

# **2023 General Synod Workbook**

**Reformed Church in America**

**Central College  
Pella, Iowa**

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## Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum

*This statement was written and approved for inclusion in the General Synod workbook by the General Synod Council at its March 2017 meeting.*

In order to have a fruitful, Spirit-led atmosphere on the floor of General Synod, it is important that all delegates observe some simple rules of decorum. These rules are not meant to stifle conversation or the expressing of opinions, but simply to ensure that all delegates are able to focus on the business before the synod. People should act in a courteous and considerate manner at all times and should be respectful of others, regardless of their opinions.

1. Come to General Synod prepared: read all of the reports in the workbook. Come to synod ready to ask questions for clarification and to speak to the reports through your prayerful discernment of the topics at hand.
2. When seated at tables with fellow delegates, be careful not to engage in distracting behavior. Silence your computers, tablets, and mobile phones. Take necessary phone calls away from the synod floor. In short, be courteous to those seated around you. Be aware that your conduct may affect the people around you.
3. When the time comes for debate on an item of business, you may desire to speak to that business. Stand and wait to be recognized by microphone number. When the chair recognizes you, begin by stating your name and the assembly from which you are a delegate. Then address your comments directly to the chair.
4. When it comes time to vote, you might be filled with joy or disappointment at the results. Remember that there are other delegates who feel differently than you do, and extend them the courtesy of not outwardly expressing your feelings. Maintain a respectful atmosphere, taking into account individual circumstances or opinions. This will show proper respect for the decision the synod has made.

Following these simple rules of decorum is each delegate's responsibility. There are no "police" to monitor your behavior. It is a matter of honor. However, those who are found to be in violation of these rules of decorum are subject to discipline at the discretion of the chair of the meeting.

## Guidelines for Civil Discourse

*The following guidelines were developed by the General Synod's Commission on Christian Action and are based on the fruit of the Spirit as revealed in Galatians 5:22-23. The 2021 General Synod commended these guidelines for use in the RCA, directed that they be included in the delegate workbook for General Synod each year, and encouraged their use in classes and congregations of the RCA (MGS 2021, CA 21-9, p. 210).*

1. Show **love** to your fellow delegates. How are your words or silence affecting those around you? Are you creating an environment that is hospitable and allows for differing opinions and the work of the Holy Spirit? Are your words and actions rooted in love and showing respect for those around you?
2. Seek **joy** in the work of this body. We have been called together to do the work of Christ's church. We should look for opportunities to rejoice in the good work God has done in and through the Reformed Church in America.
3. Act to create **peace** and highlight areas of shared interest. One of the mottos on the RCA crest is "Eendracht Maakt Macht," which translates to "in unity/concord there is strength." The church is stronger when we can celebrate the many things we have in common.
4. Practice **patience** and follow proper Robert's Rules of Order. Wait for the moderator or president to call on you before speaking. This allows your fellow delegates time to process what each speaker preceding you has said.
5. Our words and actions should reflect **kindness**. Demeaning and belittling comments, including eye rolls, exasperated sighs, or rude remarks are always inappropriate and should be unwelcome on the floor of General Synod and in any space, let alone the church.
6. Assume **good intent** from the others in this body. Seek to understand the intention and content of speakers who are expressing ideas you disagree with. What message are they trying to convey? How might their experiences, which differ from yours, shape their thinking on this? Can we find empathy for their opinion even if we don't agree with it?
7. Show **faithfulness** to God, to one another, and to the church you've been called to serve. Have you brought a personal agenda into this meeting, or have you set it aside to hear the Holy Spirit, to learn with and from your fellow delegates, and to serve the Reformed Church in America faithfully?
8. Be **gentle** with yourself in times of misunderstanding or confusion. Ask clarifying questions; if you're unsure of something happening or being said, someone else will be too.
9. Practice **self-control**. Refrain from speaking over one another or engaging in outbursts of emotion. If side-conversations are necessary, respect those at your table and around you and take the conversation off the plenary floor.

## **Roll Call of General Synod**

*This list represents voting delegates submitted and confirmed by their sending bodies as of May 1, 2023. The number of voting delegates to which each classis is entitled is computed according to Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 (2022 edition, p. 67) and Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1b (2022 edition, p. 105). Additions, drops, or changes may still occur. A report listing updates to this delegate roster will be issued shortly before the General Synod meets in June.*

### **REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY**

Becky Town

#### **Classis of Albany**

*Ministers*

Bruce Cornwell

Greg Town

*Elders*

Joan Adriance

Tina Marie Bottini

#### **Classis of Columbia-Greene**

*Minister*

Charles Wiessner

*Elders*

Savitri Devi Mark

Bret Smith

#### **Classis of Montgomery**

*Ministers*

Brian Engel

Betsy Westman

*Elders*

Randy Karcher

Jackie Leve

#### **Classis of Rochester**

*Ministers*

Tom Daubenspeck

Eric Titus

*Elders*

Amy Burdett

Robert Knapp

**Classis of Schenectady***Ministers*

Jacob Marvel  
Lisa Vander Wal

*Elder*

Angie Stewart

**Classis of Schoharie***Ministers*

Rich Dykstra  
Bob Hoffman

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA**

Stephen Shaffer

**Classis of Canadian Prairies***Ministers*

Al Plat  
Doug Smith

*Elder*

Denis Mugabo

**Classis of Ontario***Ministers*

Jose Garreton  
Meine Veldman

*Elders*

Thais Lima  
Gildo Vieira

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST**

Susan Davis

**Classis of the Americas***Ministers*

Larry Barber  
Orlando Dubois Marrero

*Elders*

Claudia Flores  
Josefina Flores

**Classis of California***Ministers*

Rick DeBruyne

Ron Spence

*Elders*

Tony Davis

Eric Moreno

**Classis of Cascades***Minister*

John Alfred

*Elder*

Dan Rientjes

**Classis of Central California***Ministers*

Stephen Norman

Drew Yamamoto

**Classis of Rocky Mountain***Minister*

Brad Kautz

*Elders*

Nancy Jensen

Ina Montoya

**Classis of the Southwest***Ministers*

Corinne Ellis

Ted Vande Berg

*Elders*

Audrey Norberg

Joaquin Salazar

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES**

Michelle Chahine

**Classis of Great Lakes City***Ministers*

Dan Beyer

Mike Lamson

Dan Toot



Dean Van Farowe

*Elders*

Dave Alverson

Paul Brinks

Marty Bruins

Jeff Frick

**Classis of Holland**

*Ministers*

Ryan Boes

Felix Theonugraha

Travis West

*Elders*

Jennifer Prince

Bill VanAuken

Hugo Vasquez

**Classis of Muskegon**

*Ministers*

Jim Beezley

Dave Celeskey

*Elders*

Shaundra Fairfield

Joe Stevens

**Classis of North Grand Rapids**

*Ministers*

Steve Pierce

Rebecca Riekse

*Elders*

Brian Andrew

John Dykema

**Classis of Northern Michigan**

*Ministers*

Chris Maki

Cobus Manders

*Elders*

Rick Shooks

James Van Sickle

**Classis of Southwest Michigan***Ministers*

Brandon Beebe  
Suzanne Hart

*Elders*

Jessica Loper  
Kathy Skippers

**Classis of Zeeland***Ministers*

Miriam Barnes  
Jamie DeVries  
Steve DeVries

*Elders*

Kurt Gernaat  
Gerry Klaver  
Lloyd Redder

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND**

Mark DeKock

**Classis of Central Iowa***Ministers*

Mark Jicinsky  
Tom VandeBerg  
Aaron Vis  
Suzanne Vogel

*Elders*

Jason Taylor  
David Timmer  
Jan Van Wyk  
Lori Witt

**Classis of Central Plains***Ministers*

Ted Godwin-Stremmer  
Bob Holtrop

*Elders*

Linda Kroese  
Julia Serrano

**Classis of East Sioux***Ministers*

Kristin Brouwer  
Brian Keepers  
Troy Van Beek

*Elders*

Anita Cirulis  
Andrea Theis  
Kim Van Es

**Classis of Minnesota***Ministers*

Josh Johnson  
Joel Vander Wal

*Elders*

Elaine Noel  
Heather Stoesz

**Classis of Pleasant Prairie***Minister*

Susan Klimstra

*Elders*

Dawson Ackerman  
Sue Shike

**Classis of West Sioux***Ministers*

Van Rathbun  
Deb Rensink  
Steve VanWyhe

*Elders*

Randy Bos  
Dwayne Postma

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA**

Bill Reecher

**Classis of Chicago***Ministers*

Jeb Jebamony  
Steve Young

**Classis of Illiana***Ministers*

Tom Archer  
Randy Knoll

*Elders*

Robert Fowler  
Steve Moore

**Classis de las Naciones***Ministers*

Daniel Davila  
Albert James

*Elders*

Yolanda Aviles  
Ricky Rodriguez

**Classis of Wisconsin***Ministers*

Paige Pugh  
Chad Strabbing

*Elders*

Steve Floyd  
Joel Harmelink

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS**

Debbie Pierce

**Classis of Delaware-Raritan***Ministers*

Scarlet Gorton  
Paul Janssen

*Elders*

Christine Fung  
Linda Santa Lucia

**Classis of the City***Minister*

Beth Carroll

**Classis of Greater Palisades***Ministers*

Richard Bierwas

Gregory Dunlap

*Elders*

Lisa Bontemps

Efrain Evertz

**Classis of New Brunswick**

*Ministers*

Susan Mulholland

Ramon Orostizaga

*Elders*

Lynne Garner

Bill Seaman

**Classis of Passaic Valley**

*Ministers*

Tom Henion

Kim Pavlovich

*Elders*

Eric Farrar

Patricia Gordon

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK**

Maudelin Willock

**Classis of Brooklyn**

*Ministers*

De Lafayette Awkward

Carlos Rivera

*Elders*

Joel Agron

DonMarie Banfield-Jones

**Classis of Mid-Hudson**

*Ministers*

Sara Appleyard-Pekich

Daniel Meeter

*Elders*

Julie Legg

James Walrath

**Classis of Nassau-Suffolk***Ministers*

Susan Converse  
Joshua Scheid

*Elders*

Chong Tae Kim  
Dave Philips

**Classis of New York***Ministers*

Sharon Atkins  
Karen Jackson Pershing

*Elders*

Marcie Doll  
Dolores Reig

**Classis of Orange***Ministers*

Rolfi Elivo Lopez  
Irving Rivera

*Elders*

Elba Arias-Lopez  
Pete Newman

**Classis of Rockland-Westchester***Ministers*

Fred Arzola  
John VandenOever

*Elders*

Wayne Adams  
Carol Schelin

**GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSORS**

Carol Bechtel  
Micah McCreary

**GENERAL SYNOD PRESIDENT**

Dwayne Jackson

**GENERAL SYNOD VICE PRESIDENT**

Judy Nelson

## **CORRESPONDING DELEGATES**

### **GENERAL SECRETARY**

Eddy Alemán

### **COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE (GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL)**

Pedro Agudelo  
Phil Assink  
Carole Barber  
Cal Brouwer  
Michelle Chahine  
Lin Cline  
Susan Davis  
Bruce Deckinga  
Brian Engel  
Randy Karcher  
Brad Kautz  
Yong Bok Kim  
Mike Meyer-Veen  
Sheila Moses  
Eric Nichols  
Al Plat  
Neale Roller  
Jidong Shan  
Kim Van Es  
Leigh Van Kempen  
Harris Van Oort  
Patti Varga  
Maudelin Willock

### **NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

#### **Board of Trustees**

Abby Norton-Levering

#### **President**

Micah McCreary

#### **Students**

Elvis Alvarez

Patricia Johnson

### **WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

#### **Board of Trustees**

Steve Spoelhof

#### **President**

Felix Theonugraha

**Students**

Israel Camacho

Vanessa Funk

**MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY****Board of Trustees**

Susan Converse

**CHURCH GROWTH FUND BOARD**

Michael Bos

**BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES**

Doug Struyk

**NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE****President**

Gregory Christy

**Student**

Ashlyn Zomermaand

**GENERAL SYNOD COMMISSIONS****Commission on Christian Action**

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead

**Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education**

Patricia Simmons

**Commission on Christian Unity**

Kitt Jackson

**Commission on Christian Worship**

Irving Rivera

**Commission on Church Order**

Joshua Scheid

**Commission on Judicial Business**

Kendra Van Houten

**Commission on History**

Daniel Meeter

**Commission on Nominations**

Patricia Sealy

**Commission on Race and Ethnicity**

Riana Shaw Robinson

**Commission on Theology**

Liz Estes

**Commission for Women**

Deb Rensink



## **ADDITIONAL COMMISSION DELEGATES**

### **Commission on Race and Ethnicity**

Kelvin Kong

### **Commission for Women**

Martha Draayer

## **REGIONAL SYNOD EXECUTIVES**

### **Regional Synod of Albany**

Abby Norton-Levering

### **Regional Synod of Canada**

John Kapteyn

### **Regional Synod of Mid-America**

Chad Schuitema

### **Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic**

Stephen Eckert

### **Regional Synod of New York**

Micheal Edwards

## **REGIONAL SYNOD WOMEN**

### **Regional Synod of Canada**

Flo Dekker

Jeannette Plat

### **Regional Synod of the Far West**

Dianne Chapman

### **Regional Synod of the Heartland**

Patti Gilmer-Van Dorp

LaCosta VanDyk

### **Regional Synod of the Great Lakes**

Nancy Boote

Tierra Marshall

### **Regional Synod of Mid-America**

Barbara Grevengeod

Jill Harmelink

### **Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic**

Ancela Fransisca Rumokoy

Jodie Wu

### **Regional Synod of New York**

Susanah Wade

Gerri Yoshida

## **REGIONAL SYNOD YOUTH**

### **Regional Synod of Canada**

Mike Griffioen

**Regional Synod of New York**

Maryella Post

**ECUMENICAL DELEGATES****Christian Reformed Church in North America**

Thomas Wolthuis

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

Carmelo Santos

**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

Y. Dianna Wright

**United Church of Christ**

Mark Pettis

**World Communion of Reformed Churches**

Lisa Vander Wal

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE****General Synod Chaplain**

David Blauw

**Parliamentarian**

Russell Paarlberg

**Seminarian Seminar Leader**

Tim TenClay

**Emerging Leaders Seminar Leader (Youth and College Delegates)**

Ruth Langkamp

**SEMINARIAN SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS**

Kelle Alavi

Elvis Alvarez

Israel Camacho

Tyrone Cervantes-Martinez

Vanessa Funk

Patti Gilmer-Van Dorp

Patricia Johnson

Das Rendla

Jaimi Vander Berg

Heather Ver Meer

## Permanent Commissions, Boards, and Agencies

### 2022–2023

Names listed below were accurate as of March 15, 2023. Current lists of individuals who are serving as members of these bodies are found online in the General Synod Directory at [my.rca.org](http://my.rca.org).

An asterisk (\*) indicates serving a final term.

#### GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

Pedro Agudelo	2023* CHM
Philip Assink, <i>moderator</i>	2023* PP, GS
Carole Barber	2023
Calvin Brouwer	2026*
Michelle Chahine	2024*
Linda Cline	2025*
Devonna Cousins	2024*
Susan Davis	2025*
Bruce Deckinga	2023* RSGL
Brian Engel	2025*
Dwayne Jackson	2023* P, GS
Randy Karcher	2026* RSA
Bradley Kautz	2026* RSFW
Yong Bok Kim	2026* CPAAM
Michael Meyer-Veen	2025*
Sheila Moses	2024* RSNY
Judith Nelson, <i>second vice moderator</i>	2023* VP, GS
Eric Nichols	2025* RSMAt
Albert Plat	2023* RSC
Neale Roller	2025* RSMAM
Jidong Shan	2023
Kjersten Sullivan	2025* Ecumenical - ELCA
Kimberly Van Es, <i>first vice moderator</i>	2024*
Leigh Van Kempen	2023*
Harris Van Oort	2024* RSH
Patricia Varga	2024*
Maudelin Willock	2026*
Vacancy	2026* AABC
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )	<i>Ex officio</i>

#### RACIAL/ETHNIC COUNCILS

##### African American Black Council Executive Committee

Sharon Atkins, *chairperson*  
Earl James, *vice chairperson*

Regina Reid  
Maudelin Willock

### **Council for Hispanic Ministries Executive Committee**

Gustavo Azar  
Fredy Gutierrez, *president*  
Fabio Sosa  
Martín Torrealba  
Maria Vera

### **Council for Native American Indigenous Ministries Executive Committee**

*[formal reinstatement by GSC not complete as of the date this list was created;  
council bylaws are in development]*

### **Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries Executive Committee**

Jae Hyun Ahn, *vice president*  
Peihuang Chen  
Felix Fan  
Kelvin Hiu Kong  
Leonardy Poluan  
Ancela Fransisca Rumokoy, *president*  
Kyunghoon Suh, *past president, ex officio*  
Jui-Lin Ou Yang

## **COMMISSIONS**

### **Christian Action**

Anne Elzinga	2023	
Leah Ennis	2024	
Mark Ennis, <i>secretary</i>	2023*	
Rodney Haveman	2025	
Edward Lungu	2025*	
Doug Ogden	2023	Ecumenical observer - ELCA
Bradley Prince	2023	
Dianna Smith	2024	
Cameron Van Kooten Laughead, <i>moderator</i>	2024*	
Mashona Walston	2025	
Vacancy	2023	Ecumenical observer - Reformed

### **Christian Discipleship and Education**

Ellen Balk	2025
Rebecca Koerselman	2023

Patricia Simmons	2025
Mark Swart, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Pamela Van Beek, <i>secretary</i>	2023*
Bradley VanderWaal	2024
Jason White	2024

### **Christian Unity**

Dale Buettner	2024	
Nathan Busker	2024	
Carlos Corro, <i>moderator</i>	2024*	
Stacey Duensing Pearce	2025*	
Anthony Elenbaas	2023	Ecumenical (CRCNA)
Carol (Kitt) Jackson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023	
Jeffery Lampen, <i>secretary</i>	2023	
Kim Pavlovich	2025	
S. Mark Veldt	2023*	
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )		<i>Ex officio</i>

### **Christian Worship**

Geimy Alvarado	2023*
Kent Frens	2024*
Dirk Gieser, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
Cory Grimm	2025
Ronald Rienstra	2025
Irving Rivera	2025
Troy Van Beek	2024*

### **Church Order**

Brian Andrew	2024
Christopher Jacobsen	2024
Howard Moths	2025*
Joshua Scheid, <i>moderator; secretary</i>	2023*
Jennifer Van Regenmorter	2023*

### **History**

Corstian Devos	2023
Katlyn DeVries	2025
Daniel Meeter	2024
Steven Pierce, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
Douglas Shepler	2024
David Zomer	2025*

## Judicial Business

Stephen Breen, <i>secretary</i>	2023* RSH
Brion Brooks	2024 RSMAM
Brianne Marriott	2025 RSFW
Erin Parker, <i>vice moderator</i>	2022* RSA
Edward Thornton	2024 RSMAt
Kendra Van Houten, <i>moderator</i>	2023* RSNY
Carl Visser	2024 RSC
Susan Vogel-Vanderson	2025 RSGL

## Nominations

Philip Assink	2023* PP, GS
Tricia Berry	2024 RSH
Ock Kee Byun	2024* CPAAM
Lawrence Dove	2023 AABC
Rainey Enjady	2023* Native Americans/First Nations
Linda Gold	2025 RSA
Eric Moreno	2025 RSFW
Carol Mutch, <i>moderator</i>	2023* RSMAt
Judith Nelson, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023* RSGL
Dean Schramm, <i>secretary</i>	2023* RSMAM
Patricia Sealy	2024 RSNY
Jael Serrano-Altamirano	2025* CHM
Vacancy	2024 RSC

## Race and Ethnicity

June Denny	2023*
Rolfi Elivo Lopez	2024 CHM
Earl James, <i>secretary</i>	2025
Stephen Kim	2025* CPAAM
Young Na	2023
Nathan Pyle, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023
Riana Shaw Robinson	2024
Kelvin Spooner, <i>moderator</i>	2024* AABC

## Theology

John Alfred	2024
Steven Bouma-Prediger	2023
James Brumm	2025
William (Ruggles) Church	2025
Elizabeth Estes, <i>moderator</i>	2023*
John Lunn	2023*
Micah McCreary	2024
William Russell	2023* Ecumenical observer - ELCA

