

Report of the President

Mr. General Secretary, delegates at the 215th meeting of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, and those who are joining us online, I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for the privilege of serving the RCA as an officer for the past three years. I also want to say thanks to my wife, Melissa, for giving me permission to serve.

A variety of circumstances have led me to add a piece to my message less than a week before synod. The recent horrible tragedies in Buffalo, New York; Laguna Woods, California; Uvalde, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Ames, Iowa; and sadly many others compel us to stop business as usual and ask God for help to guide us beyond prayers and words into action. As Dr. Micah McCreary asked last night in his message, “Lord, what would you have us do?”

I have been in conversation with the chairperson of our Commission on Christian Action to consider what response we might offer. Because time does not allow for the proper vetting before we make a proposal to the synod and the RCA, we will offer you a preliminary suggestion and ask for you to pray to guide our efforts to act in ways that change the violence in our culture.

In our conversation, we are convicted that positive actions with those making a difference are better than words alone. The Alliance for Hope is an agency that exists to seek to intervene before angry shooters commit these horrible acts of violence and murder. Now, I need to mention, the president of The Alliance for Hope International, Casey Gwinn, happens to be my brother-in-law. I will gladly recuse myself of any formal action this body might choose to take related to this organization. I hope that the Alliance for Hope will be a partner to give us an avenue of constructive response in protecting some of the most at-risk people in our society.

One program in the alliance is Camp HOPE America. To protect the confidentiality, I am going to use general terms, but I believe you will understand the significance. Camp HOPE is for children who have witnessed or experienced abuse and domestic violence. These children are lifted out of their circumstances for a week and given a different perspective on life—a perspective that offers hope. Casey tells of one young man who shared his suicide plans while attending a week at a Camp HOPE. The intervention of the staff not only saved this young man’s life, but it also cultivated the path for this young man to become a future Camp HOPE mentor and counselor.

My first proposal is: To direct the Commission on Christian Action to explore the Alliance for Hope International as a possible partner to equip congregations and members of the Reformed Church in America to support the intervention and prevention of violence, for report to General Synod 2023.

Our Transformed & Transforming vision states, in part, “Being led by the Holy Spirit, serving with each other, embracing our diverse world and striving for a multicultural future freed from racism, and working with all the partners that God provides” (emphasis added). Could the Alliance for Hope be one such partner?

As I said, we need to stop and do things differently. I’d like to invite us to take a two-minute table time to pray for these terrible, violent tragedies that have happened as of late, and for God to help us as a church and as his people to intervene and remove some of the violence from our society.

And now to return to our regularly scheduled message...

If you haven't checked in on the prayer room yet, there is a quilt project I would invite you to see. It is a watercolor quilt. If you look closely, you will see each of the sets of five squares form a small cross. All sewn together, these individual crosses form the larger picture. The artist, Anna Assink Peterson, had planned to have it finished before synod; however, she fell and broke her arm, so she was not able to complete it. However, it may stand as a more appropriate metaphor for the RCA: not a completed work but a work still in progress.

This is an interesting time to share reflections with the synod. I will state up front, that if I don't say something that makes you feel a little offended and called out, I will have missed the prophetic voice I sense we need to hear. Equally, if I don't say something that encourages you and gives you hope, I will have missed the prophetic voice I sense God wants us to hear! My hope is that these words will invite us to ask ourselves, "What is God saying to us?"

When I accepted this office in October of 2021, I mentioned that the RCA is broken. My assessment has not changed. As I said last fall, we need to decide if we are broken beyond repair, or broken and humbled to open up to let God tear through the callouses we have developed on our souls. This synod will not likely make many decisions deeply impacting the answer, but we have the opportunity to make decisions in a manner that reshapes our culture of deliberation and confrontation. I wonder how our dialogue would sound if, on matters of difference, we started by at least thinking, if not saying, "I could be wrong." As I share these thoughts with you, I realize I could be wrong. Let's talk...

A lot of talk focuses on the unity of the church. In order for that conversation to be helpful, we need an initial assessment of the current condition of the church. We need to start with the understanding that the relational covenant between the churches and classes in the RCA is broken. *We do not have a unity to maintain, but a unity to repair.* Our brokenness is multifaceted, but much of it resides in a polarizing debate between our polity and our doctrine. As I have read the Gospels over the years, I have had an unsettling discovery. I always want to be Jesus in the story. Perfect insight. Redemptive response. Kingdom impact. However, in passages like the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18, I more resemble the Pharisee. While I don't like that, I am trying to learn what God is saying to me through this disease.

