This information frequently is disseminated over a couple of hours to a couple of days. Measurable training outcomes oftentimes show clear increases in knowledge and recitable information. Over time, expectedly, retention of the increased knowledge diminishes relatively quickly. Everyday life and its regular demands crowd out utilizing many of the knowledge gains achieved in training.

Instead of traditional training, CORE recommends utilizing intensive experience strategies that challenge mind, memory, self-assessment, spiritual journeying, and emotions. Both recommended experiences will help our RCA at personal, inter-personal, cultural, and institutional levels.

The RCA has years of experience with Sankofa journeys. Over 300 of its leaders and members participated in approximately 12 journeys across a roughly 9-year period. Persons of various races, both genders, different generations, and from various regional synods participated. Those three-and-a-half-day bus trips typically went to the Deep South of the U.S. However, Sankofa journeys can be developed to go to various states, provinces, or regional synods. Participants explore the intersections of race, faith, and their personal life journeys.

The Institute for Healing Racism learning communities aim to “eliminate institutional racism that influences ideas and practices rooted in discrimination. The curriculum raises awareness of and about individual and institutional racism, and possible remedies for their elimination” (www.grcc.edu/about-grcc/office-diversity-equity-inclusion/training-development/institute-healing-racism).

These learning communities can occur over four to six two-hour sessions over a two- to four-month period. People of all races, both genders, any generation, and from various regional synods can participate. Sessions are conducted in a meeting space rather than having a travel component as Sankofa does.

An assessment is requested to support this ministry. The assessment is one part of a funding recipe that includes participant fees, contributions from assemblies and institutions, and grants. CORE requests assessment funding over a three-year period. We will make the funding request annually rather than funding all three years at once in order to spread the assessment out over the three years. For each subsequent request, we will include a progress report for General Synod delegates to review.

The per-member assessment requested for this first year is \$0.36.

RE 22-2

To direct the General Synod Council, working together with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, to provide up to three Sankofa journeys per year for the next three years and up to three Institute for Healing Racism–type experiences per year for the next three years; and further,

To approve the \$0.36 per member assessment to fund the first year of Sankofa journeys and Institute for Healing Racism learning communities.

Native American/First Nations

The *Book of Church Order* states, “The General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b [2021 edition, p. 109]).

The Reformed Church in America has established and recognizes three racial/ethnic councils: the African American Black Council, the Council for Hispanic Ministries, and the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries. At one time, there was a Native American Council in the RCA. However, it was disbanded some years ago, leaving a void with no council to advocate for

the needs and concerns of Native American and First Nations people in this denomination. Under these circumstances, the voices of Native American and First Nations members are marginalized at best and, at worst, are not heard at all. CORE believes this travesty must be immediately corrected.

RE 22-3

To direct the General Synod Council to reinstate and recognize a fourth racial/ethnic council for Native American and First Nations Ministries as a permanent council in the Reformed Church in America with all rights and privileges hereto according to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2021 edition, p. 109).

Church Multiplication

Much of the work of the RCA to address racism is focused on established congregations, assemblies, and institutions. The antiracism work in those settings often confronts deeply entrenched assumptions and behaviors, cherished practices, and honored beliefs. CORE is not saying these features are racist *per se*. Rather:

- Racist ideas and actions can be shielded by those features.
- Changing those features might be required to eliminate shielded racist ideas and actions.
- Change theory makes uprooting racism a deep challenge in existing congregations, assemblies, and institutions.

The RCA has a vigorous, fruitful Church Multiplication ministry. New churches do not have years in which to develop time-bound entrenched assumptions, cherished practices, and honored beliefs. The new churches in the RCA can provide the denomination with additional capacities to become more multiracial and multicultural.

CORE urges the RCA to vigorously embed antiracism values and practices in its church planting movement.

RE 22-4

To direct the General Synod Council to ensure that as the RCA multiplies and grows, the work in new church starts:

1. **Embeds core values on antiracism in all of its new congregations and worshipping communities.**
2. **Develops specific points that measure antiracism efforts and results of its new congregations.**
3. **Shares results of antiracism work in the Church Multiplication ministry with RCA assemblies and institutions for learning and potential development opportunities.**
4. **Reports annually to the General Synod on annual and multi-annual impacts of antiracism agendas on our new churches.**