Matthew van Maastricht	2025
Robert Whittington	2024
Vacancy	2025
Vacancy	2023* Ecumenical observer - Reformed body

## Women

Philip Bakelaar, <i>secretary</i>	2024
Kristin Brouwer	2023
Florence Dekker	2023
Cedric Nelms	2025
Claudette Reid	2024
Debra Rensink, <i>moderator</i>	2025*
Barbara Spooner	2024
Mark Waterstone	2025

## AGENCIES

### Board of Benefits Services

Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )	
Philip Assink	2023* GSC designee
Lynn Barnes	2025*
Leanne Bough	2025
Ralph Condis	2024*
Timothy Cumings	2023
Jack Doorlag, <i>president</i>	2023*
Lucio Flavio Rodrigues	2025
Judith Nelson	2023 VP, GS
Douglas Struyk, <i>vice president</i>	2023*

### Church Growth Fund, Inc. Board

Elba Arias-Lopez	2025
Michael Bos, <i>president</i>	2023
Joel Bouwens	2025
Nicole Kouba, <i>secretary</i>	2023*
Anne Putnam	2024
Ronald Rukambe	2025*
George Schneiderman, <i>vice president</i>	2023*
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )	<i>Ex officio</i>

### Ministerial Formation Certification Agency Board of Trustees

Gerald Baraza	2025
Scott Christiansen, <i>moderator</i>	2024*
Norma Coleman-James, <i>secretary</i>	2025*
Susan Converse	2023

Devonna Cousins	2024* GSC representative
San-Yi Shirley Lin	2024*
Frances Nelson	2023*
Cathleen Wolff, <i>vice moderator</i>	2025*
Vacancy	2025
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )	<i>Ex officio</i>

### **Pastoral Formation Oversight Board**

Israel Camacho	2024
Norma Coleman-James	2025* MFCA
Gregory Dunlap	2023 NBTS
Victor Folkert	2025
Daniel Gillett, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023
Kristen Johnson	2024* WTS
Micah McCreary	NBTS president
Carol Mutch, <i>secretary</i>	2025* CPAT
Chad Pierce, <i>moderator</i>	2023
David Schutt	MFCA interim executive director
Cora Taitt	2024*
Felix Theonugraha	WTS president
Kimberly Van Es	2024* GSC designee
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )	<i>Ex officio</i>

### **ECUMENICAL DELEGATIONS**

#### **Christian Churches Together**

S. Mark Veldt

#### **Christian Reformed Church (Reformed Church Collaborative)**

Eddy Alemán  
Sung Kim  
Annalise Radcliffe  
John Paul (JP) Sundararajan  
Christina Tazelaar  
Chad Farrand

#### **Creation Justice Ministries**

Daniel Carlson (board member)

#### **Churches for Middle East Peace**

Laura Osborne (board member)



## **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

Dale Buettner (Church Council)

## **Formula of Agreement**

Eddy Alemán

## **Global Christian Forum**

Stacey Duensing Pearce (young adult consultant)

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (executive committee)

## **National Council of Churches**

Eddy Alemán (governing board)

Jeffery Lampen (Christian Education Table)

Carol (Kitt) Jackson (Faith and Order Table)

Laura Osborne (Interreligious Table)

## **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

Fredy Gutierrez (Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations)

## **Reformed-Catholic Dialogue**

Eddy Alemán

Monica Pierce

Laura Osborne

## **World Communion of Reformed Churches**

Lisa Vander Wal (executive committee)

## **World Council of Churches**

Eddy Alemán

Stacey Duensing Pearce (Central Committee and young adult consultant)

## **INSTITUTIONS**

### **New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees**

Valerie Arthur	2025*
David Choi, <i>vice moderator</i>	2023*
Brittnee Crawford	2023* RSNY
Samuel Cruz	2023
Henry Davis III	2025

Gregory Dunlap	2024*	RSMAt
Cambria Kaltwasser	2023	
John Kapteyn	2023*	RSC
Denise Kingdom Grier, <i>treasurer</i>	2024*	RSGL
Therese McCarty	2025*	
Felicia McGinty	2023	
Steven Miller	2025	
Michael Morris, <i>secretary</i>	2024	RSFW
Abigail Norton-Levering	2025*	RSA
Russell Paarlberg, <i>moderator</i>	2023*	RSMAm
Zachary Pearce	2025	
Wilfredo Rodriguez	2025*	
Ming-Chen (Grace) Rohrer	2024	
Ronald Slaughter	2023*	
Elizabeth Testa	2024	
Anthony Vis	2023	RSH
Dean Zimmerman	2023*	
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )		<i>Ex officio</i>

### **Western Theological Seminary Board of Trustees**

*While General Synod voted in 2022 to approve a change in the relationship between itself and Western Theological Seminary (WTS), the relationship change must also be reviewed by the seminary's accreditor (Association of Theological Schools). That process is expected to complete in April 2023, but as of the date of this report (March 15, 2023) WTS had not filed the changes to its articles in Michigan.*

Kate Bolt	2025	
Percy Gilbert	2023	
Andrea Godwin-Stremmler	2024*	
Matthew Haworth	2024	
Alden Highstreet	2024	RSFW
Timothy Hillegonds	2024	
David Izenbart	2023	RSMAm
Fred Johnson	2023	
Rebecca Renner Anderson, <i>treasurer</i>	2025	RSGL
Beth Snyder	2023	
Steve Spoelhof, <i>chairperson</i>	2024	
Cora Taitt, <i>vice chairperson</i>	2024*	RSNY
Tite Tiéno, <i>secretary</i>	2023	
Carol Van Andel	2025*	
Lisa Vander Wal	2025*	RSA
Evan Vermeer	2024	RSH
Emilie Wierda	2023	
Eddy Alemán ( <i>general secretary</i> )		<i>Ex officio</i>

## **COLLEGES**

### **Central College Trustees Affirmed by the General Synod**

Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell	2023
Steve Sikkink	2023
Judith Vogel	2023

### **Hope College Trustees Elected by the General Synod**

Eddy Alemán	2023
Nathan Hart	2025*
Michael Pitsenberger	2023
Matthew Wixson	2023
Vacancy	2023

### **Northwestern College Trustees Approved by the General Synod**

Eddy Alemán	2026*
Michael Hardeman	2025*
Wayne Van Heuvelen	2025*

## Orientation

### CHURCH ORDER PRIMER

*The Commission on Church Order has written and maintains the following brief primer on the church's order for delegates to General Synod in the hope that it will aid delegates in doing their work. For a more detailed orientation, the commission recommends the Preamble of the Book of Church Order (BCO) and BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, "Responsibilities of the General Synod."*

*Foundations.* The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. The RCA has a Constitution that orders its life and theology in light of God's Word. The Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, Belhar Confession), the Liturgy, and the Government and Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (found in the *Book of Church Order*). The church's order therefore is much deeper than merely a set of rules for running or organizing the church as an institution. The church's order is a set of covenants by which we agree to live out the theological beliefs we confess.

*Nature and Work of Church Assemblies.* Assemblies of the church, of which General Synod is one (others are consistory, classis, and regional synod), are not the same thing as *the church*. Assemblies of the church are the church's governing bodies. They are gatherings of the offices of the church (deacon, elder, and minister) for the purposes of governing the life and activity of the church and administering its affairs.

*Scope and Limits of Assemblies' Responsibilities.* Broader assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the more local assemblies—they do what the more local assemblies cannot do on their own—without infringing upon the responsibilities of the more local assemblies. The RCA is not a hierarchical church. Its assemblies are not arranged one over the other. Each assembly is given responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, and all functions not specifically delegated to other assemblies are given to the classis.

*Office-Bearers.* Church assemblies are different than legislatures of representative democracy. Because office-bearers receive their authority from Christ and are responsible first of all to the Lord of the church, they primarily represent Christ to the church and world. They can be said to represent their churches, consistories, classes, and synods in, at most, a secondary sense. Delegates' votes and consciences cannot be bound by their sending bodies.

*Nature and Work of General Synod.* The General Synod is the geographically broadest and most diverse assembly of the church. Its responsibilities are those that the more local assemblies cannot do on their own. General Synod's responsibilities primarily pertain to the General Synod itself, including its various agencies, boards, institutions, and commissions. It is also the highest court of appeal in the church and the assembly charged with offering to the church changes to the Constitution.

*Scope and Limits of General Synod's Responsibilities.* Because assemblies are not the same as the church, it is seen that General Synod speaks and acts above all for itself, the General Synod, *within* the church and world. When General Synod determines policy, the synod instructs itself and its agents in its work and offers its wisdom to the world, to other churches, and to the other assemblies. General Synod can direct its boards, commissions, officers, and agencies. Because General Synod is the broadest assembly in the church, it alone has the authority to speak on behalf of the entire church. It speaks for the whole church frequently in areas like ecumenical relations and vis-à-vis the state and society. It can also encourage and offer wisdom to other assemblies and the local churches, such as it does through papers and resolutions. As with the other assemblies, the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. The Scriptures are understood as summarized in the Standards, which stand as the teaching of the church. As a part of the church's Constitution, the teaching of the church can only be determined by the entire church through the procedures for amending the Constitution as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*. General Synod is charged with interpreting the Scriptures and the Standards in those instances outlined in its responsibilities in the *Book of Church Order*, such as in judicial deliberation and in its relationship to the seminaries.

## PARLIAMENTARY AND PROCEDURAL PRIMER

*Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 of the Book of Church Order states, "The rules of order of the General Synod shall be those set forth in the most recent edition of Robert's Rules of Order except as is otherwise specified in the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod" (2022 edition, p. 127). Following is an explanation of some of the procedures and rules that the synod adheres to as it conducts its business.*

1. Parliamentary procedure is intended to provide for an orderly transaction of business.
2. **The General Synod Workbook**
  - a. Contains reports of the various commissions, agencies, boards, and institutions of General Synod.
  - b. Contains reports of those agencies, boards, councils, and task forces that report to the General Synod Council (GSC).
  - c. Contains overtures from classes and regional synods.
  - d. Contains recommendations for the synod to act on.
  - e. New business is referred to the Committee of Reference before it comes to the floor.
3. **On the podium** you will find
  - a. The **president** of General Synod. He or she is the presiding officer of the meeting. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.

- b. The **general secretary**, who is the stated clerk of General Synod and is available to the president for any assistance needed. He or she is also given the privilege of presenting a report to the synod.
- c. The **parliamentarian**, who offers the president advice on order, procedure, and house rules.
- d. The **recording secretary**, who records the acts and proceedings of the synod.

#### 4. Terms

- a. **Regular (or voting) delegates** fully participate in General Synod, have privilege of the floor, vote, make motions, and are elected to office.
- b. **Corresponding delegates** have privilege of the floor but cannot vote, make motions, or be elected to office.
- c. A **recommendation** is a call for the General Synod to act. Recommendations from General Synod committees, commissions, and agencies are motions that do not need to be seconded.
- d. An **overture** is a request that comes from a classis or regional synod. It is not a recommendation but will be addressed by a special advisory group.
- e. The General Synod has **advisory committees** to which delegates are assigned. Special advisory committees are assigned certain technically related recommendations in the workbook and the overtures. The special advisory committees may form recommendations of their own in response to the business assigned to them. They also form recommendations based on the overtures.
- f. A **motion to amend** can take the form of striking out words or phrases of the text of the motion being considered, inserting new words or phrases into the text of the motion being considered, or a combination of both striking out and inserting words or phrases. The passage of a motion to amend only puts the amended motion before the house; it does not approve the contents of the newly amended motion.
- g. A **motion to substitute** (a form of amendment that involves striking out and inserting a full paragraph, multiple paragraphs, or the entirety of the text of a motion with new text) must be germane to the question being amended. The passage of a motion to substitute only puts the substitute before the house; it does not approve the contents of the motion to substitute. No independent, new questions may be introduced through a motion to substitute.
- h. **Calling the question** or **moving to cease debate** or **moving the previous question** is a motion to end debate. It is therefore a suspension of the right to free and full debate. Because debate is a basic right of an assembly, it should be curtailed only when the group's welfare is furthered, and approval of such a motion requires a two-thirds vote of the assembly.
- i. When there is a question about the validity of something within the order, a **point of order** is raised. The president will decide whether or not order is being maintained.

5. **Procedure for addressing the synod**

- a. Delegates seeking the floor should approach a microphone. After being recognized by the presiding officer, delegates should give their name and the name of their sending body.
- b. Delegates desiring action by the General Synod should offer motions. General Synod does not act on suggestions.
- c. Motions must be written prior to coming to the microphone and must be given *in writing* (sent via email to [motions@rca.org](mailto:motions@rca.org)) to the staff at the back table. If an amendment to the motion currently before the assembly is being proposed, the written amendment must indicate what changes are being proposed (striking out deletions and underlining additions), not simply how the delegate proposing the amendment would like the motion to read if it is amended.
- d. Delegates may not speak more than twice to a single motion unless given special permission by the General Synod.
- e. Delegates address the presiding officer, not the assembly.

## **FUNCTION OF GENERAL SYNOD COMMITTEES**

*The annual meeting of the General Synod carries out much of its work on the floor of General Synod during plenary, but it also does work through committees of various kinds. This explanation highlights ways the work is accomplished.*

### **Committee of Reference**

The Committee of Reference is made up of the members of the General Synod Council—the body elected by the synod to serve throughout the year to oversee the implementation of the mission and ministry of the RCA, to serve as the synod’s executive committee, and to serve as its board of trustees. The Committee of Reference receives proposed new business that comes before the synod, recommends to the synod whether or not to accept it as new business, and, if accepted, determines its placement on the agenda.

The Committee of Reference also receives recommendations for the establishment of special committees and task forces. It evaluates the request, determines whether the work falls within the responsibility of an existing commission, committee, or agency, and makes a recommendation to the synod to either establish the proposed committee—including clear reasons for doing so, its manner of appointment, length of service, source of funding, and means of reporting to the General Synod—or to assign the work to an existing entity. If funding is not available in existing budgets, it is the responsibility of the Committee of Reference to inform the delegates and to propose an adjustment in the assessment budget to secure funds for the new task.

The agenda of the General Synod is set by the General Synod Council (GSC), which also approves the placement of reports and the schedule. Some recommendations will be assigned to a special advisory committee on order and governance, or a

special advisory committee on overtures and new business, or another named special advisory committee.

### **Advisory Committees**

*Order and Governance Advisory Committee.* The president has appointed a small advisory committee to review all matters pertaining to church order and governance issues, including any proposed changes in the bylaws of General Synod institutions, agencies, and corporations. The committee will receive and review the reports and recommendations, prepare advice on specific recommendations, and provide additional recommendations if necessary.

*Overtures and New Business Advisory Committee.* The president has appointed a small advisory committee to receive and review all overtures from classes and regional synods and any new business that may be brought before the synod in its opening sessions. This committee will also look at business coming from commissions.

Additional specialized committees may be formed by the Committee of Reference after a final review of the business coming before the assembly and will be announced in the opening session and materials.

### **Plenary Discussion**

Reports addressed only in plenary session may be discussed at tables. Delegates will have opportunity for questions and to address concerns to the reporting body. Recommendations for action will be addressed directly in plenary sessions. Reports coming directly to the synod will likely include:

- a. Reports from RCA seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.
- b. Reports from RCA colleges.
- c. Reports that can benefit from the process of discussion at each table during the plenary session (e.g., a commission seeking wider discussion of work in progress).
- d. General Synod Council (GSC) reports on denominational ministry.

## **ELECTION OF PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF GENERAL SYNOD**

*Each General Synod elects a president and a vice president to serve the following term. The newly elected president and vice president begin their terms upon installation at the worship service the last day of General Synod.*



## **Procedures for Election**

The president and vice president are elected by ballot. Only regular delegates to the General Synod may vote. (Corresponding delegates do not vote.) A two-thirds majority of the ballots cast is required for election on a nominating ballot; a simple majority is required for election on an electing ballot. Tellers are responsible for distributing, collecting, and counting the ballots.

### *Election of the President*

The first ballot cast will be an electing ballot. The current vice president will be the sole nominee. If the vote is affirmative, the vice president will be declared elected.

If the vote is not affirmative, the election for president will follow the process prescribed below for the election for the vice president.

### *Election of the Vice President*

The first ballot cast will be a nominating ballot. Only regular delegates to this General Synod may be nominated. (Corresponding delegates may not be nominated.) If any delegate receives at least two-thirds of the votes cast, such delegate will be declared elected.

If there is no election on the nominating ballot, every delegate receiving at least ten votes will be considered in nomination and will be introduced to the General Synod. The General Synod will then proceed to an electing ballot. If there is no election, the General Synod will proceed to a second electing ballot limited to the two persons receiving the largest number of votes on the first electing ballot.

## **Duties of the President and Vice President**

Election to the office of vice president of the General Synod implies a three-year commitment to the General Synod Council, which meets three times a year; to the Board of Benefits Services, which meets two times a year; as well as to the work of their committees and other responsibilities.

The vice president serves at the pleasure of or in the absence of the president. If elected to the office of president the following year, the person then assumes the duties of the president.

The president and vice president of General Synod have traditionally traveled in order to listen for the joys and concerns of the church and ascertain the gifts and needs of the world through the RCA mission program. It is expected that the president will visit at least seven or eight geographically diverse classes and one of the RCA's mission areas, and that the vice president will visit at least four geographically diverse classes. Special attention will be given to those areas of the denomination that have not been visited recently and to those areas that are not familiar to the president and vice president.

The president of the General Synod performs a listening function, seeking to discover the concerns and aspirations of the church. Possibilities for fulfilling this function include attendance at meetings of the church's assemblies, boards, agencies, committees, commissions, and special meetings, as well as visits to various areas of the church. The president also represents the denomination at public, ecumenical, and denominational functions.

The president gives a report of activities at each meeting of the General Synod Council and makes a final report to the General Synod in its opening sessions.

The president arranges for all opening and closing prayers and worship services, including the closing communion service at General Synod.

As presiding officer of the General Synod, the president must be familiar with the *Book of Church Order* and the basic rules of parliamentary procedure so that decorum and dignity are maintained in the church of Jesus Christ.

## **THE BYLAWS AND SPECIAL RULES OF ORDER**

*Chapter 3 of the Book of Church Order provides the bylaws of the General Synod and explains the special rules of order that are in use at the synod meeting. Here you can find information on the seating of delegates and required attendance as well as information about the election of a president and vice president of synod. If you are wondering about the executive committee of the synod, look for Article 3, General Synod Council; Article 8 covers advisory committees, and Article 9 is about corresponding delegates. The special rules of order in Part II discuss the order, presentation, and transaction of business at synod. You can click on the link below to access the online Book of Church Order in English, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, and Portuguese.*

[www.rca.org/bco](http://www.rca.org/bco)

## **THE FORMATION OF GENERAL SYNOD**

*Before the synod can act on the business brought before it in the General Synod Workbook, the synod must be "formed."*

### **A. Seating of Delegates**

**Irregularities**—The general secretary will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

**Limits of the House**—Delegates have been assigned seats at tables. Rights of participation are restricted to those within the limits of the house, which extend only to the area of the delegates' tables. Guests or visitors may sit in the gallery of chairs to the side of the plenary space or may watch the General

Synod video stream on the RCA website, but may not be on the floor of synod among the delegate tables.

Privilege of the Floor—All regular (voting) and corresponding delegates have the privilege of the floor (privilege to address the assembly).

Voting Rights and Motions—Although corresponding delegates do have the privilege of the floor, they do not have the right to vote or to make motions. Only regular delegates may vote or make motions. Staff, visitors, and guests may not address the assembly unless granted privilege of the floor by action of the assembly.

