

Report of the General Secretary

Dear delegates of the General Synod 2022, the Lord be with you!

It is an honor for me to address you this morning to share my report with you. If my report to you today were a sermon, I would title it: “From Lament to Hope.” Hope is a beautiful thing and it is what helps us carry the heaviest burdens of life. Biblical hope is not only the desire for something good to happen in the future; it is the confident expectation that it will happen. Hope is holding on to the promises of God that he will be with us to the ends of the age. Friends, we cannot live in this life without hope, but we cannot hope without lamenting first; we cannot ignore the need to lament. We come to hope through lament. This is so true for us in the world we are living in today and in the Reformed Church in America.

As you all know, our beloved denomination is going through one of the most challenging seasons of its life. This is not the first challenging season, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Throughout the course of our almost 400 years of history as a denominational family, we have gone through many difficult times, and we have been able to come to the other side stronger, and this time is not the exception. By God’s grace, we will be able to come to the other side stronger and healthier. I can see it! Can you see it?

I have said it many times and in different contexts that the first half of this decade—the ’20s—is going to be tough because we are re-organizing, re-structuring, and re-defining our ministry. These are major organizational changes, and change is difficult and painful. People usually are not afraid of change itself because change is good, healthy, and necessary, but they are afraid of loss, and when change takes place, loss becomes a reality. We are experiencing that now. As a denomination, we must lament all of the loss we are currently experiencing and will continue to experience in the next few years. But, the second half of this decade is going to be great! I can see the church of 2030. God has been at work in the past—we have seen it—and we will continue to see him at work in the future. I am a witness of the great things God does in our ministries.

Last October, in response to the Vision 2020 Team report, General Synod formed a team to develop a restructuring plan for the denomination for sustained spiritual and organizational health. A month ago, the restructuring team had its first in-person meeting, and it was a great time of prayer, discernment, and connecting. You will hear an update from several of the team members this evening.

It is not a secret to anyone that, as a denomination, we are walking through a dark time, and we need to lament that reality. We must not only recognize the need for lament, but we also need to practice the discipline of lament both within and beyond the walls of our churches.

We need to lament because of the reality we are experiencing in the world today.

- We continue to deal with the devastating impact of a global pandemic. We are not post-COVID-19 yet. We need to lament the devastating impact we continue to see in our world and our churches.
- We continue to experience social and racial injustice in North America.

- We continue to witness the senseless deaths of young and old people in places that are supposed to be the safest places, like schools and churches.

We need to lament because of what we are experiencing within our beloved denomination.

- We are seeing RCA churches leaving our family to form their own networks or to join other denominational families. We need to lament that.
- We are seeing regional synods, classes, and local congregations discerning if it's time to leave the denomination or to stay. We need to lament the process that churches are going through today.
- In my role of general secretary, I'm lamenting the loss of important staff members who have accepted other calls to serve God in other ministries, including Rev. Dr. Jill Ver Steeg and pastor Eliza Cortés Bast.

We need to lament well because the past three years have been extremely difficult. Since General Synod in October of 2021, 68 churches have left the denomination, and another four churches have closed. An additional 60 churches have filed a petition to withdraw and are still in the process of leaving the denomination. Some churches, classes, and regions are still discerning whether to stay or go. My friends, this hurts. Sometimes, it's personal—when it's a church we've served as pastors, a church we grew up in, a church where we taught Sunday school or visited family members or friends, a church where we do any of these things currently and not just in the past. When we see them having these conversations of leaving, this hurts. Separation has not always been as generous in spirit as it has been generous in resources; this, too, hurts. It hurts when people who are leaving vilify people who are staying. It hurts when they make disparaging comments about the denomination we love. But this goes both ways, and we who are staying have also lashed out. At times, I need to remind myself to be generous in spirit; I need to confess my anger and disappointment and judgment and instead commit myself to prayer. I pray with pastors every Friday and that is a highlight of my week. We confess and pray together.

We need to lament the hurt that we cause each other. We need to lament the loss of each other. We need to lament not living up to General Synod's vision of a mutually generous separation, and we need to recommit ourselves to generosity of spirit.

We lament the misinformation that is circulating about the Reformed Church in America. We lament the loss of RCA identity for people for whom that was important, but whose church has left the denomination. We lament the loss of stability. We lament the collateral damage of these decisions: friction within congregations, attention deflected from mission and ministry, strained and broken relationships. We lament the divisions that we could not overcome.

When I think about all this, Psalm 13 comes to my mind:

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me."

This sounds like a journal entry, doesn't it? This psalm sounds familiar to many of us who have gone through some of the darkest days of our lives. This psalm is a beautiful example of going from lament to hope.

