

# **Report of the General Synod Council on Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism**

## **POLICY WORDING**

The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multicultural and multiracial future freed from racism, engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism.

## **GENERAL SECRETARY'S INTERPRETATION**

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

By journeying into the future with a commitment to unity, reconciliation, and justice, we build Christ's church on a firm and diverse foundation that extends God's grace to the world. Through forgiveness, deep relationships, active service, and love for each other, the church is able to live out the message of God's love. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) commitment is to name racism as a sin and to work against its prevalence and pervasiveness both within our relationships and our denominational system, as well as in the wider domestic and global communities. Our efforts at eradicating racism call for us to change not only our systems but also our hearts for each other and for the life matters that concern each other. It requires transformation of both institution and of our person. It impacts what we embrace, what we include, what we see, and how we respond and resource. A multicultural and multiracial future freed from racism must first be envisioned, then articulated, and finally actively engaged in as the preference and commitment of all.

## **MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIRACIAL FUTURE FREED FROM RACISM**

The RCA's work toward a multicultural and multiracial future freed from racism takes a number of different forms as described here.

### **The Office of Advocacy and Race Relations**

The office of Advocacy and Race Relations was launched in July 2021. It has been the goal of this office in its first year to create a framework and rubric in which we go about our work within the denomination when we look at policies and practices. These policies and practices can be something as simple as: who do we partner with in mission? Or it could be: what processes are we using when we are hiring and training new staff at the denominational level? In order to move into the vision that general secretary Eddy Alemán has around Revelation 7:9, we have to start with where we are and make sure we have common language and understanding when it comes to race, disability, and women in ministry and leadership.

This office has been committed to working with other departments such as Women's Transformation and Leadership and the equity-based hospitality team to work out some of these details around developing a framework and rubric that can be a universal tool for every assembly, as well as staff of the RCA. We are now in the beginning stages of this development; we are gathering once a month to look at the foundational work that the equity-based hospitality team has already started, seeking to build from there.

## *Progress in 2021*

Stadia Assessment Center: The Stadia Church Planting organization invited Peter Watts to join a team of other leaders from around the country to ensure that their church planting assessment center was equitable when it came to who was approved for church planting using their tools. This yearlong process was completed and new hopeful outcomes have emerged. Jeff Bennett, vice president of U.S. church planting and part of the Stadia assessment evaluation team, reported:

In an effort to share our journey publicly, we will include an expression of lament and repentance during our Stadia gathering at Exponential in March. This is the largest gathering of Stadia's constituency and we believe the best place, as an organization, to acknowledge and lament the hurt and disservice caused to planters of color and women by our former discovery and assessment systems and processes.

We would have not been able to realize these important changes without the contributions of this team. Please know we are very grateful for your commitment and contributions. We would very much like your continued help as the new process is created, implemented, and refined.

Old First Reformed Church: On October 4, 2021, the Office of Advocacy and Race Relations received an inquiry from a member of Old First Church in Brooklyn, New York, asking for racial justice resources. Once we connected, we found out that this church in New York discovered that its stained glass windows told an old story about the benefits that this congregation has enjoyed because of slavery. Once that discovery was made, the church went into digging up that history to learn more and to figure out how they could right those wrongs. A small group of Old First Reformed members formed an antiracism reading group last June, starting with *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad. After they finished the book, they decided to form a Remembrance and Racial Justice working group to start looking into the church's history and understand how they can do better as a church when it comes to issues of racial justice. So far, they have done some research and uncovered some information about their history, and they are trying to figure out how to share what they've learned with the rest of the congregation. They have also continued to read other books (such as *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone, and *How to Fight Racism* by Jemar Tisby), and they have brainstormed some goals for the church. In January 2022, the antiracism group at Old First continued their research and shared some of it with the congregation for the first time in a special service. They presented some of the information they've gathered about the families that donated the stained glass windows and the people they enslaved. The service included prayers of lament and remembrance as well as the Belhar Confession and hymns that center racial justice.

Beyond Words: Launched during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend, this yearlong group's goal was to work with white pastors and leaders as well as congregants to focus on racial justice and what it means to be a freedom fighter alongside African American and Black congregations. We spent time reading *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem, learning about how racialized trauma happens in the body and how it can be healed. We have tried for decades to rid ourselves of this evil sin by thinking our way out of it and doing workshops. These efforts are led by Rev. Leah Ennis; at least eight pastors and leaders from across the U.S. participate. We are in year two of this group and are doing a six-month session

on “How to be an Anti-Racist.” The reflection below is from one of our cohort members, Rev. Sara Gregory.