- B. Declaration Concerning a Quorum—As of May 1, the possible membership of General Synod is 204, and the enrolled membership is 177. The general secretary will declare whether a quorum is present.
- C. Reading the Minutes by Title—The general secretary will read the minutes of the preceding session by title. The minutes from 1771 to 2022 can be found online at [www.rca.org/minutes](http://www.rca.org/minutes) for use throughout the week.
- D. Procedure for Approving the Journal—A record of General Synod actions will be posted on the General Synod page of the RCA website at [www.rca.org/journals](http://www.rca.org/journals) for information and review by delegates. Any corrections to the journal should be given to one of the recording secretaries (Angela Worthley, Terri Boven, or Gael Uwera) or to Paul Karssen (seated at the operations platform at the back of the plenary room). The General Synod will be asked to authorize its officers to approve the journal for the meetings on Friday through Tuesday.
- E. Presentation of the Rules of Order—The Bylaws and the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod may be found by accessing Chapter 3 of the *Book of Church Order* at [www.rca.org/bco](http://www.rca.org/bco).
- F. Selection of Parliamentarian—Russell Paarlberg was selected to serve as parliamentarian at the 2023 General Synod.
- G. Appointment of Tellers—The president has appointed as temporary clerks and tellers for the sessions of the 2023 General Synod: participants in the Seminarian Seminar; Committee of Reference members Pedro Agudelo and Leigh Van Kempen, and representing the Commission on Nominations, Patricia Sealy.
- H. Approval of the Agenda and Schedule—The general secretary will call attention to the agenda and schedule in the workbook. Synod will be asked to approve the agenda and schedule.

- I. New Business—The general secretary will call attention to the schedule and procedure for presentation of new business and will read the appropriate rule of order (*Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 8 [2022 edition, p. 132]).

## GUIDE TO ALPHABETESE

AABC	African American Black Council
AAR	Approved Alternate Route
BCO	<i>Book of Church Order</i>
BOBS	Board of Benefits Services
CCA	Commission on Christian Action
CCDE	Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
CCO	Commission on Church Order
CCT	Christian Churches Together in the USA
CCU	Commission on Christian Unity
CCW	Commission on Christian Worship
CFW	Commission for Women
CGF	The RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc.
CHM	Council for Hispanic Ministries
CJB	Commission on Judicial Business
COH	Commission on History
CON	Commission on Nominations
CORE	Commission on Race and Ethnicity
COT	Commission on Theology
CPAAM	Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Church in North America
GSC	General Synod Council
MFCA	Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
MGS	<i>Minutes of General Synod</i>
NBTS	New Brunswick Theological Seminary
NAIM	Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council
NCCC	National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
PFCC	Pastoral Formation Certification Committee
PFOB	Pastoral Formation Oversight Board
RCSC	Reformed Candidates' Supervision and Care
RS	Regional Synod
RSA	Regional Synod of Albany
RSC	Regional Synod of Canada
RSFW	Regional Synod of the Far West
RSGL	Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
RSH	Regional Synod of the Heartland
RSMAm	Regional Synod of Mid-America
RSMAt	Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic
RSNY	Regional Synod of New York
WCC	World Council of Churches

WCRC  
WTS

World Communion of Reformed Churches  
Western Theological Seminary

## **Report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod**

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life, and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ's mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2022 edition, p. 73]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2022 edition, p. 110]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, refer to the Bylaws of the General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2022 edition, pp. 110-111]).

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to the General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources

given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod's 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod's program agency.

## **Review of Regional Synod Minutes**

The General Synod Office has received and read the 2022 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantics, and New York.

## **GENERAL SYNOD MEETING**

### **Referral of Business**

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

#### **EC 23-1**

**To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook.**

### **The Seating of Delegates**

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2022 edition, p. 107]). The general secretary will report on classes' payments of General Synod assessments and will report whether there are any delegates who cannot be seated because of irregularities.

### **Amendments to the *Book of Church Order***

The General Synod of 2022 adopted and referred to the classes for approval two amendments to the *Book of Church Order*. The amendments are recorded in the *2022 Minutes of the General Synod* as noted. Forty-five classes were eligible to vote on these amendments (per *BCO*, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2b [2022 edition, p. 77]). As of April 25, 2023, six classes had not reported votes to the Office of the General Synod on the questions of whether to approve the amendments. The votes of the other 39 classes, as reported in writing by the classes' stated clerks, were as follows:

<i>Book of Church Order Amendments</i>	Disapproved	Approved
<b>1. Changing the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Process</b> (MGS 2022, TE 22-2 pp. 262-264)	0	39
<b>2. Changing the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Name</b> (MGS 2022, TE 22-1, pp. 253-256)	0	39

Both amendments received the approval of the required two-thirds of classes, and so they are all presented here for final declarative action.

**EC 23-2**

**To declare Amendment 1 to be approved for incorporation into the 2023 *Book of Church Order*.**

**EC 23-3**

**To declare Amendment 2 to be approved for incorporation into the 2023 *Book of Church Order*.**

The 2022 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the next stated session of the General Synod the following amendments to the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod:

*Timing for Submission of Overtures*—BCO Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 7 (MGS 2022, CO 22-1, p. 204)

*Timing for Submission of General Synod Reports*—BCO Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 5 (MGS 2022, CO 22-2, p. 205)

**EC 23-4**

**To declare the amendment to the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod specified in CO 22-1, adopted in first reading by the 2022 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2023 *Book of Church Order*.**

**EC 23-5**

**To declare the amendment to the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod specified in CO 22-2, adopted in first reading by the 2022 General Synod, to be approved for incorporation into the 2023 *Book of Church Order*.**



## **Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer**

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

### **EC 23-6**

**To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.**

## **General Synod Meeting Location**

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2024 is the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona. The 2024 meeting of the General Synod is planned to take place on June 13-18. The 2025 General Synod is also scheduled to take place at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona, on June 5-10. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

## **Land Use Acknowledgement**

The 2021 General Synod, in its adoption of CA 21-1, instructed the GSC to “annually state a land acknowledgement for any location in which General Synod meets” (*MGS 2021*, p. 203). The Commission on Christian Action assisted in the preparation of this acknowledgement.

We respectfully acknowledge that the land we gather on this year is part of the traditional land of the Osakiwug and Meskwaki peoples, who were removed from this place, often by government entities, and usually by violent means. We acknowledge the history of their people in this place, and lament any role the Reformed Church in America or her members may have played in their displacement.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION**

The General Synod Council operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, *Transformed & Transforming*. Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through policies concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.

### **RCA Salary Structure for Fiscal Year 2022 (October 2022–September 2023)**

The GSC policy (EL-8) pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market.”

The GSC compensation program allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the supervisor, employee, and Human Resources. As responsibilities change or when there is an open position, the job description is reviewed, updated as needed, and reevaluated to ensure that it is still classified in the correct range. The program incorporates geographic differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions. This has become more important as we have more and more employees working remotely. Positions are benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors. The GSC reserves the right to transfer an employee to another position or increase or decrease an employee’s job specifications based on business need.

There are thirteen salary ranges that span between 11 and 23. Grade 11 represents the most entry-level positions and Grade 23 represents the highest level, held by the general secretary. The majority of positions fall within the middle ranges (14 to 17).

Staff are evaluated annually by their supervisors. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff who are accountable to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following table represents the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2022. The ranges are utilized to establish beginning wages and annual salaries and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee. Most employees’ salaries fall in the mid-range of the table. The following table represents Grand Rapids-based staff; this table is adjusted for cost-of-living differences for staff who live and work in other areas.

## GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

2022-2023 ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE					
GRADE	LOW	25%	MID	75%	HIGH
11	\$24,960	\$27,620	\$30,280	\$32,940	\$35,600
12	\$32,240	\$35,880	\$39,520	\$43,160	\$46,800
13	\$35,200	\$38,975	\$42,750	\$46,525	\$50,300
14	\$41,800	\$46,950	\$52,100	\$57,250	\$62,400
15	\$47,000	\$52,800	\$58,600	\$64,400	\$70,200
16	\$56,000	\$62,900	\$69,800	\$76,700	\$83,600
17	\$61,000	\$68,510	\$76,020	\$83,530	\$91,040
18	\$66,500	\$74,688	\$82,875	\$91,063	\$99,250
19	\$79,000	\$89,625	\$100,250	\$110,875	\$121,500
20	\$89,500	\$101,550	\$113,600	\$125,650	\$137,700
21	\$101,376	\$118,257	\$135,138	\$152,019	\$168,900
22	\$115,983	\$135,237	\$154,492	\$173,746	\$193,000
23	\$144,662	\$168,697	\$192,731	\$216,766	\$240,800

### Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years. As BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2019 edition, p. 109) says, one of the GSC's responsibilities is:

To review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that the necessity of continuation shall not be assumed.

GSC adopted a new commission review process in March 2017, and completed several annual cycles of review under the new process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process was put on hold while in-person meetings were paused. In the past year, GSC has reviewed and updated its commission review process to take into account the fact that a larger percentage of RCA meetings will be held electronically going forward, and there will no longer be a joint in-person meeting of the GSC and commissions every fall. The GSC approved the updated process at its October 2022 stated meeting. The updated process can be found as an appendix to the GSC's October 2022 meeting minutes, which are posted at [www.rca.org/gsc](http://www.rca.org/gsc).

Two commissions were scheduled for review during the 2022-2023 review cycle (Year A, according to the GSC's review process): the Commission on Christian Worship and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity. Due to a resignation on GSC of one of the two members of GSC assigned to the review team for the Commission on

Race and Ethnicity, that review was not able to be completed in time to bring to this General Synod. Instead, GSC plans to bring a review of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity to the 2024 General Synod along with the next two commissions up for review (the Commission on Christian Action and the Commission on Christian Unity).

### *Review of the Commission on Christian Worship*

The Commission on Christian Worship has accomplished quite a bit during the past few years. In the future, there is a long list of things the commission plans to accomplish that will keep them very busy. The GSC members conducting the review thought that the commission would be blessed if they were aided by a member(s) of the Commissions on Race and Ethnicity and Theology. Multilingual versions of the Bible, hymnals, liturgies and litanies, and RCA website could benefit from the coexistence of the Commissions on Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity, and Theology.

The Commission on Christian Worship will be important for the RCA going forward as the denomination continues to become more diverse in ethnicity and in the languages used in worship. Worship is essential for congregations of the RCA and it is necessary that the General Synod continues to have a Commission on Christian Worship. GSC hopes that the General Synod and the denomination at large will continue to support the commission by recommending and recruiting members for the commission who have the gifts and passion for worship.

### **EC 23-7**

#### **To approve the continuation of the Commission on Christian Worship.**

### **Transfers of Congregations across Regional Synod Lines**

According to BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 (2022 edition, p. 69), General Synod approval is required when a church is transferred between two classes that are in different regional synods. The most efficient way for this transfer request to come to the General Synod is through the GSC. (Depending upon the timing of the request, such transfer requests could also potentially be brought to the General Synod by means of an overture or new business.)

The GSC has been asked to bring two such transfers to the 2023 General Synod. In both cases, the consistories and leadership of the congregations have expressed that their reasons for requesting transfer are for ministry context and connection, to the long-term benefit of the congregation.

One request is for City Church Denver in Denver, Colorado, which wishes to transfer from City Classis in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics to the Classis of Rocky Mountain in the Regional Synod of the Far West. The Office of the General Synod has received signatures from the consistory of City Church Denver, representatives of both City and Rocky Mountain Classes, and representatives of both the Regional

Synod of the Mid-Atlantics and the Regional Synod of the Far West that all are amenable to the transfer.

**EC 23-8**

**To transfer City Church Denver in Denver, Colorado, from City Classis in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics to Rocky Mountain Classis in the Regional Synod of the Far West.**

The second request is from Renacer Church in Doral, Florida, which wishes to transfer from the Classis de las Naciones in the Regional Synod of Mid-America to the Classis of the Americas in the Regional Synod of the Far West. The Office of the General Synod has received signatures from the consistory of Renacer Church, both the Classis de las Naciones and the Classis of the Americas, and both the Regional Synod of Mid-America and the Regional Synod of the Far West, confirming that all are amenable to the transfer.

**EC 23-9**

**To transfer Renacer Church in Doral, Florida, from the Classis de las Naciones in the Regional Synod of Mid-America to the Classis of the Americas in the Regional Synod of the Far West.**

## REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod Council (GSC), the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), and the Church Growth Fund (CGF). The Office of Finance strives to ensure that financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods as together we carefully manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

### 2022 Annual Audits

The 2022 financial statements of the GSC, BOBS, RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, and CGF were audited by Plante Moran, PLLC, certified public accountants. This was a first year engagement for Plante Moran, PLLC. All corporations and the 403(b) Retirement Program received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The GSC’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity, reviewed the post-audit letters from the auditors, and reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. The American Institute of CPAs Auditing Standards Board issued a Statement on Auditing Standards (no. 137, The Auditor’s Responsibilities Relating to Other Information Included in Annual Reports) that affects the way in which we have referred to the audited financial reports within the workbook in the past. Under this new standard, any link to the audited financials within the General Synod Workbook would require us to have the entire General Synod Workbook audited; both the timeline and cost of this are prohibitive. Financial highlights of each organization are presented below. For more information, please contact the Office of Finance.

#### *Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2022*

##### General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC’s total income was \$11 million and expenses totaled \$15 million, resulting in a net loss of \$4 million. This loss was primarily due to a decline in value of investments of nearly \$4 million and spending of grant revenue received in previous years. Total net assets were \$40.7 million, of which \$19.2 million is without donor restrictions and \$21.5 million is with donor restrictions.

The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—covered 55 percent of the GSC’s costs. Assessments provided 36 percent of GSC’s costs and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated and restricted funds, is presented in the following chart:

## REVENUE BY FISCAL YEARS ENDING SEPTEMBER 30

	2022	2021
Contributions and Grants	\$8,467,716	\$10,331,918
Assessments	\$5,542,829	\$5,916,752
Other Income*	\$(2,961,610)	\$4,086,167
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>\$11,048,935</b>	<b>\$20,334,837</b>

*\*Includes investment gains/(losses) and fees for services provided to related entities*

**Contributions and grants** decreased by \$1.9 million from 2021. In 2021, the GSC received a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. for Generation Spark in the amount of \$1,310,000, and Global Mission received approximately \$400,000 less in estate gifts in 2022 than it received in 2021.

**Assessments** decreased by approximately \$400,000 due to loss of membership and churches leaving the denomination.

**Other income** decreased by approximately \$7.0 million due primarily to the depreciation in market values of investments, as both equities and bonds lost value in 2022.

The chart below shows expenses by functional category and is followed with a summary of each functional expense category.

## EXPENSES BY FISCAL YEARS ENDING SEPTEMBER 30

	2022	2021
Church Multiplication	\$1,040,001	\$912,461
Global Mission	\$7,125,651	\$6,898,917
Transformed & Transforming	\$2,396,559	\$2,738,290
Work of the General Synod*	\$2,573,033	\$3,822,170
Ministry Support Services	\$2,149,773	\$2,218,170
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$15,285,017</b>	<b>\$16,590,679</b>

*\*Includes GSC, General Synod, and the Office of the General Secretary*

The GSC's total expenses decreased from the prior year by \$1.3 million.

- Church Multiplication expenses did not change significantly from 2021 to 2022.
- Global Mission expenses did not change significantly from 2021 to 2022.
- Transformed & Transforming expenses declined from the previous year due to continued unfilled vacancies and eliminated positions.
- Work of the General Synod expenses decreased due to the transfer of the New Jersey endowment fund (approximately \$2 million) to New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 2021. This decrease was offset by an increase in expenses in 2022, since two General Synods were held in the 2022 fiscal year, (no General Synod was held in the 2021 fiscal year).

- Ministry Support Services expenses did not change significantly from 2021 to 2022.

Other expenses decreased due to a reduction in expenses of occupancy costs, the elimination of the *RCA Today* magazine in 2021, and reduced expenses for the RCA Store. Travel and staff development increased \$300,000 due to relaxed restrictions in travel from the pandemic and more in-person meetings held across the denomination. This affected all functional categories above.

#### Board of Benefits Services (BOBS)—403(b) Retirement Program

As mentioned above, audits for the 2022 fiscal year were performed by a new audit firm, Plante Moran. In consultation with this firm, changes in reporting were implemented. The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program and Support and Investment funds were audited separately. The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program statements are presented on a modified-cash basis, as this presentation is a more accurate reflection of the financial status of the plan. As of September 30, 2022, the date of BOBS' most recent audit, \$246 million is held in participant accounts in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. In fiscal year 2022, participant and employer contributions to the plan were \$10.1 million, and \$6.5 million was reallocated from the non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan. Distributions to participants totaled \$15.9 million for the same time period.

Together as a denomination we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute 11 percent of the eligible salaries of RCA ministers of Word and sacrament to their retirement accounts each year. An estimated \$910,000 has not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2022. BOBS staff continues to work with pastors, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with *Book of Church Order* Formulary No. 5 requirements. RCA ministers of Word and sacrament should review their quarterly statements to verify that 11 percent of their eligible salary is being contributed. Elder delegates to synod should ask questions in their local congregation to ensure that their congregation is providing this important benefit for their pastor(s).

For additional information about the retirement plan, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

#### Board of Benefits Services—General Fund

The BOBS' General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, and assistance and retiree chaplains programs for active and retired RCA-ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially healthy, with \$25 million in net assets as of September 30, 2022. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2022 with a net deficit of \$2.9 million. Investment depreciation and losses on reserves and endowments of \$2.8 million were offset by other revenue of \$2.2 million. Administration costs for the retirement plans,



which are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program and the RCA Retirement Plan accounts, totaled \$328,000 in 2022.

Effective January 1, 2022, BOBS implemented a fee reduction for participants from 19 basis points (bps) to 10 bps. Since 2012, the administrative fee has dropped by 30 bps. Earnings from the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund, a decrease in operational expenses, plus investment earnings from other sources and increased values in the retirement plans allowed for BOBS to administer its programs at a reduced fee.

Support for the assistance and retiree chaplains programs came from a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance grants and retiree chaplains' ministry expenses were \$539,000 in 2022. The premiums received for life and long-term disability insurances cover the costs of administering those insurances. For additional information about the BOBS' General Fund, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

### Church Growth Fund (CGF)

The CGF makes affordable-rate loans to current and former RCA churches and related agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by current and former RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return. In fiscal year 2022, the CGF continued its plan to grow and service more RCA congregations, reaching \$81 million in total assets.

As of fiscal year end, September 30, 2022, the CGF had over \$30 million in cash and short-term investments and \$49 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by \$32 million in savings certificates and \$49 million in net assets (capital). The CGF had a net loss of \$1.6 million due to unrealized losses of \$2.4 million on investments. The CGF contributed \$800,000 to the GSC to be used for grants related to church plants and church revitalization. Since 2018, the CGF has operated under a goal of being able to contribute up to 50 percent of net operating income annually back to the denomination.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association. For additional information about the CGF, see the report of the Church Growth Fund in this workbook.

### **Investments**

The investments of the GSC, BOBS, and CGF are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise. The Investment Advisory Committee makes

recommendations for changes to investment policy or management to each RCA board for consideration.

### *Excess Operating Reserves*

Since December 2017, the operating reserves of the GSC, BOBS, and CGF are being managed by Telemus Capital, LLC, an investment firm based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. Telemus Capital, LLC, allows for the segregation of funds for each RCA corporation. The investments for each RCA entity may then be further segregated and managed under two separate investment policies. The first policy, invested only in fixed income, is the secondary liquidity source after cash and savings for the RCA entity and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays 1-5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The second policy, allocating assets to longer duration fixed income and equities, is the third source of liquidity for the RCA entities and uses the benchmark for fixed income investment returns of the Barclays Intermediate Government Corporate Bond Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Telemus Capital, LLC, was \$27.2 million at September 30, 2022.

### *Endowment Funds*

The GSC manages \$23 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the GSC date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index.

In addition to the GSC and CGF, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2022, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed \$977,000 to the GSC, \$35,000 to the CGF, and \$243,000 to RCA-affiliated organizations. If you are interested in setting up an endowment for the benefit of the GSC or your local congregation, please contact the RCA's Office of Advancement ([advancement@rca.org](mailto:advancement@rca.org)).

BOBS also manages an endowment fund valued at \$22.1 million. LVM Capital Management, Ltd., actively manages 100 percent of the fixed income investments and 80 percent of the equity investments. The remaining 20 percent of equities are invested in passive index funds at the recommendation of the Investment Advisory Committee. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. In 2022, approximately \$535,000 was distributed from the endowment fund to the BOBS' General Fund.

### *RCA Retirement Plans*

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for the BOBS' retirement plans. In collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC), in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement plans. BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants from Creative Planning Retirement Services (formally named Lockton Retirement Services).

Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant's retirement age as well as 18 diversified mutual funds, including four environment, social, and governance (ESG) investing options. As of December 31, 2022, 76 percent of the participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds. The total market value of the mutual funds held in the 403(b) Retirement Program was \$246 million, with \$182 million in the non-qualified Retirement Plan at September 30, 2022.