Let me risk alienating most of you early on. In looking back on our RCA history, the Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter, an RCA historian, observes that the RCA has been shaped by two major immigration movements. Those arriving in the New York area came to be a part of the new world and the new colonization. Those who arrived in Western Michigan were more interested in being set apart from those around them. I see many of us in the RCA falling into one of two camps that have roots in this history. Both are eager to cite Scripture and history to support their position—one I'll call the Doctrinal Pharisees. This group is characterized by leaders who can neatly package Christianity and give a clear answer to any question or issue that may arise. Every question or conflict can be answered with a response where our doctrine clearly distinguishes between right and wrong. Just cite a verse, a question and answer from the Heidelberg, or an article from the Belgic Confession, and you have it!

The second group I'll call the Polity Sadducees. This group is characterized by leaders who can find a section in our *Book of Church Order* that clearly charts the path we can or should take. As

long as we can cite chapter, part, article, section, and paragraph, we are justified. Whether this is used to find a way through or a way around, we are content as long as it is in our polity.

I don't think either group is malicious in their focus. Being aware of our roots can help us better understand our current reality and hopefully forge our future. If we can hold our convictions with humility, we will be more likely come to a deeper understanding and a better outcome.

In his book, *Building a Discipling Culture*, Mike Breen shares an observation that reflects our tendency. "Repentance [humility] is necessary if we are to grow as disciples, but it is not always easy. Facing our failings, our pain, and our fears is something we want to put off like going to the dentist or washing the cat. ... In a culture where our disciples look to our example and where our own pride often gets the best of us, we find ourselves running away from the sins and faults of our lives and toward the goal of fixing the problems in the lives of others." I'm not sharing this to try to identify the "guilty party." I want to find a kingdom solution!

Our current discussions and debates have led to the departure of friends and colleagues from our denomination. I have seen groups and individuals leaning away from the RCA even before [recommendation three was adopted by last year's synod](#). As some of these churches leave, it will have a profound impact on our future as well as theirs. Learning to bless each other and be at peace as we part is not an easy path. Vice president of the General Synod, Dwayne Jackson, and I have often reflected that no one is making an irrevocable decision. We hope that people will remember the door swings both ways.

I have also seen groups and individuals leaning toward the RCA and finding fresh ministry insights. I was introduced to Friends to Friends Community Church in Ridgewood, New Jersey, and their pastor, Joanne Van Sant. Friends to Friends is a unique ministry that welcomes families and individuals of all abilities. I was in Canajoharie and enjoyed the community third space being created in a coffee shop hosted by pastor Matt Draffon and the church. From Washington State to New Jersey, I saw food pantries engaging volunteers and serving communities. I saw churches reaching across languages and cultures by embracing bilingual ministry. We saw the church in Warwick, New York, with pastors Stacey Duensing Pearce and Rolfi Elivo Lopez embracing an Hispanic and English-speaking partnership. We heard pastor Daryl Redmond in Paterson, New Jersey, sharing the vision of the multicultural communities they are seeking to reach. I have listened to elders and classes wrestle with some of the big moral challenges we face. They are exploring avenues to develop a deeper pastoral approach along with a broader vocabulary to reach more effectively. Many of these groups are discovering mistakes that have been made, particularly over the past 40 years. One church framed their ministry plan and then engaged friends in the LGBTQIA+ community in reviewing it. More significant than that they have a relationship with the community is that they have created a safe space for people to talk about it even though they have arrived at a different conclusion.

All of us need to recognize that issues facing the RCA are complicated. Yes and no questions are tidy but seldom reflect life. Eugene Peterson wrote in *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*:

The Trinity is of particular use to Christians in times of confusion. Our age certainly qualifies on that score. With the theological, religious, and cultural traditions in disarray, the options offered by opportunistic teachers and religion marketers for dealing with God and/or the soul are beyond calculation. In desperate times we are tempted to go for the quick answer and the efficient solution. But the quick answer is almost always the over simplified answer, leaving out all the complexities of actual truth; the efficient solution is

almost always the depersonalized solution, for persons take a lot of time and endless trouble. In such conditions the Trinity is our most practical theological formulation for staying in touch with Christian basics: It keeps us in touch with the immense largesse of God and at the same time the immediate personalness of God. Meditating and praying in the name of the Trinity is essential for keeping our lives both large and personal during these times when the devil is using every strategy he can come up with to make us small and mean.