In the first two verses, the psalmist asks a set of painful questions to God that clearly describe the pain and sorrow of his heart:

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

Notice the recurring phrase, "how long?" As in, "when will this be over?" or "when will you relieve me of my grief and agony?" What is happening to David is unpleasant. It's hard. He wants to be done with it. And so he asks, "How long?" How many times have we asked that question? I have asked that question many times in my life. He addresses this to the Lord. It's a desperate, miserable plea for the Lord to intervene for him.

I believe this a great example for us to follow as a denomination. We need to cry out to the Lord in a similar fashion. The situations we are going through are troubling. They are not enjoyable. They are causing us grief, pain, and anguish. We need to cry out to the Lord and ask him, "how long?" It is not a sin for us to express our deep grief about the situations we are going through that are hurtful and frightening.

Verses three and four include David's humble petition to the Lord:

"Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken."

In these two verses, David gives a request and then reasons as to why the Lord should answer him. He starts by asking God to "consider" and "answer" his request. He wants God to look at and be mindful of him. But he won't settle for just a look. He wants an answer from God. His

request is for God to “give light to his eyes.” In essence, what David is saying is: “I know there is a solution to my problem. I just need You, Lord, to open my eyes so that I can see it.”

This reminds me of another person from the Bible who was in a hopeless situation. Hagar, Sarah’s slave who had given birth to Ishmael, had been sent away from Abraham’s home. She and her son were alone in the desert with no more food or water. At that point, Hagar resolved that she and her young son would die. She walked away from her son so that she would not have to watch him die and then she sat down and wept.

An angel appeared to Hagar and told her that God had heard her son’s cries and that they both would live. The Bible tells us, “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water” (Genesis 21:19). Hagar and her son were saved that day.

Notice that Scripture does not say that God miraculously created a well of water. The well had been there all along, only Hagar could not see it. It’s only when God opened her eyes that she could see the solution to her problem, which had been right in front of her.

Sometimes when we are feeling hopeless, stressed, or afraid, we lack the vision to see how we can help ourselves. We lack the vision to see what God has in store for us. Sometimes, we can be feeling great and still lack the ability to see what is best for us. At all times, we must turn to God and pray as David prayed that God will “Give light to my eyes”—that God will open our eyes and illuminate our souls so that we can see the path that leads to our salvation. Then, when our eyes are opened, like David, we, too, will joyfully sing, “my heart rejoices in your salvation” (verse 5). That’s my prayer for our beloved RCA family. We need God to open our eyes wide for us to see what he is doing in our midst.

Finally, in verses five and six, we can see the beautiful affirmation of hope.

“But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Hope removes all fears because it allows us to see the wonderful acts of God. Hope allows us to trust in God’s steadfast love. And thus, we can sing to the Lord and rejoice in his salvation.

If I were to rewrite Psalm 13 for us today, it might sound like this:

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever? How long will you hide your face from us?
How many more farewells must we endure? How much more drastic change must we ride out?
How long will the enemy keep us divided?”

Consider and answer us, O Lord our God! Give light to our eyes; unless you open our eyes and show us the way, we’re doomed, and critics will say, ‘They got what they deserved,’ and our foes will rejoice because we are smaller, because they think we won’t make it.

But we trust in your steadfast love and believe you have a bright future for us. We will rejoice in your salvation; we know you can make a way.

We will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with us; for 394 years, through many trials and dangers, he has provided for us abundantly.”

Friends, even as we lament, there is so much to be hopeful for and to celebrate in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

Transformed & Transforming

Reasons for hope start with the progress that we are seeing through the work of Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s 15-year strategic initiative to equip RCA congregations in discipleship, leadership, and mission. You will hear other reasons for hope later this week in reports about RCA Global Mission and Church Multiplication.

We have made significant progress in many important areas of ministry this year through Transformed & Transforming; these are some of the highlights.