For additional information about the retirement plan investments, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services in this workbook.

### *Planned Giving Programs*

The GSC manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling \$1 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and recordkeeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts. This fund is in a wind-down phase. Those wishing to establish a charitable gift annuity benefiting the RCA or a local RCA church may contact the Barnabas Foundation or the RCA's Office of Advancement to do so.

### *Church Growth Fund Investments*

The CGF invests a portion of excess operating cash in four fixed-income accounts and two equity accounts. As of September 30, 2022, Telemus Capital, LLC, the Barnabas Foundation, and LVM Capital Management, Ltd., manage these funds. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

### *Socially Responsible and Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) Investing*

All investment policy statements for each pool of investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms.

BOBS currently offers four ESG funds to its participants in the Retirement Program. Participants who wish to learn more about ESG investing and the ESG funds available to them may visit [www.rca.org/esg](http://www.rca.org/esg).

Two General Synod actions (CA 21-6, *MGS 2021*, p. 206; ONB 21-9a, *MGS 2021*, p. 119) taken in October 2021 were related to ESG investments. Both actions were tasked to the Investment Advisory Committee for follow up; one was also tasked to BOBS for follow up. The Investment Advisory Committee created an ESG subcommittee to specifically review these actions. The subcommittee met with the moderator of the Commission on Christian Action in September 2022.

The subcommittee recognizes that the industry standards for ESG ratings and definitions are a work in progress. The criteria and scoring methods are constantly evolving. There is also a lot of recent pushback, both political and regulatory, regarding ESG standards. The subcommittee does not believe that the RCA is behind the industry on incorporating ESG criteria into our policies. In this frequently changing environment, the GSC Investment Advisory Committee is being cautious and prudent and believes it is not a good time to integrate ESG criteria into our investment policies. We are committed to balancing both investment growth and our ESG impact. The GSC Investment Advisory Committee plans to take the following steps:

- Paying attention to the developing industry standards related to ESG.
- Asking investment managers to provide scoring reports annually at the committee's summer meeting.
- Reviewing what peer groups are doing related to this. This can be done with our investment managers as they serve other institutional clients.
- A subcommittee of the GSC's IAC will meet annually following the full committee's summer meeting to review the ESG scores of our holdings and evaluate the current ESG environment in order to determine whether ESG criteria should be integrated into our policies.

## **2023 Budget Process**

### *Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, and Church Multiplication*

The general secretary has identified four ministry priorities that are in line with the GSC's ends policies—Transformed & Transforming initiatives, Global Mission, Church Multiplication, and Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism. The new Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry encapsulates the work of Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and Race Relations and Advocacy. GSC staff focuses on equipping churches and church leaders in these four areas so that they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. Budget managers developed 2023 budgets with the aim of making sure that we are using resources wisely in light of decreased assessment revenue.

The assessments and contributions provided by RCA churches and members enable the GSC staff to come alongside RCA congregations in many ways, start new churches, and reach people with the love of Christ through RCA mission efforts. For more on how the RCA's financial resources were used in ministry during the past

year, please see the reports in this workbook on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry and on Global Mission.

### *General Synod Council Operating Budget Process*

The GSC operating budget is primarily funded by assessment income and contributions. The 2023 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from assessments, contributions, investments, and other income. In June 2022, the General Synod approved a per-member assessment for GSC, BOBS, and theological education of \$55.58 for the 2023 calendar year. This was an increase from the prior year due to the GSC assessment increase of \$1.00 to \$47.10. General Synod 2022 also approved a \$0.36 per member assessment for Sankofa journeys, which was offset by the expiration of the \$0.29 per member assessment for the restructuring team (also called the Vision 2020 implementation team in the *2021 Minutes of the General Synod*). The fiscal year 2023 budgeted assessment revenue to the GSC (excluding the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency [MFCA]) is \$3.4 million, representing a decrease of \$800,000 from the 2022 budget. The budget was built based on an estimated decrease of 20,000 confessing members.

Contributions to the On Mission Fund are unrestricted contributions to the RCA. For 2023, contributions to the On Mission Fund are budgeted at \$100,000 less than 2022 because of the uncertainty of donor commitment due to churches departing the denomination. Based on Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares pledged to support missionaries, Global Mission expects to see an overall increase in contributions of about \$250,000 compared to prior year giving.

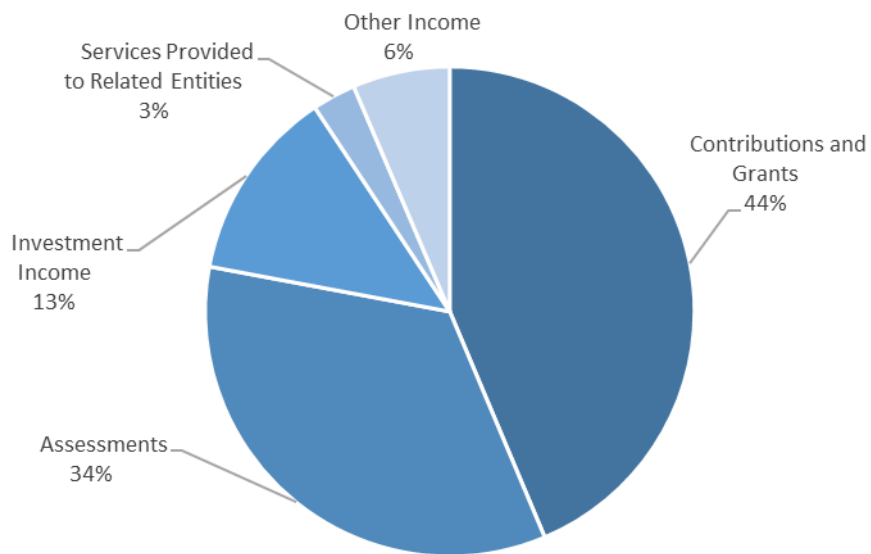
Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 71 percent of the total budget. The remaining 29 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.

The 2023 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about \$800,000. This deficit included a planned draw on reserves of \$110,000 for the MFCA.

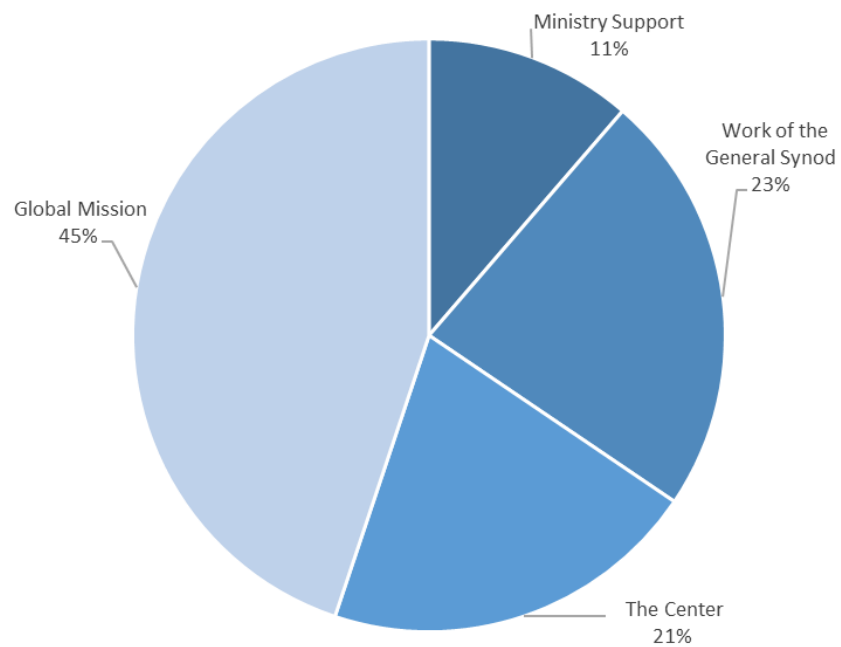
### *General Synod Council 2023 Fiscal Year Budget*

The charts below show the budgeted operating income and expenses for 2023. This budget includes the four strategic priorities, the work of the General Synod, and ministry support services. The budgets do not include donor-restricted activity.

2023 GSC Budgeted Income  
Total \$10.3 Million



2023 GSC Budgeted Expenses  
Total of \$11.1 million



In addition to the operating budget, gifts and grants designated for specific purposes typically provide about \$4 to \$5 million annually. These specific purposes include funds for disaster relief, Global Mission projects, grants from foundations, and other projects beyond the scope of operational work.

In the summer of 2023, staff will finalize the 2024 budget, which will be based on the approved covenant shares percentage rate and other estimated revenue for 2024. We are expecting a drop in revenue based on departures from the denomination. The negative financial impact of churches leaving the RCA will likely continue through the next several years. The budget will remain focused on fulfilling the priorities of Transformed & Transforming, Global Mission, Church Multiplication, and Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism in impactful and measurable ways.

To find out more about how assessments provide funding to the denomination, please review the following resource on the RCA website: [www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials/what-are-assessments](http://www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials/what-are-assessments). To find out more about covenant shares, please review the resources available on the RCA website: [www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials](http://www.rca.org/assessments-and-financials).

## **2024 Covenant Shares**

The 2023 per-member assessment amount was approved by the June 2022 General Synod. The 2023 per-member assessment provided funding for GSC, theological education, and Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) assistance grants. Classes and regional synods also assess churches; however, those assessments vary by classis and regional synod and are not approved by GSC or General Synod; thus, they are not covered in this report.

General Synod 2019 approved a proposal to replace the current per-member assessment method with covenant shares, an income-based assessment method. General Synod 2022 declared the related amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod approved. This means that covenant shares will be effective beginning with the calendar year 2024, so the GSC is recommending a percentage rate, rather than a per-member assessment, to the 2023 General Synod. The General Synod will annually approve the percentage rate to be used to calculate covenant shares.

The GSC is recommending a covenant shares rate of 2.7 percent of congregational income for the calendar year 2024. The GSC will calculate the amount due from each classis based on the total contributions received by each church within its bounds, as reported on Line 21 of the Consistorial Report Form (CRF), multiplied by the General Synod-approved percentage rate. The change in the total dollar amount of a church's covenant shares will be limited to no more than 10 percent, either up or down, over the previous year's assessment amount.

A covenant shares rate of 2.7 percent will generate approximately \$3.2 million of assessment revenue. From that overall amount, the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) is requesting \$415,000 (representing approximately 0.35 percent of

congregational income) in assessments to be used for theological education. The remainder, approximately \$2.8 million, will support the GSC.

The total projected assessment revenue of \$3.2 million represents a 1.5 percent increase over the expected assessments collected from 2023 assessments for the churches remaining in the denomination. This compares all assessments collected by the GSC for the GSC, BOBS, and theological education to the expected collection of 2024 assessments based on the proposed rate of 2.7 percent.

### *General Synod Council Assessment Request*

Assessments provide funding for three of the four ministry priorities that are in line with the GSC's ends policies—Transformed & Transforming initiatives, Church Multiplication, and Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism. Assessments also fund the work of the General Synod—the annual General Synod meeting and the work of GSC, commissions, and racial and ethnic councils—as well as general and administrative support services. Assessments do not fund Global Missions. Contributions and grants, investment income, endowment distributions, and fees for services provide the additional revenue to the GSC.

Assessment revenue has declined significantly over the past five years due to churches leaving the denomination. In the calendar year 2020, the GSC received \$6 million in assessment revenue. By 2024, assessment revenue will have declined by over \$3 million. The projected assessment revenue of 2.8 million in 2024 represents a decline of over \$600,000 from the previous year. The GSC has made several budget reductions in anticipation of this significant decline in assessment revenue. However, more reductions will be necessary in order to develop a balanced budget. In the summer of 2023, staff will finalize the 2024 budget, which will be based on the approved covenant shares percentage rate and other estimated revenue, as well as using a portion of our unrestricted operating reserves.

A \$30,000 portion of the assessments collected will be set aside to be used for General Synod initiatives. This fund will be set aside and carried forward year to year unless a General Synod action requires the use of a portion of the funds for a specific purpose. The intention behind setting aside this amount of assessments each year is to create a fund from which initiatives approved by the General Synod can be funded without needing to add an additional assessment. For example, the 2023 General Synod approved a program of Sankofa journeys and Institute for Healing Racism experiences through the adoption of RE 22-3. It also then adopted a \$0.36 per member assessment to fund that initiative. Going forward, General Synod actions requiring funding would no longer need to include a specific per member assessment; instead, the General Synod action would specify a dollar amount to be used from the General Synod initiatives fund. If a General Synod action requires funding that exceeds the amount available in the General Synod initiatives fund, an addition to the covenant shares percentage would need to be approved by the General Synod.



The GSC realizes the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations. We commit to careful stewardship of the funds with which God has blessed us.

#### *Theological Education Assessment Request*

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$415,000, allocated in the following manner:

- \$15,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split evenly between the three theological agents.

In previous years, this was a separate request than the GSC assessment request, and General Synod voted on the amounts separately. Because the theological education assessment would end up being an uneven fraction of a percent (approximately 0.35 percent), it will be less complicated for the General Synod to approve one overall covenant shares rate and allocate the dollar amount for the theological education assessment within that overall rate.

#### *Board of Benefits Services' Assistance Grant Assessment Request*

The Board of Benefits Services is requesting no assessment for 2024. BOBS is pleased to report that due to endowment funding, they are able to eliminate the assessment request to provide funding of the assistance program. In previous years, the approved assessment rate for the BOBS assistance grant program was \$2.00 per member.

### **Covenant Shares Recommendation**

The GSC recommends that the General Synod 2024 covenant shares rate be set at 2.7 percent (calculated based on Line 21 of the CRF with 10 percent increase or decrease limits per church over the previous year's assessments, as described earlier). Of the assessments collected, \$415,000 would be provided to theological education and allocated according to the recommendation from PFOB.

#### **F 23-1**

**To approve a General Synod 2024 covenant shares rate of 2.7 percent, of which \$415,000 will be allocated for theological education according to the formula provided by PFOB.**

### **Determining Assessments for Newly Organized Churches**

General Synod 2010 adopted a recommendation (*MGS 2010*, R-51, pp. 166-167) that determined how newly organized churches would pay assessments. This recommendation asked the GSC to apply a formula in which newly organized churches would pay 20 percent of the full assessment amount the first year of organization, 40 percent in their second year, 60 percent in their third year, 80

percent in their fourth year, and 100 percent in subsequent years. This formula has been used for newly organized churches since January 1, 2010.

The gradual assessment scale was implemented with the mindset that it would help a growing church if it were able to ease into its full share of assessments. This was a gracious idea to help emerging congregations. With the shift into covenant shares, it is a good time to help our new congregations of any size partner from day one with the mission of the RCA regardless of giving level. We don't wish our assessments to be seen as a burden but as an investment into the greater mission of the RCA family. Under the covenant shares method, the amount owed to the denomination will be based on contributions made to the newly organized church, which will be in accordance with the church's ability to pay assessments, therefore the church's investment in the denomination will grow as the church grows.

Therefore, the GSC recommends that the gradual assessment formula no longer be used. The change would be effective for churches organized on January 1, 2022 and after. These newly organized churches would be assessed under the covenant shares method beginning with calendar year 2024. All newly organized churches being assessed under the graduated formula (those churches organized in the years 2018-2021) will be assessed at the covenant shares rate but will continue on the gradual implementation plan until they are paying 100 percent of the covenant shares rate. Because those churches are increased at a rate of 20 percent each year, they will not be limited to the 10 percent limits.

#### **F 23-2**

**To eliminate the formula for assessing newly organized churches as adopted in R-51 in 2010. This will be effective for all newly organized churches that have organized on or after January 1, 2022. All newly organized churches currently being assessed under the graduated formula (those churches organized in the years 2018-2021) will be assessed based on the covenant shares method, but the graduated increase in their rate will continue to be based on the 2010 formula until they are paying 100 percent of the covenant shares rate.**

## REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON ADVANCEMENT

The Advancement team's responsibility is to encourage churches and individuals to give generously of the financial resources God has entrusted to them in support of the mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The team coordinates all General Synod Council fundraising efforts while striving to develop and strengthen relationships with donors, potential donors, church leaders, business allies, and others that will not only inspire financial partnerships but also promote the mission and vision of the RCA.

Team members raise financial support through outright cash gifts, will bequests, life income plans, and grants. These funds are primarily given as a result of personal solicitation on the part of an Advancement team member and/or member of the RCA Strategic Leadership Team or via direct mail appeals. Any and every gift received by the RCA may be designated for a specific area of ministry or left undesignated. All undesignated cash gifts are typically assigned to the RCA On Mission Fund. Gifts to the RCA On Mission Fund help make the RCA's mission possible, including the work of the new Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. The center comes alongside groups of RCA churches to strengthen and support existing congregations and new churches in the following areas:

- Race relations and advocacy
- Leadership development
- Disability advocacy
- Women's transformation and leadership
- Discipleship building and training
- Church planting and multiplication
- Local missional engagement
- Next generation engagement

The center is a place of connection and curated resources for the purpose of growing disciples who participate in God's reign throughout the world, to the glory of God, whose mission we follow. In addition to supporting the work of the center, the On Mission Fund supports the ongoing work of RCA Global Mission. Your gift to the RCA On Mission Fund makes ministry possible.

A further clarification of the RCA's policy on undesignated gifts: all undesignated estate gifts in excess of \$10,000 are assigned to the RCA General Endowment Fund. All Global Mission undesignated gifts (both estate and other) are typically assigned to the Global Mission Endowment.

The Advancement team also assists with raising resources and awareness of the RCA Church Growth Fund through savings certificates, estate planning, special project funding, or capital campaigns.

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God's people. In fiscal year 2022, 77 percent of the RCA's total income was received through voluntary support (contributions, grants, and Partnership-in-Mission shares).

For a brief synopsis of the 2022 budget, please refer to page 26 of the most recent Ministry Impact Report (October 2021 through September 2022). You may request a Ministry Impact Report by calling 616-541-0881 or emailing [advancement@rca.org](mailto:advancement@rca.org).

The ongoing funding structure of the denomination relies heavily upon the generosity of individual donors, foundations, corporations, and churches that give over and above assessments. We remain truly grateful for all those who have chosen to invest in the mission and ministry of the RCA.

The RCA continues to partner with the Barnabas Foundation for resources around estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift management. The easiest gift, and often the gift with the most impact, is the gift that is made through your estate plan. For information about how you can include the RCA in your final estate plan or how you can receive income for the remainder of your lifetime from a planned gift that will benefit the RCA at the time of your passing, please contact Larryl Humme at [lhumme@rca.org](mailto:lhumme@rca.org) or 708-778-3780.

The mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America only happens because of the generosity of people like you throughout the denomination. Please consider including a gift to the RCA in your regular giving and/or in your estate planning. For more information on how to make a gift, please visit [www.rca.org/give](http://www.rca.org/give) or contact an Advancement team member:

- Larryl Humme, director of Advancement ([lhumme@rca.org](mailto:lhumme@rca.org) or 708-778-3780)
- Natalie Lopez, executive assistant for Advancement ([nlopez@rca.org](mailto:nlopez@rca.org) or 616-541-0881)

## **REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL**

My sisters and brothers in Christ, as children of God, we continue to stand fast, celebrating the grace of God in our lives. The willingness of our Lord and Savior to die, live, and bring forth the promise of eternal life is a gift that we carry with us each day.

Yet, during this celebration, we recognize that the reality of the world around us still exists. Yes, we are three years into a pandemic that still controls our lives, especially as many try to grasp the fact that we will never return to “normal” or again have many of the creature comforts that we once enjoyed.

As a society, we continue to deal with the social injustices that come forth from acts of racism, police brutality, the miseducation of our children, and the unequal distribution of resources among our communities.

The United States is also dealing with a political landscape that brings forth a true challenge to the words of our constitution:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

For the church of Jesus Christ, the brokenness of God’s kingdom has become apparent, by the decline and the divide within our mainline denominations, as well as the continued decline of in-person attendance at worship services, even after many churches have opened up their doors following the major portion of the pandemic. The initial hunger by many of our churches to reach the youth and those who have disconnected or have never connected with the church had to be put on hold or pushed back to deal with the reality of the financial needs to keep the doors open.

Yet, no matter how critical these pieces are to the daily lives of God’s children, within the kingdom of God, no matter what religious faith or background, there is one portion of our current reality that darkens the hearts of all people everywhere. No matter where you live, in North America or abroad, the reality of gun violence has pushed us to the brink of internal and external pain and fear.