As I was reading and processing the book *My Grandmother's Hands*, I was again made aware of how much white models of understanding focus on intellectual concepts. This is maybe even especially true in the Reformed Church tradition. As Menakem kept encouraging us to recognize how much of our trauma lives in our bodies and is generationally passed down through visceral experiences, I realized how far the church has to go in discipling people into a framework that takes our bodies into account. Particularly in the conversations I am in right now, many white people want to further abstract conversations about race and racial trauma to a critique of an intellectual or philosophical framework about Critical Race Theory. Refusing to see the humanity, or the personal trauma by abstracting the conversation is yet another way that white bodies continue to try to gain control and dominate the conversations around this topic. And the church has become the leading voice in many of these conversations. We need to develop an embodied form of discipleship that will help give people frameworks for faithful responses to our own trauma and the trauma of others that moves people out of their heads alone and back into the lived experiences of bodies. I appreciated the reflection and grounding practices that Menakem uses throughout these chapters to give people tools to engage personal and corporate history through embodied practice. I wonder if there are ways that leaning back into some more contemplative practices with new intentionality could help Christians live into a more embodied practice of their faith, which could then give them tools to have conversations about racism and racial trauma that would move beyond their heads and into their bodies and souls in a different way.

Since my ministry context puts me mostly in a position to disciple white people in these conversations, I spent a lot of time thinking about the ways that what Menakem calls “moral injury” to white people from carrying the shame of their ancestors’ abuse and mistreatment of people of color has led to inaction and fear of repentance. Helping white people move beyond their perceived fragility, the shame that comes with addressing their complicity, and helping them have tools to empathize and love people of color in the midst of their trauma is part of what I feel called to do in this season. Naming the shame and the fear that comes with these conversations feels like one of the most helpful ways to bring down barriers to these conversations, but I think after that, there needs to be more embodied practices. Long term, it is not helpful to keep having conversations in our heads, or even conversations about systemic change if white people cannot deal with the shame and move beyond the perceived fragility that keeps them from engaging these conversations humbly.

I think the hardest part of that process in my current context is keeping the conversation safe enough for people to stay engaged. White people need to overcome their fragility, but until they have the tools to name the fragility and face shame in a healthier way, their perceived fragility is a real barrier to conversations. It feels like a dance right now to keep people comfortable enough to stay in the conversations while making them uncomfortable enough to move them towards change.

### **Equity-Based Hospitality**

Flowing out of the work done in 2019 with Dr. Reesheda Washington, Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders formed a team to develop a framework for equity-based

hospitality, including definitions and values that link to the rich resources of the four ministry initiatives that focus on drawing in those historically, intentionally, and traditionally at the margins: Disability Concerns, Next Generation Engagement, Women's Transformation and Leadership, and Race Relations.

This framework is discipleship-based, rooted in growing in the character and competency of Jesus. Equity-based hospitality is defined as one in which the biblical practice of welcoming both friends and strangers is embraced in generous, kind, respectful, flexible, barrier-free ways that takes people's needs into account so they can find space to truly belong, experience the freedom to live into their God-given gifts and callings, and contribute to the body of Christ in unique, strengthening ways. It embraces the mutual hospitality of guest and host, can be readily adapted to different contexts, and enfolds the biblical understanding of hospitality as a sacred duty to treat strangers and friends alike, welcoming one another into our homes, communal spaces, and lives.

### *Progress in 2021*

Over the past year, the equity-based hospitality ministry has evolved into a staff collective led by Liz Testa, along with Terry DeYoung, Erika Fleming, Ruth Langkamp, Lesley Mazzotta, Anna Radcliffe, Eduardo Rodriguez, Stephanie Soderstrom, and Peter Watts. Lesley and Eduardo have subsequently wrapped up their work on the RCA staff, but in 2021, they were part of this team. This team wrestles with systemic barriers for the flourishing of all members of the body and provides resources to RCA leaders and communities as they seek to embrace equitable practices of welcoming and belonging.

This collective offers broad resources created with an equity lens such as the article on Faithward on how to choose a children's Bible that is inclusive and grounded in Reformed Theology ([www.faithward.org/how-to-choose-a-childrens-bible-that-will-form-faith-for-life](http://www.faithward.org/how-to-choose-a-childrens-bible-that-will-form-faith-for-life)). It also offers resources tailored to each of the four ministry initiatives as on-ramps for those new to the work as well as invitations to the "From Outreach to Embracing" network (which started as a virtual learning journey from January to March 2021) for deeper transformation and missional engagement.