- Disability Concerns is looking to young leaders to lead us into a future marked by discipleship, servanthood, and equity-based hospitality. They are working to particularly identify and invest in disability advocates age 30 and younger. One way they are doing this is by leading the Disability Advocacy Journey in partnership with Next Generation Engagement. The Disability Advocacy Journey is an eight-month virtual experience for young people in their 20s to study the disability rights movement in North America and apply their own advocacy skills in community-based initiatives. This experience elevated the passion of young leaders and equipped them for advocacy right where they are. Ten young people have been selected to develop grant-funded projects toward advocacy work that will help their communities better love and serve alongside people with disabilities. Revs. Anna Radcliffe and Terry DeYoung led this cohort of young leaders.
- More than ten women are enrolled in the She Is Called cohorts for New Brunswick Theological Seminary’s certificate program in church leadership and theological studies, exploring their callings to become preaching elders or commissioned pastors, to go further in their seminary studies, or to simply become better equipped ministry leaders.
- In early 2022, our first Generation Spark group launched with ten participating congregations. Generation Spark partners youth with mentors in their congregations in order to fully integrate another generation into the life and leadership of the church. It shows young adults why being part of the church matters. Rev. Anna Radcliffe and Ruth Langkamp lead Generation Spark in partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). The program is funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc.
- Speaking of partnerships with the CRC, RCA and CRC Disability Concerns released an updated and expanded third edition of the *Inclusion Handbook* last summer, retitled *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*. This practical resource helps advocates, church members, and pastors improve accessibility in their churches and recognize people with disabilities as ministry partners. The third edition includes many more perspectives of

people with disabilities. It is available on the RCA's Faithward website, in print, and in audio. Spanish, Korean, and French translations are available.

- As pandemic concerns curtailed and continue to curtail in-person events, Rev. Liz Testa and the Women's Transformation and Leadership team she leads have continued to create sacred spaces that foster community and combat isolation, including small groups, book studies, retreats, and prayer gatherings.
- The *Lavish Hope* podcast, now in its third season, shares incredible stories of resilience and overcoming. Each episode's guests share their story and offer tips and tools to help listeners embrace hope and build resiliency as Christ-followers in today's world. Their stories are really remarkable.
- Two cohorts allowed ministry leaders to journey together and hone their leadership skills as solo pastors and as senior pastors. Another cohort helped leaders flourish through change and disruption.
- The Local Missional Engagement team helped churches develop new local mission practices in the midst of a pandemic. They provided tools like a prayer-walking guide, helped churches understand their community through MissionInsite demographic analyses, and coached pastors and consistories.
- Beginning in the summer of 2021, Next Generation Engagement began a partnership with five young leaders, elevating their voices on Faithward.org as regular content contributors on issues pertaining to finances, environment, spiritual formation, and more.
- A second volume of the popular *She Is Called Women of the Bible* study series has been released on the RCA Store and on Faithward. Volume 2 takes biblical women's stories deeper, coming from a Reformed perspective with relevant practical application. It is available in both English and Spanish and is being used by people in North America and beyond.
- In early 2023, Next Generation Engagement will launch its first online course for children's ministry leaders. The course has been developed by Shelley Henning as a way to better serve and prepare children's ministry leaders for the shifting reality of congregations post-pandemic as well as shifting generational dynamics.

Shifts in Transformed & Transforming

In 2014, I joined staff as the coordinator for Leadership Development, part of the ministry of Transformed & Transforming. Given the reality that we are living today, we are trying to make some changes. The reality that we are living today is different. It is challenging, and it is hard. This year, GSC staff work around Transformed & Transforming experienced multiple shifts that continued to shape and re-shape its identity within the RCA. On top of the challenges and impact of COVID-19 and the impact of decisions made at General Synod 2021, the way that we have been structuring our work around Transformed & Transforming was reviewed as part of my plan to reorganize the GSC denominational staff.

As part of the ongoing Transformed & Transforming vision mandated by General Synod, as well my own commitment to give an answer to the reality we are living today, I asked Rev. Sung Kim to initiate a new integrated vision for equipping in 2022 and beyond. We are in the midst of an internal structure shift to honor both the spirit and goals of Transformed & Transforming, while also embracing the Spirit's movement toward a new global future for the RCA.

Sung is working closely with the Church Multiplication and Global Mission team to house a new center for leadership and mission. This center will offer training for discipleship, leadership, local mission, Women's Transformation and Leadership, Disability Concerns, Next Generation Engagement, as well as holistic discipleship work for church planting locally and around the world.

During the pandemic, we realized that we could do a better job of responding, listening, and working alongside churches and leaders. The need for additional Sabbath and mental health resources for ministers, the need for training on adaptive leadership and innovation processes, the pain of mid-pandemic challenges, the desire for advocacy opportunities and avenues to pursue anti-racism, the fear of churches not being able to sustain themselves and remain open beyond the pandemic, and the need for resources for ongoing next generation work have led us to retool Transformed & Transforming.

We are committed to developing a more nimble and responsive way for the Transformed & Transforming team to provide quality services for both the present and future RCA. Part of that retooling will be greater partnership with regional synods, classes, and classis leaders, recognizing and supporting the work that God is already doing in and through the regions and classes in the Reformed Church in America.

During this season of change and restructuring, and with a smaller ministry staff, we need to be creative and strategic. We no longer can continue to do things the way we always did. Bringing all the ministry staff together in a new center is an effort to respond with creativity to the current reality we are facing as a denomination.