In the United States of America, in the year 2022, there were over 640 mass shootings, and more than 40,000 lives were lost to gun violence. Yes, it is said that these numbers are somewhat lesser than the year before, but the reality is that across the globe, the number is still too large.

Living in the inner city, I can’t remember a day in the past couple of months that I have not woken up to hear that someone was shot or killed by a gun. Cities and neighborhoods where we do not manufacture guns continue to be a breeding ground for gun violence. Our adults are dying, our children are dying, and in most

cases, for no reason at all. For other cases, the hatred that is fueled within has burdened the outside.

In his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King Jr. shares these words:

Every man [woman] lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live.

Through celebration and pain, the African American Black Council (AABC) continues to press forth, realizing in the struggle that our internals and externals need to match up. This is not just the foundation to our calling within the kingdom of God; this is also the prayerful calling that God has mandated through our mission statement, which we hold so dear:

The AABC celebrates God's love by empowering, educating, and encouraging its members to partner with their communities and the RCA to develop ministries and policies for:

- Church growth
- Leadership development
- Social and racial justice
- Economic development

"What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." –Micah 6:8

Within the year 2022, through a greater development of our mission statement, we, the members of the AABC executive committee, were challenged to revisit our work and service to the church and the community at large. We continue to celebrate the defined structure and the dedicated work of our foundational brothers and sisters, but we recognize within ourselves that a change is necessary. Not only do we owe it to ourselves to engage the larger community within the leadership and leadership development, we also need to be intentional about the clarion call to all African Americans within the denomination, no matter their location or church community.

But our work does not end there. We must bring forth a voice and action in the critical areas of community living, so that we can truly and faithfully be the hands and feet of God upon the earth.

This year, in our connection and our programming, we brought forth deeper learning engagements and programs for individuals and church communities that are committed to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## AABC Ministries Summary

1. **Prayer Journal**. The AABC led the development and publication of a prayer journal. *The Prayer Journal for Racial Justice and the Beloved Community* is a joint effort of the racial and ethnic councils. The journal is available for purchase from the RCA store: <https://store.rca.org/products/prayer-journal-for-racial-justice-and-beloved-community>. The devotions are also available for free at [www.faithward.org/justicedevos](http://www.faithward.org/justicedevos).
2. **Sankofa Project**. The AABC developed a partnership with Influential Global Ministries (IGM) to launch a year-long Sankofa Project learning community. The Sankofa Project is a cohort for pastors and other church leaders. Its goals are to launch two to three new churches (fresh expressions) and strengthen two existing AABC churches. Dr. Peter Watts, the AABC coordinator, will be visiting cohort congregations to coach them through implementation of their plans and hopes they developed in the cohort.

Their Sankofa Project takes African American congregations through a learning journey in which they look back at the heritage of the African American church to inform how they might revitalize and flourish amid a rapidly changing context and mission field.

IGM's Sankofa Project is quite different from the RCA's Sankofa journeys. The RCA's Sankofa journeys were 3.5-day bus journeys into the Deep South to explore the overlays and intersecting of race and faith in the travelers' personal lives. IGM's mission is to equip and influence leaders and churches in the African American, multiethnic, and metropolitan contexts.

3. **Book discussion**. The AABC led a three-part discussion with author Lisa Sharon Harper on her newest book, *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World and How to Repair It All*. We gathered Black, White, Asian, and Latino Christians from around the country to talk about race in America, its impact on us and the church, and ways we can repair the harm that was done to all of us.
4. **Prophetic activism**. There has always been a tradition in the Black church that encourages faith-based social action, social service, and involvement in public policy issues. This tradition is rooted in an understanding of Christianity's historic concern for the poor and oppressed and encourages the involvement of the church in virtually every aspect of African American life. The AABC's coordinator will be implementing this work in 2023.
5. **Reorganization**. As we all know, the RCA is undergoing a deep, significant restructuring to craft faithful, fruitful ministries despite significant reductions in the denomination's membership and resources. The AABC is also engaged with a strategic restructuring. Our goals also include energizing faithful, fruitful ministries in changing ministry contexts through both new and existing congregations. A significant focus in our restructuring involves incorporating

into our executive committee champions/catalyzers. Each champion/catalyzer will focus on an element of the AABC's mission statement: church growth, leadership development, racial and social justice, and economic development. The changes we envision will require changes to the AABC's bylaws. When ready, the AABC will forward approved bylaw changes to the General Synod Council for certification.

6. **Mini Grants.** In 2021, the AABC developed a mini-grant initiative. The initiative's purpose was to promote the development of the AABC's four missional areas: church growth (multiplying disciples), leadership development (multiplying leaders), social and racial justice (multiplying missions), and economic development (multiplying capacities). Promotion is through a mini-grant demonstration initiative. Six congregations received mini grants of \$2,000–2,500. The AABC paid for the mini grants by repurposing funds not expended for its annual meeting, canceled due to COVID. The AABC is considering a similar mini-grant initiative. It likely will be done if funds can be identified.

### **AABC Recommendations to GSC**

*[Editor's note: the racial and ethnic councils are councils of the General Synod Council (GSC), according to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; as such, recommendations from the racial and ethnic councils are recommendations for action by the General Synod Council and not by the General Synod. These recommendations have already been acted upon by the GSC and are included here for information only. Information regarding actions taken by the GSC in response to these recommendations can be found at the end of this report.]*

As per BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b, the AABC makes three recommendations to the GSC.

Each recommendation emerges out of the lived experiences of some to many AABC constituents. These experiences have occurred across many years. Some of our council's leaders share that they have heard constituents of other councils express similar life experiences.

Each recommendation also contributes to the RCA becoming more antiracist. "Antiracist" here focuses the 2022 General Synod's adoption of RE 22-1 (MGS 2022, pp. 235-236), which begins:

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 AABC utilizes the following sections of RE 22-1 as the basis of its recommendations:



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 of 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.

*Recommendation 1: Ensure the Book of Church Order (BCO) embeds antiracism in the RCA's polity*

As we all know well, the RCA is going through a period of deep change. Restructuring that fits the RCA's mission to our reduced resources is in full swing. At the denomination level, the RCA's restructuring team and general secretary Eddy Alemán and his staff are doing tremendous work. They imagine and are making strategic changes. The AABC is thankful for and grateful to them for that work.

The AABC asserts that a deep review and redesign of our *BCO* needs to be included in the restructuring work. The antiracism policy necessitates that work. The Belhar Confession's theological assertions of justice, reconciliation, and unity also require it. Some of our constituents' experiences in assemblies encourage it.

Why our *BCO*? As a central governing document, the *BCO* is:

1. *Historic*. It is rooted in hundreds of years of RCA presence in America.
2. *Culturally rooted*. Dutch-American history, thinking, theologies, and assumptions about governance are embedded in the *BCO*.
3. *Polity expertise*. Most to all of the acknowledged *BCO* experts are of Dutch-American background. *BCO* experts who are people of color, across the centuries, have been few.
4. *An assimilation tool*. Racial and ethnic people have joined across generations. When joining, they assimilate into the fellowship's Dutch-rooted polity. That polity shapes for them governance patterns without regard to their own values and experiences.
5. *A racial, ethnic, and cultural tool of exclusion*. Racial and ethnic people who join the RCA own for themselves its Dutch-American heritage. They will not necessarily find many values and theologies indigenous to their own people groups. In effect, the *BCO* has deprived many of us racial and ethnic peoples the right to develop and honor our own corporate governance identities. People are not excluded; their cultures might be. There is plenty of space to be multiracial; there seems less space to be multicultural.

Note: The AABC does not believe these *BCO* descriptions reflect current personal or inter-personal intentions. We do believe the *BCO* was historically intended to maintain a Dutch national identity. With institutional racism, personal and inter-personal discrimination by current people is not necessary. Race-based institutions benefit and bless an intentionally preferred group and discriminate against others. That discrimination does “deprive many of us of the right to develop our personal and corporate identities” (quote from the antiracism policy).

Legitimate questions that challenge these assertions about our *BCO* include:

- “To what extent have our assemblies heard from our racial and ethnic constituents that they were racially or culturally discriminated against?”
- “If our assemblies do not hear much from them about injustice and discrimination, should we not assume injustice and discrimination either do not exist or are minimal in occurrence?”

In recent years, the GSC sponsored learning communities on cultural agility. These learning communities served and equipped a multiplicity of RCA congregations and members. The teaching tool of “Big Fish vs. Little Fish” was used in some of those learning communities. The tool sheds light on answers to those questions.

Big fish and little fish coexist in the same community. They do in our RCA community. Big fish tend to be more numerous and influential than little fish. However, each operates under different communications assumptions and options.

Big fish assumptions:

- They have rights to set or lead in setting standards, decisions, and directions
- Little fish fall in line

Little fish options when they perceive big fish pose dangers:

- **Disregard** big-fish danger (function as if safety and discrimination are irrelevant)
- **Capitulate** to big fish (give them what they want to keep self/us safe)
- **Deceive** big fish (deception is morally and ethically defensible as openness brings threats that can make self, family, and/or community seem or be less safe)
- **Fear** big fish (fear that some sort of penalty or retribution might be imminent)
- **Hate** big fish (both hating big fish for blocking ability to honor one’s own integrity and hating self for having to capitulate, deceive, fear and/or hate rather than stand up to big fish)
- **Withdraw** from big fish (either by being passive or resistant)

Also, as learned from the RCA’s cultural agility work, different kinds of conversations can and do occur about the same situations:

1. Among big fish when no or very few little fish are present
2. When big fish and little fish interact together and

3. Among little fish when the eyes and ears of big fish are not on them.

The big fish/little fish dynamic has played out when some AABC and other councils' constituents share experiences in assemblies, etc. of personal diminishment, racial injustice, and/or discrimination. There are instances where racial and ethnic people speak openly about their experiences. There are many other instances when racial and ethnic people opt to remain quiet or capitulate or deceive rather than engage in settings they believe are unsafe. When the communication strategies in the immediately preceding sentence are used, racial and ethnic people might share openly with other racial and ethnic people if they feel safe with them.

The AABC does not believe there are easy fixes to this communications challenge. One answer lies in the fifth portion of the antiracism policy about supporting allies.

The AABC's specific recommendation to GSC:

To direct GSC's racial and ethnic councils to, individually, review the *BCO* and develop specific ideas to alter, eliminate, or replace any article or section that would result in making those portions of the *BCO* more antiracist and culturally inviting for their groups; and further,

To assign to the restructuring committee or some similarly empowered ministry team to meet with the councils to receive from and negotiate with the councils on their recommendations for altering the *BCO*, and convey those recommendations to the GSC; and further,

To involve the Commission on Church Order and other entities to fashion recommendations for change to the *BCO*, and recommend agreed-upon changes to the General Synod for its discussion and action.

*[Editor's note: See page 72 for the GSC's response to the AABC's recommendation.]*

*Recommendation 2: Establish and resource internal and external evaluation units to assess the RCA's progress in becoming antiracist*

The 2022 antiracism policy is not the RCA's first effort to become an antiracist body of Christ.

The 1957 General Synod discussed and decided on serious, far-reaching recommendations. Little denominational impact resulted. In the 1960s, the RCA established a Commission on Racism. It did prodigious work and made many profound recommendations. In its final report, the commission lamented our denomination's limited progress. The denomination created the racial and ethnic councils. Since the 1990s, they have been serving as standing advisory committees to the GSC. Many RCA leaders guided the RCA in exploring and adopting the Belhar Confession. The AABC served among those leaders. That confession is our fourth Standard of Unity. RCA teams developed worship, discipleship, and leadership

resources based on the Belhar. The AABC cannot determine usage of those resources.

Through the early 2000s, our denomination labored for a “Decade Freed from Racism.” Our Call and Transformed & Transforming are the RCA’s most recent multi-year ministry plans. GSC staff and many assemblies made significant efforts through them to equip existing and new RCA churches for discipleship, leadership, and mission. The GSC established a position focused on multiracial initiatives. It also made “multiracial future freed from racism” the sixth dimension of Our Call. General Synods have authorized and developed a plethora of “freed from racism” resources.

Those resources aimed to:

1. Embed antiracism into discipleship and faith formation and
2. Make General Synod and GSC’s processes freer from racism.

Under the banner of “cultural agility,” GSC staff developed and facilitated a large number of antiracism learning communities and connection events.

Cumulatively, these efforts resulted in less-than-hoped-for transformation of the RCA into a thriving multiracial/multicultural denomination.

Most of these antiracism efforts used internal evaluation tools and processes. “Internal” essentially means that staff tended to evaluate their own work. They forwarded their evaluations to the general secretary. The general secretary often included them in his report to GSC and General Synod. Often, those staff reports celebrated outputs and shorter-term results, but not outcomes as much.

“Outputs” generally measure the amount and types of work we do. “Outcomes” generally measure the short-, intermediate-, and long-term changes made in the people and groups we serve.

Outcome evaluations can shed light on how fruitful and sustainable implementation of the antiracism policy is over time.

Internal evaluations must continue. External evaluations must also be developed and implemented. “External” essentially means engaging the work of professional evaluation entities not employed by the RCA. Those external evaluations must focus on short-, intermediate-, and long-term results. The AABC is unaware of external evaluations being used to assess any of the multiracial/antiracism efforts identified above.

The AABC recommends this posture:

External evaluations need to serve the RCA’s antiracism needs much like financial audits conducted by external certified public accountants serve the RCA’s financial needs.

Antiracism emerges from many Scriptural stories and teachings. Antiracism is embedded in the tenets of one of our cherished confessions. General Synod acknowledged that racism is sin because it is an offense to God. We have an antiracism policy whose features point to the ends we seek. Vigorous internal and external evaluations can help certify the RCA's progress toward becoming an antiracist body of Christ.

The AABC's specific recommendation to GSC:

To engage a reputable external evaluation organization, develop with them measurable short-, intermediate-, and long-term antiracism outcomes consistent with the antiracism policy, and authorize that organization to conduct annual evaluations for five consecutive years making annual evaluation reports to GSC on RCA antiracism progress.

*[Editor's note: See page 72 for the GSC's response to the AABC's recommendation.]*

*Recommendation 3: Applying spiritual formation, leadership, and mission toward gun violence in our communities*

Note: This recommendation specifically relates to gun violence, but is also applicable to any trauma-producing situations.

This recommendation is not about gun control. It is not about bullets. It is not about screening for gun licensure. It has to do entirely with spiritual formation, leadership, and mission.

The AABC introduces this topic by highlighting aspects of the August 21, 2019, pastoral letter by our general secretary, Rev. Eddy Alemán, published to our RCA membership ([www.rca.org/general-secretary-responds-to-gun-violence](http://www.rca.org/general-secretary-responds-to-gun-violence)).

That pastoral letter was written in response to a wave of mass shootings that occurred that August. A racially motivated mass shooting in El Paso resulted in 22 people killed and 24 injured. A mass killing in Dayton, Ohio, which occurred shortly thereafter, resulted in 9 dead and 17 injured. That perpetrator simply said he wanted to kill people.

In his letter, Rev. Alemán stated, "Some of the other tragedies [of the shootings that August] stemmed from unresolved family strife, out-of-hand disagreements, drive-by shootings, desire for revenge, results of criminal behavior, and a variety of other situations."

On March 1, 2023, the AABC studied the Gun Violence Archive ([www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting](http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting)) to understand better the mass shootings that occurred in the United States in February 2023. That month, 41 separate shootings occurred in which 54 people were killed and 143 were injured. Among the oldest shot was a 78-year-old person; the youngest was a five-year-old

child. Many perpetrators and victims were teens. Several of those 41 shootings were murder/suicides. Others took place in public places. Still others occurred at parties. Several were drive-by shootings. Several appear to simply be arguments that got out of hand. Some of these shootings took place in large metropolises such as Brooklyn, New York (population 2,736,074), and Chicago, Illinois (population 2,697,000). Others occurred in small towns and villages such as Loris, South Carolina (population 2,572), and Louisville, Missouri (population 6,008).

According to the Gun Violence Archive records, no state is free of injury and death by gun violence.

The AABC highlights here another part of Rev. Alemán's pastoral letter.

When I think about these shootings and the lives lost, I quickly think about my own family: my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my siblings. I think about my aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends. Do you think about yours?

I think, too, about the places the victims frequent: homes, schools, stores, places of worship, places of work, parks, and more. I think about how often I assume these places to be safe and secure for my loved ones and yours as well. Do you share these assumptions?

These sentiments are real, powerful, and very present realities for many of us. Many of us within the AABC describe our experiences with and knowledge of these ongoing instances of gun violence as traumatizing. The effects of the massive number of shootings live inside many of us. We might carry fearful, unspoken concerns about what we, our children, families, and friends might face day or night. We hope and pray for safety, give our children what we call "the talk," while at the same time we bury deep within our souls these concerns. Yet every day, life continues. Too often, our souls become burdened and overwhelmed but not healed.

Lamentably, many of our spiritual communities and leaders lack knowledge or even sensitivity about how to help us bear these burdens. We acknowledge tragedy and heartache at worship services and prayer. We support grieving members afterward with visits, meals, and ongoing prayers.

Still, the AABC humbly asserts that our and anyone's unhealed trauma affects the quality of what we understand it means to be in Christ. Too often, the AABC fears many of us lack the knowledge and resources within ourselves, families, communities, and congregations to nourish whole-making for traumatized spirits.

Trauma is not solely limited to moments of crisis. Trauma often is an ongoing chronic assault on our hearts, minds, and souls, staining our abilities to have the quality of life due to us as image-bearers of God.

In fact, too often, it appears that our rich teachings and potent exercises in discipleship, leadership, and mission seem untouched by, even insufficient to heal, the traumas we bear, including traumas from gun violence.

This link among gun violence, trauma, and the need for healing is deeply spiritual. The AABC asks the GSC:

1. How can the RCA help our AABC constituents, as well as our RCA members and friends, to increase their spiritual sensitivities to people traumatized by gun violence?
2. What guidance can the RCA offer our assemblies and people about how to help people heal from the traumas they bear?

The AABC's specific recommendations to GSC:

1. To urge GSC members and staff to identify and describe for themselves individually and within their families how their spirit of empathy is exercised when they learn of new acts of gun violence. Urge them individually and within their families to creatively connect their personal faith formation, leadership, and sense of mission to how they react and respond to episodes of gun violence within their congregational spheres, their geographic communities, and beyond.
2. To encourage congregations to do for themselves what is recommended for individuals in #1 above.
3. To stimulate congregations to learn about how gun violence has affected their members and the communities in which their members reside, and to encourage congregations to appreciate the traumas those experiences cause, and, just as importantly, what can happen to the soul and spiritual well-being of a person for whom such traumas are not attended to and healed.
4. To ask congregations to learn about local mental health and pastoral counseling resources that can assist persons with healing traumas.
5. To direct the general secretary to find ways to creatively incorporate addressing and healing traumas caused by gun violence into discipleship, leadership, and mission ministry strategies.
6. To direct the general secretary to urge leaders of our seminaries, MFCA, and the RCA colleges to incorporate addressing and healing traumas caused by gun violence in their educational work of faith formation, leadership, and mission.

*[Editor's note: See page 72 for the GSC's response to the AABC's recommendation.]*

My RCA family, the external is tapping on the internal, and the question at hand is "How will we respond?" Our challenge is to strengthen our spiritual connection as we move toward the external engagements. When we embark on this direction, we allow the Spirit of God to go forth upon the hearts of our two nations, touching one heart at a time and reviving it, not for one's will, but God's will.

The AABC will continue to examine our past, present, and future endeavors through the evaluation and assessment of our service within the kingdom of God and the Reformed Church in America. It is our hope that you will pray for us and with us, as together we continue the journey toward kingdom building.

Submitted by  
Rev. Sharon Atkins, AABC president

### **General Synod Council Response to AABC Recommendations**

At its March 21-22, 2023, stated meeting, the GSC received the AABC's report and spent time in discussion around the three significant recommendations that the AABC brought before GSC.

In response to the AABC's first recommendation, GSC voted:

#### **GSC 23-31**

To invite GSC's racial and ethnic councils to, individually, review the *BCO* and develop specific ideas to alter, eliminate, or replace any article or section that would result in making those portions of the *BCO* more antiracist and culturally inviting for their groups, and to convey those recommendations to the GSC and the restructuring team.