Our table times are an intentional effort to engage this slower work of the Trinity. We are building on the work of the Commission on Christian Action's [recommendation CA 21-9 about civil, compassionate, Christ-honoring conversations](#). This is not a new set of laws for us to follow but a challenge for us to live into. It is insufficient to practice these disciplines for a few days at synod. They need to reshape the way we relate and interact.

The church in general and the RCA in particular have too long been at the forefront of the "cancel culture," where those we disagree with are shunned, disparaged, defamed, and publicly shamed. Our human nature is to believe information that supports our biases, exaggerate facts that underscore our perspective, and spin our presentation to put ourselves in the best light. We launch toxic letter, email, and social media campaigns with a self-righteous sense of superior understanding and insights. The worst of these are regularly launched toward our general secretary. This is not a new practice. It assumes a quick resolution. It is a too deeply seated culture in the RCA that fosters tension and division. There are constructive but slower ways to engage disagreement and change. Using misinformation and public campaigns to ask for removal or termination over disagreements is an unacceptable practice for Jesus-followers. This is not something that will be easily purged from our midst. It will take an intentional and gracious accountability to one another where we not only refuse to become participants, but we also ask peers to refrain from or stop such behavior.

While our wounds and flaws threaten to define us, I also want us to consider what God is saying to us through the mission and ministry that flourishes across the RCA. The RCA has important work it is engaged in to celebrate.

Foremost, I want to thank the amazing staff we have serving us. I have found nothing but humility and sacrifice in my work with them. I would try to call out individuals, but that would be a disastrous exercise in omission! Please join me in thanking them here and wherever they are confined this week!

I'm excited to be in conversation with staff member Anna Radcliffe about the Next Gen work she is engaging. I invite you to get in line behind me to schedule her to come to your church, classis, or community to challenge you to consider how emerging leaders will shape the church today. On Whidbey Island, this will be an ecumenical gathering where we will have multiple partners, including Young Life, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Christian Missionary Alliance, and more. A cooperative endeavor that captures the ministry partner model needed as we move forward. However, our Call Waiting program was canceled at synod this year due to the limited number of youth corresponding delegates. What do we need to do to reach and include this generation?

On the second and fourth Tuesday of each month, we have a team leading a prayer gathering focused on dismantling racism in the RCA, in our churches, and in the communities we serve. This group presents a patient platform for us to gather and listen to the Spirit of God. It

encourages us to move away from a frenzy of activity in reaction to a single event, to what I first heard from professor Travis Shaw at Western Seminary: “sustained indignation.” If you are looking for a grace-filled opportunity to be stretched and engaged, please join us as we ask, “How is God calling us to dismantle racism and promote reconciliation?”

I am encouraged to hear the many ways our Women’s Transformation and Leadership is equipping women and men to work together. Congregations are engaging the Bible study “Building God’s Church Together.” We have a wonderful avenue of discovery and encouragement in the She Is Called retreat ministry identifying the gifts and calling of women in the RCA and helping them to ask, “What is God saying to me?” To the whole church I ask, how will we unleash all the gifts of all of God’s people?

We are seeing God stretch the boundaries of our denomination, geographically and linguistically. These are not easy or accidental changes. We need the work that Randy Weener, our Church Multiplication leader, is spearheading in church planting. Classes like Central Plains and Classis de las Naciones are engaging to reach people for Christ. Church planters are being gathered, equipped (taught Reformed theology and polity), and supported in their work. I sat in Managua, Nicaragua, with a pastor and his wife asking our Latin America Missions coordinator, Luis Ruiz, how at least five churches can join with the RCA.

From Nepal to Norway, from Chiapas to Chile, the Holy Spirit is opening doors and we are forging a new way of doing ministry in a world that is becoming a global village. Our Multiplication and Global Mission staff are working together to forge a new ministry paradigm. Still valuing our principles of local control and responsibility, we are discovering ways to form new and different mutually beneficial partnerships with churches globally. How is God at work and inviting us to join in?

Church planting is great, but I pray it can be a catalyst for church renewal. I know that statistically more new disciples are made in church plants than in established churches. My conviction is that this is sociological, not theological. By that, I mean that God wants *every* church focused on sharing Jesus in ways that makes new disciples who make new disciples. I was so encouraged as I listened to Heather Dood share her journey at Grace Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan. From her seat on the pastoral search committee, God called her to be the pastor of the church that she was on the search team for. Her story emboldens the whole classis as they recount the Easter after their revisioning and rebirthing where there were 12 professions of faiths and baptisms on that first Easter.