The center will train the head, heart, and hands of leaders, and strengthen the soul of our churches.

The training and learning opportunities offered to churches and ministry leaders will empower them for greater discipleship, leadership, and local mission, as it has in the past, whether they serve long-established congregations or new church plants. I want you to hear from me the importance of our churches that are staying—small, big, and mid-size, 200 years old or 400. We cannot go into the future without paying attention to and blessing those long-established congregations in the Reformed Church in America.

Different levels of learning will be available, from content such as blog posts or toolkits, to more in-depth coaching or consulting, or connecting with other leaders through a cohort learning experience.

New ministry connections in Central and South America

In this past year, I have had the wonderful opportunity to connect with leaders from different parts of the world who would like to have a closer connection with the Reformed Church in America. It is wonderful to read the book of Acts. All of these are “Macedonian calls” of leaders and churches asking us to come and help them.

Nicaragua

In December of 2021, I went to Nicaragua with Rev. Andres Serrano, who is our coordinator for Hispanic Ministries and a strategist for Church Multiplication. We met with a group of about 40 leaders who are seeking our help to establish an equipping center to train pastors and church planters.

It was a beautiful thing for me to go back to the place where I was born, to meet with these leaders and train them for mission work in my own birth place.

Argentina, Uruguay and Chile

In February, I had the opportunity to respond to another “Macedonian call,” this time coming from South American leaders. I joined a trip organized by Rev. Fabio Sosa of Central Plains Classis, which had connections with pastoral networks in Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Montevideo, and Santiago. The pastors we met with are familiar with the RCA through Central Plains Classis or Classis de las Naciones, and are interested in joining our denomination through those classes. We are walking into new territory, responding to the opportunities that God is giving us. Traveling with the Revs. Andres Serrano and Fabio Sosa, I was impressed to see that what is attracting all of these leaders is our Reformed theology. In my meetings with them, I just gave a simple explanation of the five solas of the reformation:

- *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)
- *Solus Christus* (Christ alone)
- *Sola Fide* (faith alone)
- *Sola Gratia* (grace alone)
- *Soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone)

A pastor from the Classis de las Naciones teaches the Heidelberg Catechism to a couple hundred people every Saturday via Zoom because they really value our creeds, confessions, and Reformed understanding of Scripture. Friends, in the midst of the challenging season we are going through as a denomination, even as we are lamenting, God continues to do great things. This gives me hope. It should give us all hope. Let us stay alert for the work of God’s Spirit with hopeful expectation, so that we can join in that work. I invite you to pray and help us discern how to answer these “Macedonian calls.”

Encouragement from RCA churches

This spring, I have traveled a lot, and I thank God for the visits I have been able to make to RCA churches and leaders across the denomination. This is a really important time for connection. I have had wonderful visits with leaders from churches that are committed to the Reformed Church in America long-term. From Wisconsin to New York, from Iowa to California, from

Florida to Ontario to New Jersey, these visits have been an encouragement to me during this challenging season. We are honest with each other about the challenges facing the church and the denomination, and we are able to bless each other and pray for each other and seek God's face together.

Seeking transformation

Reformed Church in America churches and leaders, I ask you to explore new ways of doing ministry in the communities God called you to serve. Please watch [this video](#) as a beautiful example of transformational ministry for the community.

Friends, this is an example of one of our churches going from lament and death to resurrection and hope. This is the transformation story of Fourth Reformed Church becoming the BLVD Church in Holland, Michigan. I give thanks to my dear friends Jonathan Brownson and Ben Aguilera for sharing their beautiful story with us. I believe this is a great example of the transformation that the Reformed Church in America is going through right now. We're in the midst of that, experiencing death in many different ways, to seeing and experiencing new life and hope about the future—a hope that is multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-generational, and a future that includes doing ministry with people in every walk of life, a future that involves us listening to the gospel, and a future that looks like Jesus.

If you read the Gospels, Jesus always hung out with the wrong people—having dinner with tax collectors, talking with a woman from Samaria, and allowing a prostitute to cry and wash his feet. I am praying for a future of the Reformed Church in America that will look more like Jesus's ministry. I am praying for a church that looks more like the kingdom of heaven, where people of all nations and tongues will worship God together, as described in Revelation 7:9. That's the future we're hoping for. I invite leaders in the Reformed Church in America to try new things. Don't be afraid of the work God is doing. Embrace the work God is inviting us to follow.

Dear friends of the Reformed Church in America, God is up to something great in our future. Keep the faith, keep lamenting, and keep hoping!

Mr. President, this concludes my report.