GSC strongly supported the content of the recommendation, but wanted to simplify the number of steps required to receive and apply the suggestions for changes to the *BCO* so that the restructuring team would be able to incorporate suggestions from the councils into its proposals. The GSC moderator communicated this request with each racial and ethnic council in early April, asking for a response by September 15, 2023.

In response to the AABC's second recommendation, the GSC felt it needed more information, particularly about the estimated financial impact of an external audit of that nature, but also regarding what organizations do this type of audit. To that end, the GSC voted:

#### **GSC 23-22**

To refer this recommendation back to the AABC to ask them to research options and costs for employing a reputable external evaluation organization to evaluate the RCA's movement toward antiracism and help the denomination develop a related strategic plan, and to bring this recommendation and information back to the GSC not later than March 2024.

The GSC adopted the AABC's third recommendation as proposed (GSC 23-23) and drafted communications to the various parties listed, encouraging the responses to gun violence as indicated in the recommendation.



The GSC moderator sent a communication to the AABC moderator in early April to inform the AABC of the actions GSC took in response to the AABC's recommendations.

## **REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES**

The *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b, states that “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.”

### **Introduction**

The 2022-2023 year has been another fruitful yet challenging year for many of our churches and their ministries. While most things have returned to normal post-pandemic, our churches and their leaders face unique challenges in reorganizing and restructuring their Sunday services to meet the in-person need as well as developing a multimedia presence to accommodate those who are not ready to worship in-person. Many churches have experienced significant decreases in church attendance over the past few years and are still working on bringing their numbers back to pre-pandemic times. However, because of this decrease in numbers, churches are struggling financially, especially with the current state of the economy.

Despite all these challenges, God continues to move and stir the hearts of his people, especially those who are members of the racial and ethnic councils, such as the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM), to unite and strengthen one another by sharing and listening to each other’s stories and to overall become a solid support system for the Reformed Church in America (RCA). For 2023, our joint task is to continue to grow as a diverse but united community in Christ Jesus, as a foundation of our denomination.

### **Joint Council Gathering in August 2022**

The Joint Council Gathering took place in Chicago, Illinois, in August 2022. CPAAM joined the African American Black Council (AABC), the Council for Hispanic Ministries (CHM), and the newly formed Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council (NAIM) in the joint meetings. CPAAM participants were excited and encouraged to finally have the opportunity to meet in-person since they had not been able to meet for the past three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the participants expressed gratitude for this opportunity to share and listen to each other’s stories about their respective councils, ministries, and visions, and most of all, we are encouraged to be part of the multiethnic and multicultural unity that is the vision of the RCA.

This occasion was particularly special because it was the first time the Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council joined us as an official council and we were blessed by their songs and testimonies. The event also provided very helpful information and resources from the various ministries within the RCA and allowed people to connect with others outside of their own ministries. Overall, it was a successful gathering and many participants expressed that they look forward to future meetings.

## **CPAAM Annual Consultation Meeting in August 2022**

While in Chicago for the Joint Council Gathering in August 2022, CPAAM also held its annual Consultation with about 30 members present. We were pleased to hear from Rev. Eddy Alemán, the general secretary, about the vision and direction of the denomination. Rev. Dr. JP Sundararajan, director of RCA Global Mission, was also a keynote speaker who focused on how we all can be engaging in God's mission in the global community. Rev. Dr. John Chang, from Grace Christian Church in Bayside, Queens, shared some opportunities within the Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International. During the workshop, "What's Next?" we used the book *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* to generate discussion among the different language groups: Korean, Taiwanese, Mandarin, and English. We enjoyed a pleasant fellowship with others by playing ping-pong, singing hymns accompanied by a wonderful pipe organ, and touring the church facility at the Taiwanese Community Church in Lombard, one of our member churches in the Chicago area.

## **Leadership Transitioning in Churches within CPAAM**

There have been many changes to staffing in the Taiwanese churches this year, including the installation of Reverend Cheng Il (Amos) Mo, and the ordination and installation of Kelvin Kong at Grace Christian Church in Bayside, as well as the installation of Reverend Yang Sheng Yu at Long Island Taiwanese Church. Reverend Peter Chen was installed at Fair Lawn Community Church, and Reverend Peter Chao was installed at Winfield Reformed Church. Reverend Dong Won Han was installed at Grace and Peace Reformed Church in Englewood, New Jersey. Mr. Leonard Poluan, seminarian and youth pastor at the Reformed Church in Metuchen, was accepted into New Brunswick Classis as a minister candidate. We are blessed to have these leaders serving in various faith communities, and we look forward to praying and supporting them as they embark on new ministry opportunities.

## **Ministries in the CPAAM**

Grace Christian Church in Bayside launched a Flushing preaching site with 40 members. Bronx Grace Christian Church has been developing for 15 years. These churches are training new cell group leaders, focusing on generational identity for youth, and restoring families through prayer and healing ministries. Grace Dunamis Seminary has been established online.

The Japanese American United Church (JAUC) continues to ask for prayers for their five-year search for a bilingual minister. During the pandemic, JAUC was able to invite disability preachers and speakers via Zoom. Besides Rev. Terry DeYoung and Rev. Mark Stephenson, the RCA and CRC coordinators for Disability Concerns, Rev. Doug McClintic, one Korean American minister, and one Japanese American seminarian were guest preachers.

Due to the rise of anti-Asian sentiments and violence during COVID-19, CPAAM members have been invited to share their stories through New Brunswick

Theological Seminary's Reformed Church Center, the Dismantling Racism Prayer gatherings, and other venues within the RCA.

The members of the Women's Ministry haven't been able to meet very often during the pandemic. However, we are blessed to see many CPAAM women taking leadership roles of various capacities within their local churches, communities, CPAAM, and even at the RCA denominational level. In 2022, a group of women met to share about the obstacles that women face in ministry. We learned that some women ministers are facing challenges in their process of becoming ordained ministers and discussed how CPAAM might help. Several CPAAM women attended the 2022 RCA "She Is Called Sabbath Rest Retreat" and those who benefited much recommended it to other CPAAM sisters. More are expected to attend the 2023 "She Is Called Sabbath Rest Retreat."

We recognize the importance of inviting and working side-by-side with the youth and English-speaking ministry leaders in order to empower and encourage the younger generation of believers and leaders. We continue our efforts to brainstorm ideas and opportunities for increased collaboration and teamwork. It would be difficult to have a full discussion about the youth and English-speaking ministries without those leaders from the respective churches. We hope that CPAAM church leaders would encourage their next generation leaders to join in these conversations in order for our CPAAM churches to continue to thrive into the future.

### **Changes in CPAAM Executive Committee Members**

The following individuals were elected: Leonard Poluan was elected as the English-speaking representative, Jui Lin Ou Yang was elected as the Taiwanese representative, and Felix Fan was elected as the Chinese representative.

We are so grateful to the following individuals who represented their language groups within the executive committee for a total of two terms in the past four or five years: Rev. Kyunghoon Suh, Rev. Steven Kim, Rev. Grace Rohrer, and Ms. Gerri Yoshida. These individuals contributed and served CPAAM ministries by providing reflective and insightful leadership to the executive committee.

### **Conclusion**

CPAAM is a wonderful group consisting of individuals from many different countries in Asia including but not limited to China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India, Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Throughout American history, non-Asians presented a pattern of thought that all people of Asian backgrounds looked alike, sounded alike, and thought alike, when in fact, we all have uniquely different histories, perspectives, and values. It is only recently that people are starting to better understand these differences. CPAAM churches continue to contribute to this breakthrough by sharing and learning more about how to navigate through challenging multiracial issues as well as simultaneously breaking down the stereotypical barriers that divide us. In the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we stand together to move

forward toward the goal of racial equality, unity, and oneness that is called for in the body of Christ.

In conclusion, we thank all executive committee members for their dedicated time, passion, and wisdom poured into the ministry of CPAAM, and we are also grateful to our CPAAM coordinator, Rev. En Young Kim, for all her efforts in caring for the CPAAM churches and pastors, representing the CPAAM communities at RCA meetings, and advocating for CPAAM and the RCA at ecumenical gatherings.

Respectfully submitted by

Rev. Jae Hyun Ahn

Ms. Peihuang Chen

Mr. Felix Fan

Rev. Kelvin Kong

Mr. Leonard Poluan

Rev. Kyunghoon Suh (*ex officio*)

Rev. Fransisca Rumokoy (president)

Ms. Jui Lin Ou Yang

## **REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES**

To the General Synod Council (GSC) of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), peace and greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Council for Hispanic Ministries submits the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2022.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries (CHM) has continued to work toward the implementation of a culture of disciples that multiply into other disciples. After a couple of years of not being able to gather and have our annual Hispanic Summits for the years 2020 and 2021, finally, in 2022, we had the opportunity to meet in Chicago, Illinois, for the Joint Racial and Ethnic Council Gathering, where we had a turnout of over 180 representatives from all four racial and ethnic councils. Just like in Revelation 7:9, this gathering brought together people from every nation, every tribe, and every language, praising Christ for what he has done and will continue to do in us and in the RCA.

All four councils were able to have their own separate reunions at different times. The Council for Hispanic Ministries gathered under the direction of our coordinator, Rev. Andres Serrano, and president at that time, Rev. Pedro Agudelo. It was a time of encouragement, learning, and fellowship. All present expressed their desire and excitement about future mixed gatherings like this one.

We thank Rev. Pedro Agudelo for the two years he served as the president of the Hispanic Council. It is an honor and pleasure for me, Rev. Fredy Gutierrez, to serve as the new president.

CHM continues to work with Classis de las Naciones, Classis of Central Plains, Classis of the Americas, and other classes in planting churches. As of 2022, over 30 Hispanic churches are receiving NCP (New Church Plant) funds through RCA Church Multiplication. We are still intentional in reaching out to all classes to offer our support and help planting churches and other Latino ministries.

In October 2022, representatives from Classis de las Naciones, Classis of the Americas, RCA Global Mission, and RCA Church Multiplication traveled to the Dominican Republic to officially ordain 12 ministers and welcome the Iglesia Reformada Dominicana (Dominican Reformed Church, IRD) into the Classis de las Naciones. This same group of delegates then traveled to Medellin, Colombia, to gather with 30 local pastors interested in learning more about the RCA and Reformed theology. From Medellin, the group traveled to Cucuta, Colombia, to gather with 50 Venezuelan pastors who crossed over the border, invited by Classis de las Naciones and Classis of the Americas and sponsored by Global Mission. At this meeting, Classis de las Naciones graduated and ordained 15 commissioned pastors who had been taking Reformed theology classes with Rev. Andres Serrano.

As a result of these meetings, we have over 100 pastors currently receiving Reformed theology classes taught by Rev. Andres Serrano, Rev. Fabio Sosa, and myself (Rev. Fredy Gutierrez) in the following countries: Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and the U.S.

CHM continues to assist pastors and leaders to get seminary training with New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) and Western Theological Seminary (WTS). Currently, we have around 100 students. The number of students who received RCA scholarships declined in 2021 from 50 students to 30 students due to changes in the application process and limitations of funds. We continue to work at finding ways to support those seminarians who are in need to finish their seminary training. We continue our partnership with NBTS's WELL Program, which empower pastors to enjoy integral well-being in their leadership.

CHM continues its weekly prayer Zoom meeting every Monday with our general secretary, Rev. Eddy Alemán. Training and relationship building also takes place at these meetings.

We are working with all racial and ethnic councils and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE). We also support CORE's promotion of an antiracism culture.

In conclusion, we are thankful for the work and support of the general secretary, the office of Global Mission, the office of Church Multiplication, the coordinator for Hispanic Ministries, and the General Synod Council for the work done for the Hispanic people of the RCA. We pray for the RCA and are excited to work toward its future in the expanding of the gospel. We submit this report to you and pray for the Lord's blessings and for the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be with all of us as we continue to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Respectfully submitted,  
The Executive Committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries  
Rev. Fredy Gutierrez, CHM president

## **REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION**

Since its origins in 1628, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Today, we continue to share stories of how God is at work among us. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, utilizing longstanding communication channels alongside new ones.

### **Supporting Denominational Priorities**

General Synod Council (GSC) communication staff communicates about and provides marketing support for key RCA initiatives, including RCA Global Mission and the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. As teams for Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and Advocacy and Race Relations came together in the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry, communication staff assisted with streamlining many existing communication vehicles to support the new team structure and connect effectively with people in the church.

### **Increasing Focus on Digital Communication**

In 2019, the RCA unfolded a new digital strategy with the launch of Faithward.org. The site, focused on moving faith forward, includes ideas for living out your faith, reflections on Scripture, and resources for your church. In its first year, Faithward helped church leaders connect with resources and spend time in thoughtful reflection about faith. It also engaged people asking big questions like “Who is God?” and “How do I know God’s listening when I pray?” and “How do I know what God wants for me?” Contributors come from across the RCA and sometimes outside it.

As Faithward’s reach grew, it began to shift from a blog site to a resourcing hub for the wider church. The website contains many resources for RCA leaders and church members, but it also serves a much wider audience. In its first four years, Faithward has reached more than 3 million users, from pastors looking for tools to teens struggling with their faith. In the last year, people have visited Faithward from nearly every country in the world.

What began as a small, experimental ministry has become a digital space for discipleship, spiritual growth, transformation, and connection.

All Faithward content is now available in English and Spanish, and Spanish-language visitors have increased dramatically in recent months.

Popular content posted in the last year includes a guide to choosing a children’s Bible, a series on the Lord’s prayer, devotions on racial reconciliation and justice, a First Nations Bible study written by Bizzy Feeke, a series on equity-based hospitality, and volume 3 of the *She Is Called Women of the Bible* study series.

One Faithward visitor shared this comment: “I’m so happy that I found this [‘Why did Jesus have to die for us?’ article]. I have so many questions about the Lord.



Questions I am sometimes embarrassed to ask because I guess I feel like I should know the answers. This way I can read and get the answers I need and hopefully help someone else know the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for having this on here. It is appreciated.”

Another shared: “As I myself am struggling with my faith, I got a lot of clarity from [‘Advice for When You’re Struggling with Doubt’. I feel a lot better. ... Thank you for sharing. It helps to know I am not alone in dealing with these things, helps me to continue to have hope.”

The RCA website, [www.rca.org](http://www.rca.org), continues to resource RCA leaders with RCA-specific materials, including creeds and confessions in several languages, liturgies, and information about governance.

A News & Resources email newsletter provides provide dynamic, responsive resourcing to church leaders twice a month; other email newsletters provide updates related to particular topics or initiatives. Subscribe at [www.rca.org/subscribe](http://www.rca.org/subscribe).

### **Translation Efforts Continue**

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2022 *Book of Church Order* in Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin, a number of ministry resources have been translated. For the first time, the *Book of Church Order* was translated into Portuguese. Other recent translation projects include the *She Is Called Women of the Bible* study series volume 3, applications for grants, forms for the Board of Benefits Services, and everything on Faithward.org and RCA.org. Faithward is available in English and Spanish, while the RCA website is available in English, Spanish, Korean, and Portuguese.

### **Improving Internal Processes**

The communications team moved to a new project management software this year, ClickUp, to better support shifting needs and digital-first communications. ClickUp has brought greater efficiency to the communications team and enables better collaboration across staff departments.

### **Report on the RCA Store**

Beginning in 2021, resources specific to the RCA became available on an online RCA Store rather than being housed and distributed through Faith Alive Christian Resources. This move significantly reduced both production and fulfillment costs for the denomination.

The RCA Store ([store.rca.org](http://store.rca.org)) was launched in summer 2020, offering synodical resources as a pilot project. Select additional resources have been added, with more expected over time. The store is a print-on-demand platform, which requires no inventory. When an order comes in, each item is printed at that time and shipped to the purchaser.

Revenue from the RCA Store supports the ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

Over the next year, resources currently housed on the RCA Store will be migrated to Amazon.com to further reduce cost, improve customer service, and streamline staff time dedicated to the store.

## REPORT OF THE RCA ARCHIVES

### Looking Back to Look Forward: The Role of Archives and Their Special Purpose for the RCA

The purpose of archives is usually stated as legal, financial, historical, and administrative. Archives also serve a spiritual purpose in the life of a religious community, especially that of the Reformed Church in America. Records of activities and initiatives (from those of churches, classes, or regional synods to the General Synod; from urban outreach to global mission work) tell a compelling story: how the Reformed faith is lived out in the world.

The history of the Reformed Church in America is the embodiment of a living faith, one whose early footprint predates the founding of the United States. This long history also has depth: the Reformed Church is introspective by nature. A desire to be true to the faith informs periodic denominational self-examination. Examples of such reforms include the anti-apartheid promise of the Belhar Confession, current denomination-wide antiracism initiatives, and other changes that address modern challenges while maintaining the faith. A recent Reformed Church Center lecture by Dr. Andrea Mosterman exemplifies using archival research to learn about the past in order to learn *from* it. The role of archival research in the living faith of the Reformed Church shows a continual desire for reflection, self-examination, and *reform*.

The history represented by these records continues to inform decision-making by the Reformed Church in America. Throughout four centuries, the Archives has held and maintained records of churches, classes, consistories, and regional synods. It also houses records of General Synod Council staff, missionaries, and more. Last year at General Synod, the Commission on History expressed concern about some staff records that had not been collected. In follow-up conversation, they named records of the Strategic Leadership Team, formerly known as the Executive Leadership Team, since 2018. Those records have been collected and submitted to the Archives, with plans in place to continue collecting them every year. The Commission on History also raised concerns about records related to Transformed & Transforming; the Archives is working with the commission to verify, and, if needed, remedy the oversight.

Last year, the Archives was staffed by a digital archivist and was closed during a staff transition from mid-September through January. After assessing the needs of the Archives and of the Reformed Church in America, a full-time archivist, rather than a more specialized digital archivist, was determined to be the best fit. A job description was revised with input from the Commission on History. The commission was kept up to date during the hiring process, which concluded with the new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, beginning her role at the end of January 2023, and the RCA Archives reopening a week later. This report presents observations based upon the new archivist's limited time in this role, outlines suggestions for maintenance and improvement, and offers a vision for the future of the Archives.

This assessment and vision for the RCA Archives can be summed up with the acronym **P-COATS**: Preservation, Conservation, Organization, Accessibility, Technology, Spirituality. The last category is summarized in the conclusion.

*Preservation.* In keeping with archival principles, care for the RCA's collections begins with preservation and conservation. Archival preservation ensures that records such as vulnerable items in the Collegiate Collection, which was transferred to the RCA Archives in the fall, are protected in suitable archival housing. For example, the rare books in the Collegiate Collection will now be housed in acid-free archival boxes.

*Conservation* encompasses repair, when possible, of damaged materials. The archivist will continue in these initiatives through active involvement in professional organizations such as the Northeast Document Conservation Center; the Center for Book Arts, the religious archives section of the Society of American Archivists; and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. The latter organization sponsors grant programs for assessment of archival collections such as the RCA Archives; the archivist will apply for this grant both for practical reasons and for its institutional prestige. Candidates for conservation include books in the Collegiate Church collection that range from 100 to 400 years old; these rare artifacts are systematically being housed in archival boxes for protection and longevity.

*Organization: Coordination of electronic lists with physically stored archival materials.* Granting accessibility to researchers includes the need for re-organization, specifically coordinating electronic finding aids, inventories, and file lists with the physical materials stored in the archives. This is a long-term project that will proceed in increments. An intern from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) or Rutgers School of Communication and Information (library school) would assist in this work, allowing the archivist to create workflows for accession and deaccession of materials. Accessibility could be improved with new software. For example, the archivist has a continual need to process bequests (such as the recent bequest of the late Rev. James Eelman's papers), the Collegiate records, and records of departing churches.

*Accessibility* of the archives is necessary in more than one sense of the term. Making the collections accessible to researchers and physical accessibility are overlapping concerns. The physical space in the basement, which encompasses two former offices, will be maximized in three ways: digitization, distribution, and deaccessioning.

- **Digitization.** Six boxes of paper files sent out for digitization by the previous archivist now take up 6.75(H)x2(W)x5.5(D) inches; similarly, 47 boxes of microfilm are now accessible on a dedicated external hard drive.
- **Distribution.** Multiple copies of books now taking up valuable space could be distributed to students or theological libraries.
- **Deaccessioning.** Obsolete computers, pamphlet copies, redundant copies of modern books, and other non-archival items in archival boxes are proposed for deaccession, freeing up space.