The journey toward discerning what God is saying to us has a built-in focus. In the Vision 2020 report, [recommendation one established a Restructuring Team](#) to report back not later than General Synod 2024. That feels like a long time to hold our breath for an uncertain future. I can’t encourage us to adopt any ideas from this team as there are none yet formed. However, I can lay before this body some words that I hope will echo until at least June of 2024. We have to come behind this team with prayers and patient support. It is an enormous task taken on by a group of people who are already carrying a heavy load. If we learned anything from the Vision 2020 Team, it is that this work is demanding and exhausting. When we hear ideas being considered, rather than slamming them as unreasonable or unacceptable, we need to engage in dialogue offering our assessment and feedback in constructive ways. In a post-synod 2021 debrief, I heard this team described as unconstitutional and illegal, and the challenge was offered for synod 2022 to overturn it. I do not find this attitude helpful if we want to see where

God wants the RCA to go. Our history tells us we need to do something different. Before you say to the team, "That is a bad idea," or, "That won't work," please ask, "What might God be saying to us?"

The "doom loop" is a concept Walter Brueggemann has overlayed with themes from the psalms. The doom loop's thesis is that an organization will make a bold, healthy, missional decision. When it does, the status quo, the institutional preservationists will raise a voice that can create enormous organizational tension. When this happens, the bold, healthy, missional leaders consider their action and are often inclined to revert back to the old calm. The problem is that every reversion goes further back and ultimately a desire to avoid anxiety leads to an organization's death. At some point, the organization has to lean into a time of change in order to discover the new thing God is calling it to. Brueggemann's analysis identifies themes, such as the stability in Psalm 23, the destabilization in Psalm 22, the new orientation or new hope in Psalm 96. Another familiar definition that comes to mind is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is that it sounds insane. But I would invite you to consider how many times in the past 40 years the RCA has had the opportunity to make a bold missional step and we have cowered in the anxiety of the organization, seeking institutional calm and creating institutional chaos.

My plea is that we will not lock the RCA into a doom loop by limiting the thinking and creativity of this group. I have no idea what they will come up with. I have my ideas of what they should come up with as well as you do. However, this task force has one shot. We are the ones who need to begin to prepare our hearts and the heart of our denomination for one of the most radical changes in our history. Who knows? One of the craziest ideas might be taking the RCA out to the desert in October to listen to the Holy Spirit!

I am convinced we need to let this team know that everything, absolutely everything, about the RCA organization and structure is on the table. A pastor in Chicago said it well, "Please don't try to tweak the RCA. We need a complete makeover." We cannot ask for an exemption for our pet emphasis. Every page and paragraph of the *Book of Church Order*, every organizational piece from Commissions to Councils needs to be assessed, evaluated, and be open to revision and change.

I'd like to delve a little more deeply into one example that can help us see the challenge. Our ecumenical relations are an emotional part of this assessment. I have been involved in interdenominational work since I was in high school. I have spoken in front of this body in support of our ongoing membership in the National Council of Churches. I have been a supporter of the Formula of Agreement. I believe the body of Christ working together can be a powerful witness to the presence of Jesus.

I am greatly encouraged to hear of organic and local expressions of ecumenical cooperation. I enjoyed listening to Stacey Duensing Pearce, our RCA representative at the Global Christian Forum, talk about the emphasis on gathering and listening she experiences as she represents the RCA in the forum. I hope you are enjoying and maybe even benefiting from the partnership the RCA has had with the Evangelical Covenant Church on the Vitality Pathway with its emphasis on healthy missional markers. Another global example from our missions team is our partnership with the biblical seminary in Medellin, Colombia. Through this ministry where RCA missionaries Andrew and Amy Fields serve, we engage a broad swath of Christianity in Latin America and even back into North America.

Our history has spent a great deal of time, money, and energy on formal ecumenical agreements. Has our focus on formal agreements contributed to us missing the more organic work of the Spirit? A disturbing image filled my mind as I participated in one of our ecumenical conversations. As I listened to one of our ecumenical partners speak of the ways we have been systematically taking down the bricks that have built a wall between us as denominations, I saw those same bricks being laid in a new wall that now divides us as a denomination. Can you feel the institutional anxiety that evaluation and change creates? What is God saying to us about ecumenical partnerships?