### *Goals for 2022*

Currently, the collective is building out the equity-based hospitality values to be a robust Bible study for individual and communal study. These values were shared in last year's monitoring report and are available on Faithward.org: [www.faithward.org/how-to-practice-biblical-equity-based-hospitality](http://www.faithward.org/how-to-practice-biblical-equity-based-hospitality). The group is also working with Peter Watts to create a diversity playbook and framework.

## **Dismantling Racism**

Dismantling racism is central to one of the RCA's doctrinal standards, the Belhar Confession ([www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession](http://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession)). We believe racism is sinful. And we are actively working to uncover and dismantle racism in ourselves and the systems we're part of.

In response to the pressing racial/ethnic justice concerns that emerged in the spring of 2020, there has been a Spirit-led movement within the RCA to intentionally work toward dismantling

racism. The seeds for this movement were first planted in 2020, took root in 2021, and continue to grow and flourish in 2022. This work has been stewarded by various staff including Lorraine Parker, Eduardo Rodriguez, Liz Testa, and Peter Watts.

### Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings

Jesus said: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

In June 2020, through the virtual platform created by Women’s Transformation and Leadership at the beginning of the pandemic, the Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier introduced a like-minded, diverse group of RCA leaders to the 1 Cor. 13 Project as a way to engage the challenging work of “learning and unlearning” and the deep heart transformation needed in the wake of surging racial injustice against African Americans and Black people. This discipleship-based process leads to true repentance through a process of “rehearsing, re-minding and re-remembering,” using 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 as the foundation.

From this process, Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings were born, initiated by Rev. Nancy Boote and Rev. Liz Testa, and soon joined by Dr. Micheal Edwards and other committed leaders, including Rev. Dr. Rick DeBruyne, Deacon Cynthia Peters, Elder Lorraine Parker, Rev. Jewel Willis Thomas, Rev. Dr. Joanne Van Sant, Dr. Mark Veldt, Pastor Peter Watts, and Dr. Gordon Wiersma. This team shapes the prayer movement that continues to grow and thrive today. Over the past year (March 2021 to February 2022), 440 people have attended these gatherings, with an average of 20 people per gathering. Some gatherings have been attended by more than 40 people.

### *Progress in 2021*

Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings: Launched in October 2020, prayer gatherings are held every other week on Tuesdays from 1:30-2:30 p.m. Eastern. These virtual prayer gatherings are interactive times of praying and sharing hopes and challenges of engaging this important work, personally and communally; sacred times of lament, confession, and hope, grounded in vulnerability, humility, unity, and trust. The first year (October 2020 to September 2021) followed the Holy Spirit’s leading, focusing on breaking down internal and external systems of oppression of all kinds, centering Black lives in this season particularly, and living into Jesus’s call to love one another.

Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Solidarity: In April 2021, when anti-Asian hate crimes rose dramatically in the public eye, a group of staff, commissions, and the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) members gathered for two listening sessions. From this, the Commissions on Christian Action (CCA) and Race and Ethnicity (CORE), the Commission for Women (CfW), and CPAAM issued a statement in solidarity with the AAPI community, denouncing the hatred and violence ([www.rca.org/commissions-call-the-rca-to-stand-with-the-aapi-community](http://www.rca.org/commissions-call-the-rca-to-stand-with-the-aapi-community)). This statement is accompanied by a curated list of resources and videos for leaders and communities to engage.

### *Goals for 2022*

Dismantling Racism Prayer Gatherings: Now in year two (September 2021 to present), the prayer movement is going deeper. Each month engages a two-fold rhythm around a particular “dismantling” theme (e.g., colorism, Native American history, Advent longing and hope, Black

history, and race and gender). The first gathering hosts diverse voices to educate and focus the intercession. The second gathering, two weeks later, is a space for reflection and prayer in small groups. This deepens relationships and offers catalytic, prayer-centered encouragement and accountability.

The goal is to continue deepening and catalyzing transformation, leading toward advocacy and action. Spurred on by the 2021 General Synod's embracing of Revelation 7:9 and the motions and exhortation brought forth from the African American Black Council (AABC) and CORE, this prayer movement is energized to courageously embrace the promise that, with God, it is not impossible for the Reformed Church in America to experience deep heart transformation leading to true, authentic repentance, emerging ready to seek a "more excellent way" forward. All with an open heart and mind are welcomed to these gatherings; alongside RCA members, several other denominational siblings have also joined, thanks be to God.

AAPI Solidarity: To continue working together with CPAAM and other members of the AAPI community to equip and empower RCA members and congregations to stand against anti-Asian hate, uncover unconscious bias, and encourage members of the AAPI community to share their stories and have voice and agency.

The Dismantling Racism prayer movement plans to have this topic be the dismantling theme for May, which is AAPI Heritage Month.