“State of the Archives” reports from the early 1990s predict that space would run out in six years; thirty years later, this prophecy has come true. The RCA Archives share physical space at the Gardner Sage Library with the collections of NBTS. Recently, storage was maximized by the availability of an old basement office and clearing out boxes previously stored in NBTS’s space. The new space has 28 boxes, with shelving space for incoming church records; contents of the former archivist’s basement office will reside there during construction.

Currently, researchers with disabilities cannot access the basement level where archives are stored. Boxes are now carried by hand down to the archives and storage areas. The non-functioning dumbwaiter also limits the type of materials that can be brought up to the main level. Repairs are scheduled for June.

*Technology.* Accessibility would be enhanced by ArchiveSpace, the software standard in the field. Filemaker Pro would continue to be used, as most of the records use this software.

*Spirituality.* This report presents suggestions for the good stewardship of administrative, legal, financial, and historical records of the RCA. It also offers a vision for a well-preserved, organized, accessible collection of spiritual and historical interest. As demonstrated above, the new plan for the Archives is designed to fulfill practical needs as well as attest to the Reformed Church’s manifestation of faith in the world. Contemporary archival technology is an ancillary but necessary means to the end of preserving the rich, four-century-old heritage of the RCA.

## **REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2022**

### **Response to MGS 2022, H 22-1a, pp. 216-217**

In response to a recommendation from the Commission on History that would place supervision for the RCA Archives and its staff under an Archives Supervision Subcommittee, the 2022 General Synod voted:

To refer H 22-1 to the Commission on Church Order, working with the Commission on History and any other relevant parties, for report back to General Synod 2023.

See the relevant portion of the report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 183-191 of this workbook.

### **Response to MGS 2022, H 22-2, p. 218**

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

See the relevant portion of the report of the Commission on History on pp. 192-216 of this workbook.

### **Response to MGS 2022, RE 22-3, p. 238**

To direct the General Synod Council to reinstate and recognize a fourth racial/ethnic council for Native American and First Nations Ministries as a 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).

General Synod Council (GSC) staff consulted with the Commission on Church Order (CCO) for guidance regarding the steps needed to “reinstate and recognize” the Native American Indigenous Ministries (NAIM) Council. The CCO advised staff and the GSC that it believed certain actions should be taken in order to officially reconstitute NAIM:

Given the wording, the commission agreed that the council likely is not “officially constituted” until any necessary actions to “reinstate” and “recognize” the council are taken by GSC. The commission believes that the nature of those actions should probably include:

1. a declaration that the council is reconstituted;
2. a designation and approval of any initial governing documents (bylaws) for the council—which are first the prerogative of GSC, although GSC

- could largely delegate the drafting of more permanent bylaws to the council itself;
3. and a designation of the initial members of the council or its executive board.

A challenge lay in the fact that, without a defined executive committee, it was unclear who should most properly be tasked with drafting bylaws, and yet without bylaws that define the executive committee and how it is selected, there could be no official executive committee. The CCO noted in its initial response that the GSC could choose to do the initial drafting of bylaws itself, but upon further discussion, the GSC felt that option would remove the agency of NAIM constituents to have primary input into their own council's structure. The GSC wanted to ensure that NAIM itself would be the primary drafter of its own bylaws (though final bylaws will need to be approved by the GSC, as is the case for all racial and ethnic council bylaws).

The director of General Synod operations and the staff coordinator for Native American and Indigenous Ministries, along with his executive assistant, consulted further with the moderator of the Commission on Church Order and came up with a potential way forward, which was recommended to the GSC at its March 2023 stated meeting.

The GSC received this recommendation favorably, and at its March 2023 stated meeting it appointed a small group of five NAIM leaders (Jeffrey Botella, Nancy Gillis, Nathan Gullion, George Montanari, and Vincea Nez) to draft bylaws for the council, with the intention that they would begin this work at NAIM's April 2023 retreat.

Once bylaws are drafted, the GSC will meet to approve them as well as take an action to officially declare NAIM reconstituted. Once the bylaws are approved, NAIM can elect its executive committee according to the process laid out in its new bylaws.

#### **Response to *MGS 2022*, ONB 22-5, p. 108**

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, meeting electronically with representatives of classes with dual-affiliated consistories, to develop a plan that accounts for an equitable payment of assessments/covenant shares without placing an undue burden on either classes or the denomination, for report to the 2023 General Synod.

See the relevant portion of the report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 183-191 of this workbook.

#### **Response to *MGS 2022*, ONB 22-7, p. 109**

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.

See the relevant portion of the report of the Commission on Christian Action on pp. 155-163 of this workbook.

### **Response to *MGS 2022*, ONB 22-9, p. 111-112**

...To instruct the Commission on Theology in consultation with the General Synod professorate to examine whether the conditions surrounding Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine meet the criteria for a declaration of *status confessionis*, a full break in communion due to the gravity of the breach of faithfulness to the gospel by any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia's (and Belarus's) war against Ukraine, for report and recommendation to the 2023 General Synod...

There were four parts to ONB 22-9, one of which requested a specific report to the 2023 General Synod. (The remaining three parts were addressed throughout this past year in the manner directed in the original recommendation.) For the response to the above portion of the synod action, see the relevant portion of the report of the Commission on Theology on pp. 222-241 of this workbook.

### **REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2021**

#### **Response to *MGS 2021*, RF 21-1, p. 94**

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should consider the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2024; and further,

To approve the \$0.29 per member assessment to fund the work of this team.

### **INTERIM REPORT OF THE RCA RESTRUCTURING TEAM**

#### **Overview**

As a result of the RCA's Vision 2020 Team report, the restructuring team was created by General Synod in October 2021 to propose updated structures for the denomination to "optimize the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health" (*MGS 2021*, RF 21-1, p. 94). The General Synod in 2022 approved a recommendation



for the restructuring team to provide an interim report to General Synod 2023, for “the purpose of lessening the sense of uncertainty and to build upon the vision going forward” (*MGS 2022*, ONB 22-2a, p. 105). The restructuring team will present its final report and recommendations to General Synod 2024 for consideration.

General Synod had charged the General Synod Council (GSC) with appointing a team of between 10 and 15 people, including “several executive RCA staff members, and representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA.” They took into account research and guidance from the Vision 2020 Team as well as feedback from General Synod 2021.

Additional resource people include representatives from the Commission on Church Order and Tim TenClay, pastor of Community Reformed Church in Manhasset, New York. Bob Logan acts as a facilitator for the team. Resource people have no vote. Marijke Strong and Brian Keepers from the Vision 2020 Team are available for consultation with the Restructuring Team as needed.

The restructuring team members include:

- Eddy Alemán, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America
- Dale Assink, regional executive for the Regional Synod of the Heartland
- Greg Brower, classis leader for the Great Lakes City Classis
- Michelle Chahine, General Synod Council member, Regional Synod of the Great Lakes president, former GSC moderator, and elder at Immanuel Community Reformed Church in Lansing, Michigan
- Chad Farrand, director of the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry for the Reformed Church in America, Regional Synod of Mid-America vice president, classis executive consultant for Classis de las Naciones
- Andrea Godwin-Stremmler, trustee at Western Theological Seminary, executive director of New Revelations Collegiate Mission in Krum, Texas
- Sung Kim, lead pastor of Grace Churches in Ann Arbor, Michigan, associate general secretary and chief operating officer of the Reformed Church in America
- Micah McCreary, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, General Synod professor of theology
- Sherri Meyer-Veen, co-pastor of Niskayuna Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York, minister for renewal for the Regional Synod of Albany
- Ina Montoya, elder at Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church in Dulce, New Mexico
- Young Na, pastor of Forest Park Church in Woodhaven, New York
- Andres Serrano, pastor of Iglesia La Senda in Corona, California, and coordinator for Hispanic Ministries of the Reformed Church in America
- Gildo Vieira, church multiplication leader for the classis of Ontario, elder at Igreja Vida Nova in Toronto, Ontario

## Summary of Progress

The restructuring team has been meeting since March 2022, in a series of Zoom calls and in-person meetings.

### *Spiritual Discernment*

For the first year, the team's work focused on spiritual discernment to faithfully discern how we believe God is calling us to restructure our denomination for the future. As we engaged in a process of group discernment using the work of Ruth Haley Barton in her book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, we realized that in order to restructure, we must first know what outcomes that structure needs to produce.

Throughout this discernment process, we have focused on Scripture, using two key passages to guide us to these outcomes:

The Great Commission - Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Revelation 7:9-10

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, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb."

The restructuring team, through our discernment process, has sensed God calling the RCA to re-examine and refresh our individual and denominational commitment and faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, while maintaining alignment with our Reformed theology, including our creeds and confessions, and honoring our history and traditions while reshaping our structures for effective ministry in the twenty-first century. We are discerning that God is reminding the RCA to return to basic biblical principles of discipleship in preparation for the expanding ways in which God wants to impact the world through us.

The focus statement that we believe God is calling the RCA to produce is "growing disciples who participate in God's reign throughout the world." This focus statement has already been refined through feedback received from around the denomination via the roundtable meetings that will be discussed below. We recognize that this focus statement still needs more definition, yet we know that God is calling us to focus on transformation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that leads

to deepening our love of God, others, and the world. This will form the foundation on which our proposed future denominational structure will be built.

### *Zoom Meetings and In-Person Roundtable Meetings*

From October to December 2022, the restructuring team conducted ten Zoom meetings with classis and regional leaders. We are pleased to share that there was a high level of interest and participation from leaders in nearly all RCA classes and regional synods.

From January through April 2023, the restructuring team held a series of 13 in-person gatherings around the U.S. and Canada. In May, one Zoom event will be held for those unable to attend an in-person gathering. These gatherings were open to anyone in the denomination who was interested in attending, especially young people with a heart for the RCA's future.

The purpose of both the Zoom meetings and in-person roundtable gatherings was to open up dialogue with as many in the RCA as possible and to be transparent about the work we have done as a team thus far. The team's goal in these meetings was to introduce the focus statement we have discerned, engage in dialogue, and gather feedback, which our team will consider as we continue to refine the outcomes.

Overall, the discussion at the Zoom meetings felt positive, with a sense of curiosity, a desire to express concerns openly, and a willingness to contribute to the future of the RCA. For a summary of the themes in the feedback received from classis and regional leaders, please read the team's February 2023 update at [www.rca.org/update-from-the-rca-restructuring-team-february-2023](http://www.rca.org/update-from-the-rca-restructuring-team-february-2023).

The team looks forward to sharing the summary of the themes in the feedback from the in-person roundtable gatherings once the analysis has been completed. The team greatly appreciates the feedback and engagement we have received as a team from these meetings. It has been a great encouragement to see how these conversations have gone, and to be able to refine our work with input from hundreds of people who are part of the RCA as members, deacons, elders, pastors, commissioned pastors, chaplains, church planters, children's ministry leaders, young people, and more. This is the work of spiritual discernment, of discerning the mind of Christ together. We're in this discernment work together, not just as a restructuring team, but as a covenantal family of the RCA.

The restructuring team is intentionally listening to the feedback and listening to God's voice in the midst. We are diligently striving to put systems in place to engage the denomination, to build momentum, and prepare the RCA for a new envisioned future.

### *The Framework of a New Structure*

At the restructuring team's March 2023 in-person meeting, we spent a lot of time discussing the framework for a new structure. A sub-team had done significant

research and exploration around structure, and that sub-team brought their ideas to this meeting. Those ideas were discussed at length, leading to strong consensus on an outline of a structural framework to begin sharing with the denomination for reflection, prayer, and feedback as the team works toward its final report and recommendations to General Synod 2024.

Out of this meeting, the team also sent a formal request to the Commission on Church Order to begin to explore the possible size and shape of the church order and of judicial bodies within the framework that the team discerned. A representative from the commission has attended each of the restructuring team meetings thus far to offer advice to the team, and now the full commission is being asked to do more extensive work. The commission will report back to the restructuring team at the team's next in-person meeting in fall 2023.

At this General Synod 2023, the restructuring team will present a rough draft of the new structure proposal. Following the presentation in plenary, a copy of this rough draft will be shared with delegates. Delegates will have the opportunity to discuss the draft in small groups the following day. This will provide delegates time to read and consider the information from the presentation and written proposal before providing their feedback. Feedback provided by delegates at General Synod 2023 will be analyzed by the restructuring team and used as the team continues to refine its rough draft.

### **Next Steps**

The restructuring team has agreed upon a timeline for the remainder of its work, which will incorporate multiple rounds of connection with and feedback from the denomination.

- June 2023: The team will share a rough draft of the restructuring proposal at General Synod and seek feedback from General Synod delegates.
- September 2023: The restructuring team will meet in person, incorporating feedback from General Synod as well as the work of the Commission on Church Order. The team will refine and add detail to the framework for a more detailed second draft.
- October to November 2023 (possibly into early January 2024): A second round of roundtable discussions will be held in-person around the denomination to explain the second draft, answer questions, and seek feedback.
- January 2024: The restructuring team will meet in person, and, utilizing input from the fall roundtable meetings, will develop the third and final draft of the team's report and proposals.
- February to April 2024: A third round of in-person roundtable discussions will be held across the RCA in order to share and explain the final proposal and to answer questions, hoping especially to give General Synod 2024 delegates a chance to understand the proposal in detail so that it is widely understood and known before the report comes to General Synod.

- June 2024: The team's final report and recommendations come to General Synod for consideration.

## **Communication Resources**

For more information about the RCA restructuring process, we invite and encourage you to read and review the following articles provided to the denomination, to date. All of the articles below, and a general overview of the restructuring team's work, can be found at [www.rca.org/synod/rca-restructuring-team](http://www.rca.org/synod/rca-restructuring-team).

- Restructuring Team Update: March 2023 (March 23, 2023)
- Roundtable Discussions Provide Feedback for the Restructuring Team (March 7, 2023)
- Update from the RCA Restructuring Team - February 2023 (February 3, 2023)
- Restructuring Team In-Person Roundtable Meetings (February 3, 2023)
- Fall 2022 Update from the RCA Restructuring Team (October 24, 2022)
- Where We Are: Restructuring Team Updates And Generous Separation (June 10, 2022)
- Highlights from the Restructuring Team's First In-Person Meeting (May 17, 2022)
- Sherri Meyer-Veen Joins RCA Restructuring Team (April 4, 2022)
- General Synod Council Names Restructuring Team for RCA's Future (February 2, 2022)
- New Team To Develop Restructuring Plan for the RCA (October 17, 2021)

The restructuring team is grateful for and encouraged by the signs of God at work in this season of the RCA. We invite you to join us looking for those signs, seeking where God is at work. May all that we think, say, and do reflect Jesus Christ.

Serving together,  
The RCA restructuring team

# PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF THE STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA FOR THE YEAR ENDING 12/31/2022

## Organized Churches

	2020	2021	2022	Change
1. Churches	844	781	659	-122
2. Church Households	77,747	63,442	42,976	-20,466
3. Confessing Members	120,188	95,579	64,113	-31,466
4. Inactive Members	25,810	25,839	21,941	-3,898
5. Baptized Members	40,271	30,899	18,867	-12,032
6. Total Membership	186,269	152,317	104,921	-47,396
7. Adherents	50,270	36,544	24,818	-11,726
8. Avg. Worship Attendance	105,641	88,114	61,160	-26,954
9. Received on Confession	2,400	2,378	1,860	-518
10. Received on Certificate	1,034	1,043	915	-128
11. Transferred	1,450	1,718	943	-775
12. Deceased	2,490	2,115	1,599	-516
13. Other Removals from Roll	3,674	4,866	2,987	-1,879
14. Infants Baptized	1,181	1,392	981	-411
15. Adults Baptized	668	879	596	-283
21. Contributions Received	292,442,259	261,355,821	157,449,273	-103,906,548
22. Endowment Gifts	4,543,715	2,273,988	2,581,013	307,025
23. Investment Income	40,903,221	13,518,110	13,603,676	85,566
24. All Other Income	51,901,879	41,717,559	23,466,943	-18,250,616
25. <b>Total Income</b>	<b>389,791,074</b>	<b>318,865,478</b>	<b>197,100,905</b>	<b>-121,764,573</b>
26. Assessments Paid	13,276,960	12,467,935	7,344,238	-5,123,697
27. All Other Church Expenses	337,403,825	281,198,456	180,830,145	-100,368,311
28. <b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>350,680,785</b>	<b>293,666,391</b>	<b>188,174,383</b>	<b>-105,492,008</b>
<b>NET INCOME</b>	<b>39,110,289</b>	<b>25,199,087</b>	<b>8,926,522</b>	<b>-16,272,565</b>

## Church Plants with a Denominational Plan

*Does not include satellites or campuses whose data is included with that of their parent congregation*

	2020	2021	2022	Change
1. Churches	100	94	81	-13
2. Church Households	1,325	1,452	1,095	-357
3. Confessing Members	2,176	2,196	1,851	-345
4. Inactive Members	229	230	252	22
5. Baptized Members	520	642	677	35
6. Total Membership	2,925	3,068	2,780	-288
7. Adherents	1,129	1,123	1,342	219
8. Avg. Worship Attendance	2,799	2,534	2,410	-124
9. Received on Confession	249	307	316	9
10. Received on Certificate	109	81	100	19
11. Transferred	142	192	174	-18

12.	Deceased	12	21	19	-2
13.	Other Removals from Roll	27	50	39	-11
14.	Infants Baptized	27	33	34	1
15.	Adults Baptized	90	142	135	-7
21.	Contributions Received	3,226,597	3,324,150	3,618,517	294,367
22.	Endowment Gifts	49,500	0	14,500	14,500
23.	Investment Income	4,760	1,479	1,018	-461
24.	All Other Income	769,174	985,630	636,550	-349,080
25.	<b>Total Income</b>	<b>4,050,031</b>	<b>4,311,259</b>	<b>4,270,585</b>	<b>-40,674</b>
26.	Assessments Paid	5,356	5,506	2,250	-3,256
27.	All Other Church Expenses	3,566,111	3,950,573	3,681,105	-269,468
28.	<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>3,571,467</b>	<b>3,956,067</b>	<b>3,683,355</b>	<b>-272,712</b>
	<b>NET INCOME</b>	<b>478,564</b>	<b>355,180</b>	<b>587,230</b>	<b>232,050</b>

### **Organized/Received/Adopted**

Renacer Church, Doral, Florida (1/22) Classis de las Naciones

Chosen Generation Fellowship Church, Long Beach, California (3/22) Classis of California

Vida de Reino Iglesia Reformada, Sarasota, Florida (10/22) Classis de las Naciones

### **Disbanded/Transferred/Released**

Beverly Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan (1/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Faith Harvest Church, Warren, Michigan (3/22) Classis of North Grand Rapids

St Paul's Church, Ohio City, Ohio (3/22) Classis of Illiana

South Blendon Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan (3/22) Classis of Zeeland

Reformed Church of Bentheim, Hamilton, Michigan (3/22) Classis of Zeeland

Ottawa Reformed Church, West Olive, Michigan (3/22) Classis of Zeeland

Pipeline Church, Visalia, California (3/22) Classis of Central California

New Hope Community Church of Shafter, Shafter, California (3/22) Classis of Central California

Harrison Community Church, Harrison, South Dakota (3/22) Classis of Dakota

Grandview Reformed Church, Armour, South Dakota (3/22) Classis of Dakota

Life Tree Community Church, West Olive, Michigan (3/22) Classis of Holland

Springs Community Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado (4/22) Classis of Rocky Mountain

Faith Reformed Church, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin (4/22) Classis of Wisconsin

Fordham Manor Reformed Church, Bronx, New York (4/22) Classis of New York

Remembrance Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (5/22) Classis of North Grand Rapids

Spring Valley Church, Allendale, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Zeeland

Harlem Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Zeeland

Community Reformed Church, Zeeland, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Zeeland

The Bridge Ministries, Portage, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Martin Reformed Church, Martin, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Hopkins Community Reformed Church, Hopkins, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

North Point Church, Plainwell, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Centerpoint Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Haven Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan (5/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Central Church, Oskaloosa, Iowa (5/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Celebrate Community Church, Knoxville, Iowa (5/22) Classis of Central Iowa

First Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa (5/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Newton Church of the Way, Newton, Iowa (5/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Third Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa (5/22) Classis of Central Iowa