Nowhere are the benefits of our ecumenical relations greater than in our Global Mission work. A troubling element came when I sat with some of our global missionaries. As if the RCA isn't filled with enough uncertainty for us state-side, try to imagine what it is like to maintain your focus and spirit when you are dependent upon churches who are in flux with their relationship to the denomination. The heartbreaking words to me were our missionaries recounting hearing that churches are informing them they dropping or reducing support of RCA missions.

My second proposal to this body is: To urge all congregations that support RCA Global Mission through Partnership-in-Mission shares to maintain those partnerships, and, for congregations that have transferred or are transferring out of the RCA, to consider staying engaged with their RCA mission partners even when they are no longer formally connected to the RCA to sustain this kingdom witness.

[Synod 2021 clearly and resoundingly affirmed that Global Mission is one of the most significant elements in our history.](#) Our Global Mission director, JP Sundararajan, provided the sound bite, "General Synod just gave Global Mission a great big hug." Our current mission's staff and missionaries are among the best. With devotion and dedication, they serve sacrificially and selflessly. While I recognize we cannot force or enforce this recommendation, I do not believe any PIM share or other Global Mission partnership should be allowed to end without a significant call to consider the potential kingdom impact. I pray our domestic divisions will not negatively impact our global witness.

While on missions, I'd like us to set our sights on a future goal as well. The RCA has had a long and strong history in the area of disaster response. Always willing to accept offerings and send volunteers, the RCA rallies to the cause when disaster strikes. We have used our global missionary partners to maximize the impact of our gifts and services. We have responded early with needed supplies and money, and we have stayed late to rebuild when the crisis has passed from the popular spotlight. This is happening in real time in and around the Ukraine today. Our missionaries and partners on the border in Hungary and Romania are adapting daily to help the refugees fleeing the war.

In the past, the RCA has adjusted its budget to say these disaster response offerings are being received without any overhead being assessed. An evaluation of this practice revealed that some ministries were suffering to make this happen. The decision was made to re-institute an overhead percentage to cover the additional costs for staff time and travel. In an effort to minimize the impact of this necessity, the staff reassessed the need and squeezed the percentage to the lowest possible measure.

I am convinced on a much broader scale than just the RCA, poor stewardship is one of the most damning evidences of disciples lacking a vibrant understanding of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Near where I live is one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world: The Gates

Foundation. Its assets are rather staggering to the average person. (Its assets are \$49 billion.) However, studies show that if Christians in the United States were to tithe, in one year, the additional income that would be generated could create a foundation more than four times the size of the Gates Foundation. And every year after that...

To give the RCA an opportunity to exercise the spiritual discipline of stewardship through special gifts, to encourage us with Paul's encouragement in 2 Corinthians 8:7, to excel in the grace of giving, I am working with the general secretary and our Advancement staff and Global Mission team to develop ideas and plans for raising funds for a future endowment fund for disaster response. The income from this endowment would be used to fund administrative and other overhead costs for disaster response efforts so that 100 percent of donated funds go directly to those in the field responding to the disaster. We felt this would not be the time for a formal proposal, which carries with it the implications of a mandate that must be fulfilled in a specific way. However, the possibilities are worth exploring.

The endowment can be set up in such a way that should RCA disaster relief ever cease to be, this endowment would have a restricted distribution that can only be used for disaster relief. The past year gives us a glimpse of what this could mean. We have received disaster relief gifts in the past 12 months for the Haitian earthquake, India COVID relief, Afghanistan refugee assistance, a building destroyed in a storm in Brazil, and the war in Ukraine. If the overhead were funded by an endowment, that would mean that just this year alone, an additional \$83,000 would have gone directly to relief efforts. For the war relief effort, a special gift for administration was received so that 100 percent of all money received for this crisis is being used for disaster relief. This means that, to-date, an additional \$26,000 have gone to disaster relief that would have otherwise been needed for response logistics. This endowment would allow us to do this in perpetuity, adding another shining facet to our Global Mission and witness.

Remember our quilt? Yes, Anna is my mother! She is making the quilt to remind us that thousands of individuals make up the RCA. It reminds us that God is still at work in our midst. May the Spirit unite us into a larger body as we explore the question, "What is God saying to us?" I invite you to ask yourself the question: What did you hear this afternoon that unsettles you? What did you hear that encourages you? What gives you hope? What is God saying to you? What is God's unfinished work in your life?

Thank you, and God bless you.