First Reformed Church, Orange City, Iowa (6/22) Classis of East Sioux

American Reformed Church, Primghar, Iowa (6/22) Classis of East Sioux

First Reformed Church, Sanborn, Iowa (6/22) Classis of East Sioux

First Reformed Church, Sheldon, Iowa (6/22) Classis of East Sioux

Christ Community Church, Carmichael, California (6/22) Classis of Central California

Reformed Church of South Bound Brook, South Bound Brook, New Jersey (6/22) Classis of Delaware-Raritan

Newtown Reformed Church, Newtown, Pennsylvania (6/22) Classis of Delaware-Raritan

Faith Reformed Church, Kankakee, Illinois (8/22) Classis of Illiana

Hollandale Reformed Church, Hollandale, Minnesota (9/22) Classis of Minnesota

First Reformed Church, Willmar, Minnesota (9/22) Classis of Minnesota

American Reformed Church, Worthington, Minnesota (9/22) Classis of Minnesota

Ramsey Reformed Church, Titonka, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Immanuel Reformed Church, Belmond, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Bethel Reformed Church, Aplington, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

First Reformed Church, Alexander, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Hope Reformed Church, Parkersburg, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Zion Reformed Church, Sheffield, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

Cedar Hills Community Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

First Reformed Church, Aplington, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Pleasant Prairie

The Bridge in Allegan, Allegan, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Reformed Church of Corinth, Byron Center, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Rehoboth Reformed Church, McBain, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Northern Michigan

First Reformed Church, Sully, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Ebenezer Reformed Church, Leighton, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Otley Reformed Church, Otley, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Crossroads Church, Norwalk, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Adventure Life Reformed Church, Altoona, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Trinity Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa (9/22) Classis of Central Iowa

Immanuel Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Fourth Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (9/22) Classis of North Grand Rapids

Orchard Hill Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (9/22) Classis of North Grand Rapids



Knapp Street Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan (9/22) Classis of North Grand Rapids

Calvary Reformed Church, Mattawan, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Doster Community Church, Plainwell, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Hope Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan (9/22) Classis of Southwest Michigan

Desert Winds Community Church, Palmdale, California (9/22) Classis of California

Encounter Church, Bellflower, California (9/22) Classis of California

Rancho Community Reformed Church, Temecula, California (9/22) Classis of California

Hope Community Church, Los Angeles, California (9/22) Classis of California

Generations Church OC, Cerritos, California (9/22) Classis of California

Movementchurch.online, Moreno Valley, California (9/22) Classis of California

Infusion Church, Escondido, California (9/22) Classis of California

Emmaus Church, Redlands, California (9/22) Classis of California

New Life Community Church, Artesia, California (9/22) Classis of California

The Turning Point, Norco, California (9/22) Classis of California

The Bridge, Chino, California (9/22) Classis of California

Lincoln Avenue Community Church, Pomona, California (9/22) Classis of California

East Hills Community Church, Riverside, California (9/22) Classis of California

Community Reformed Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota (9/22) Classis of Dakota

Christ Community Church, Buena Park, California (9/22) Classis of California

Canyon Lake Community Church, Canyon Lake, California (9/22) Classis of California

Crossline Community Church, Laguna Hills, California (9/22) Classis of California

Pembroke Fellowship Church, Hopkins Park, Illinois (10/22) Classis of Illiana

Reformed Church of Beacon, High Falls, New York (10/22) Classis of Mid-Hudson

Shandaken Reformed Church, Mount Tremper, New York (10/22) Classis of Mid-Hudson

North Ridge Community Church, Eldridge, Iowa (10/22) Classis of Illinois

First Reformed Church, Fulton, Illinois (10/22) Classis of Illinois

Emmanuel Reformed Church, Morrison, Illinois (10/22) Classis of Illinois

Second Reformed Church, Fulton, Illinois (10/22) Classis of Illinois

Haven Reformed Church, Hamilton, Michigan (10/22) Classis of Zeeland

Forest Grove Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan (10/22) Classis of Zeeland

Hamilton Reformed Church, Hamilton, Michigan (10/22) Classis of Zeeland

Church of the Chimes, San Jose, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Bethel Reformed Church, Abbotsford, British Columbia (10/22) Classis of British Columbia

Calvary Reformed Church, Ripon, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Grace Community Church, Surrey, British Columbia (10/22) Classis of British Columbia

Home Church Langley, Langley, British Columbia (10/22) Classis of British Columbia

Sunrise Community Church, Tulare, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Cornerstone Community Church, Chowchilla, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Church of the Cross, Modesto, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Tulare Community Church, Tulare, California (10/22) Classis of Central California

Annville Community Reformed Church, Annville, Kentucky (10/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

McKee Reformed Church, McKee, Kentucky (10/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Grace Covenant Ministries, Annville, Kentucky (10/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Gray Hawk Reformed Church, Gray Hawk, Kentucky (10/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Addisville Reformed Church, Richboro, Pennsylvania (10/22) Classis of Central California

Hudsonville Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan (10/22) Classis of Zeeland

New Hope Community Church, Aurora, Colorado (11/22) Classis of Rocky Mountain

Christ Community Reformed Church, Denver, Colorado (11/22) Classis of Rocky Mountain

Christ Community Church, Great Falls, Montana (11/22) Classis of Cascades

New Life Community Church, Wendell, Idaho (11/22) Classis of Cascades

East Valley Reformed Church, Yakima, Washington (11/22) Classis of Cascades

Refuge Church, Lynnwood, Washington (11/22) Classis of Cascades

Nooksack Valley Reformed Church, Nooksack, Washington (11/22) Classis of Cascades

First Reformed Church, Lynden, Washington (11/22) Classis of Cascades

Valley Life Community Church, Meridian, Idaho (11/22) Classis of Cascades

Twin Falls Reformed Church, Twin Falls, Idaho (11/22) Classis of Cascades

American Reformed Church, DeMotte, Indiana (11/22) Classis of Illiana

Immanuel Reformed Church, Fennville, Michigan (12/22) Classis of Zeeland

Harvest Christian Community, Wheat Ridge, Colorado (12/22) Classis of Rocky Mountain

CenterPoint Church, Gahanna, Ohio (12/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

CenterPoint Church, Lewis Center, Ohio (12/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

First Reformed Church, Cedar Grove, Wisconsin (12/22) Classis of Wisconsin

Rolling Hills Community Church, Zellwood, Florida (12/22) Classis de las Naciones

First Reformed Church, Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin (12/22) Classis of Wisconsin

The Journey, Lakewood, California (12/22) Classis of California

Hope Reformed Church, George, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

First Reformed Church, Inwood, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

First Reformed Church, Ireton, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

Carmel Reformed Church, Rock Valley, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

American Reformed Church, Hull, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

Central Reformed Church, Sioux Center, Iowa (12/22) Classis of West Sioux

### **Creation of Collegiate Church**

Harbor Churches of Hudsonville, Michigan (4/22) Classis of Great Lakes City

Walker Harbor (previously a new start), Hudsonville, Michigan, and

Jamestown Harbor Church (previously a new start), Hudsonville, Michigan

## Overtures

### *Amend BCO Provision Regarding Elder Delegates to Classis*

1. The Classis of Holland respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Section 1b, for recommendation to the classes for approval (proposed additions are underlined):

**A church without an installed minister or a commissioned pastor appointed by the classis to serve as supervisor of the consistory shall have an elder delegate who shall not be counted as one of the above delegates in subsection (a).**

#### Reasons:

1. Currently, a church served by one or more commissioned pastors and no installed ministers must send two elder delegates to stated sessions of classis in addition to their commissioned pastor(s), even if a commissioned pastor has been appointed by the classis to preside at meetings of the consistory (as provided for in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4a).
2. Commissioned pastors shall not serve as an elder delegate to classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 4b).
3. It can be a significant burden for one church to send three or more delegates to classis meetings, especially if the congregation does not have many members. Adopting this amendment would decrease that burden for such congregations.
4. Because such churches often find it difficult to send all their required delegates (commissioned pastors and elder delegates), their classes may struggle to meet the requirements for attendance at stated sessions laid out in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1: “The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.”
5. If such a church were able to send all their required delegates, that would result in that one congregation having more representation than other churches with one installed minister and one elder delegate.

### *Additional Instructions for Restructuring Team*

2. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures the General Synod to instruct the Restructuring Team to commit to a more open, transparent, and communicative conversation, inviting and welcoming input not only responsive to its own proposals, especially from the classes and regional synods who will be affected by its proposals, and expanding its “one voice” policy to allow for minority voices.

Reasons:

1. It seems only fitting that the assemblies most likely to be affected by restructuring should have free input into the conversation about their restructuring.
2. The RCA is called to “a multi-ethnic future freed from racism.” This requires minority voices to be fully heard and empowered, and that minority opinions of all sorts should be welcomed, encouraged, and supported, not only in conversation and debate, but also in minority reports, recommendations, and proposals.

**3. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures the General Synod to instruct the Restructuring Team that any new structure must increase, rather than decrease, the opportunities and spaces for shared work by “volunteers” and delegates, in order to develop relationships, understanding, and trust, and that these opportunities include commissions, boards, and other committees decentralized from the GSC and given access to staff for conversation and consultation.**

Reasons:

1. The RCA has seen a general shrinkage of spaces, occasions, and media for conversation and relationship-building. We no longer have a *Church Herald*. Our pastors no longer have studied at the same seminaries nor read the same theology. Whereas the RCA used to have a number of responsible boards with delegates from all the regions of the denomination (World Missions, Domestic Missions, Education, Women’s Work, Publications, etc.), our church business is now handled by paid program staff who communicate only to the GSC. General Synod is now the only place the denomination gets to talk, and that space is severely restricted.
2. Whenever the RCA has appointed task forces and teams for special work, they report positive fellowship and mutual regard across divergent viewpoints. Such working groups used to be a matter of course throughout the denomination when it was less centralized.
3. The downsizing of the General Synod Council in 2002 resulted in substantial reductions in volunteer participation and in contacts with denominational staff.

**4. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures the General Synod to advise the Restructuring Team that many RCA officebearers consider our structures and polity not merely as “form to follow function,” but as our practical theology, and as the formal expression of our doctrinal convictions of how our covenantal God speaks to our congregations through biblical officers in Word and sacrament.**

Reasons:

1. Our doctrine of the Word of God leads us to believe that God’s will for the Reformed Church is discerned through the regular, weekly preaching of the

Word in congregations, together with our experience of that Word in the sacraments, worship, mission, and service. Our lived and local experience of God's Word is then shared and tested in our classes and synods, by means of which, in candid conversation and biblical and theological study, we hold each other accountable.

2. We do not believe that God's will for the Reformed Church is revealed privately to denominational staff persons or to selected groups of leaders, to be then "top-down" shared with the assemblies and churches.

***Commission on Church Order to Evaluate GSC's Use of the Policy Governance Model (aka Carver Governance)***

**5. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to review the apparent conflict between the two systems of government at work in the RCA, namely the centralized and directed government of the General Synod Council and the widely conversational and bottom-up government of our historic polity, to include:**

- **Re-examining the Carver model for policy governance, its principles in comparison and contrast to those of our polity, its costs and benefits after two decades of use, its critique from outside the GSC, with attention to its restrictions on interaction with the staff and on communication in general, and its effect on the organizational health of the RCA;**
- **Consulting the officers and stated clerks of all the classes and regional synods, as well as other General Synod commissions;**
- **Investigating the governance policies of our partner denominations in full communion, such as the more open governance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA);**
- **And reporting to the General Synod of 2025.**

**Reasons:**

1. There is increasing discontent with the Carver model within the RCA and a growing worry that its use has lessened our organizational health and might even have aggravated our denominational dysfunction and division.
2. Our full communion partners do not use the Carver model, and the ELCA, for example, has a very open governance and communication system.
3. The Carver model was designed and is appropriate for corporations, unlike the RCA. While it may be great for driving a truck, it is not designed for driving a bus. The second "Key Theme" of the Vision 2020 report suggests that the RCA needs to keep shifting away from a "product delivery" model directed by "headquarters."
4. The Carver model might well be appropriate for board-organized ministries that report to or are accountable to the General Synod, but it is a different matter whether it is appropriate to the General Synod's executive committee, when the General Synod itself is a meeting of the classes and regional synods.
5. As the commissions are regularly reviewed, the General Synod Council should be as well, especially with a view towards how it might be "transformed and transforming."

6. It has been 20 years since the General Synod Council adopted the Carver model in November of 2003. It is time to review the RCA's experience of its costs and benefits.
7. The Commission on Church Order advised the General Synod of 2005 on some "cautions" about the Carver model, and after 20 years, it is worth reviewing how those cautions have panned out.

## **Report of the General Synod Council on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry**

*Encompassing the strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and a Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism*

Over the last year, the general secretary presented a compelling vision to unite Transformed & Transforming with Church Multiplication; the goal was to create a more cohesive approach to supporting congregations and helping them flourish. This vision has come to fruition as the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry, announced at General Synod 2022.

The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry is a significant step forward in the mission of making disciples of all nations, as it provides a platform for collaboration and cooperation among various groups within the church. Through this center, churches work together to create an environment of growing disciples, learning from one another, sharing resources, and supporting each other in their common goal of making disciples and building a discipling culture.

The center's unified staff team is composed of experts who are equipped to provide the resources to assist every classis in its work of supporting congregations. The team walks alongside each classis, taking a personalized approach tailored to the unique needs of each context. This approach recognizes that every congregation is at a different stage in its journey toward growth and flourishing, and thus requires a unique set of resources and support. In the report that follows, you will read about ministries that have committed to this collaboration, seeking to transform the culture of congregations in an effort to prioritize discipleship-making for kingdom impact within their communities.

### **Church Renewal**

This year, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) partnered with Church Renewal Lab, Multiplication Network's "Stronger Churches" curriculum, and others to help equip regions, classes, and congregations, enabling congregations to thrive. We have also partnered with congregations in New York and California that were seeking out new pastors and seeking new strategies for strength. Through coaching, we have worked with congregations like Christ Community Church in Pompano Beach, Florida. This 45-year-old congregation is seeking to better reach its community with a fresh vision and new ideas for the future. We are committed to helping classes in their work to help congregations thrive.

### **Women's Transformation and Leadership (WTL)**

This year marks the fifth decade of women in ordained ministry as elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA. Throughout the year, we are all invited to witness the powerful movement of God's calling through women's stories being shared in written and video form, at virtual and in-person events, and through

the resources included in this report. General Synod events include a special evening plenary with dessert reception and a celebration dinner. A special thanks to our planning team partners: General Synod president Rev. Dwayne Jackson, General Synod vice president Rev. Judy Nelson, Commission for Women moderator Rev. Deb Rensink, and Commission on History moderator Rev. Dr. Steven Pierce, along with Rev. Kristin Brouwer, Rev. Flo Dekker, Rev. Katlyn DeVries, Rev. April Fiet, Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier, Rev. Cedric Nelms, elder Barbara Victoria Pimentel, Ms. Grace Ruiter, and Rev. Liz Testa.

The She Is Called Women of the Bible study series, created by the WTL guiding coalition to help raise biblical literacy around women's stories in Scripture across the whole church, released its third volume in late 2022. All three volumes are being used in print and digital format across the RCA and beyond, in English and in Spanish. Dozens of congregations have used these resources in small groups, accumulating over 924,000 users and 1.3 million page views on Faithward since 2020. Since the digital chapters have been available in Spanish, this readership has continued to climb, garnering close to 60,000 views since their debut in late September 2022. Leaders are reporting how Scripture is being illuminated in fresh ways around women's leadership and empowering women to embrace their own callings. The #sheiscalled biblical women "& Me" T-shirts promote biblical literacy and also help women feel a sense of ownership and belonging. At the recent APCE (Association of Partners in Christian Education) conference, partner members from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Moravian Church were inspired and impressed to learn that this is part of the RCA's commitment to the full inclusion of women's gifts, influence, and leadership in the church and beyond.

The She Is Called seminarian cohort at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) continues to grow with its certificate program and master's pathway as Women's Transformation and Leadership continues to support women from all backgrounds, ages, and stages of life as they courageously step into God's call on their lives and get further equipped for ministry. This has been a true partnership with our historic seminary, classes, regions, and, of course, the women themselves. Elder Devonna Cousins, for example, was one of the first two She Is Called cohort certificate program graduates in May 2022. She plans to pursue a master's degree as soon as she completes her chaplain residency program, and she continues to grow in leadership as vice president of her consistory in Brooklyn, New York, and of Brooklyn Classis.

The We Are Speaking statement marked five years in January 2023. An open invitation was issued for all RCA members to commit or recommit to the important work of ending harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women and girls. Updated resources include a seven-day devotional written by Rev. April Fiet and Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier.

Spanish resources for Building God's Church Together (Construyendo Juntos) and She is Called (Ella es Llamada) women's leadership development workshop (Vida con



Proposito taller de mujeres) and Bible studies were debuted at the Hispanic Council meeting in Chicago, Illinois, in August 2022. WTL guiding coalition members and pastors Israel and Karla Camacho, along with pastor Sonia Asbei Loera Casto and husband Alberto, presented these resources to the gathered body of the council. They shared the recent pilot process done with their leadership and the powerful breakthroughs that had been experienced for both men and women. This team is now moving to the second generation of small groups at their church of both Construyendo Juntos and Vida con Proposito taller de mujeres.

WTL has partnered with women leaders, classes, regions, and seminaries to create spaces for networking, equipping, and mutual encouragement. Virtual small groups on Monday and Thursday evenings provide space for women to study Scripture, champion each other in their gifts and callings, and pray together. The seventh annual Women's Stories Day, a collaboration with the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, honored women's callings as elders and deacons. In-person gatherings were co-hosted with local leaders at Faith Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan; First Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan; Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; Oakland City Church in Oakland, California; and Warwick Conference Center in Warwick, New York.

A story of hope from Building God's Church Together (BGCT) comes from the Classis of Minnesota. Elder Patti Van Dorp realized that her church was being torn apart by their new pastor. His challenges with women in office emerged, causing Patti to call on WTL for support and encouragement. The BGCT four-part study was offered as a resource, and she and other consistory members decided to engage their members in a virtual small group to learn and grow together. Dr. Rob Dixon, part of WTL's guiding coalition and an expert in this field, joined them for the session on the "complicated" scriptural passages about women in church leadership. Elder Patti credits the BGCT process and the support she received from WTL with helping their congregational decision to stay in the RCA. What's more, Patti has recently been taken under care of classis to become a commissioned pastor and plans to start work on her MDiv at NBTS following completion of NBTS's two-year certificate program this May.

In early 2023, the *Lavish Hope* podcast wrapped up four seasons of diverse guests (women and men) from different cultures and callings. Hundreds of listeners from the RCA and beyond have been inspired by powerful testimonies, wisdom, and practical inspiration for navigating today's complex world. Season four includes stories of being resilient and obedient to God's call, from writing a much-needed book on faith and grief, to following the Spirit's leading to come to America from Indonesia to become a pastor in New Jersey, to becoming a certified spiritual director and founding a girls-empowerment non-profit. These stories of resilience and overcoming are available through Faithward, Apple, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, and share God's hope in fresh, relevant ways to women and men of different generations, cultures, and geographic locations.

## Disability Concerns

In April, we celebrated the decades-long work of Terry DeYoung, who faithfully led the work of RCA Disability Concerns in partnership with Christian Reformed Church in North America Disability Concerns. Terry retired in early April after 14 years of service in this role. Previously in Terry's career, he served as the managing editor for the *Church Herald* and associate pastor of Central Park Reformed Church. In his role for Disability Concerns, Terry has been a strong champion, promoting awareness of ableism and offering support for those who have been marginalized by an ableist society. He gave a voice to the voiceless and helped advocate for the full inclusion of those with all forms of abilities.

From August 11-12, 2022, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns held a training event, Let's End #AbleismAtChurch. The event was open to anyone who wanted to learn more about ableism and consider ways to reduce the impact of ableism in churches. This virtual event modeled accessibility in a variety of ways, and three of the four speakers were people with disabilities. This event attracted 170 participants over two days, including a dozen General Synod Council staff members.

This event served as the kickoff to Disability Concerns' 2022-2023 emphasis on reducing the impact of ableism in RCA churches. The goal of the emphasis is to initiate a variety of conversations that educate and train church leaders to identify ableist practices in RCA and CRC churches and systems, and provide resources to support efforts in the RCA and CRC to dismantle and replace these with equity-based practices that lead to full inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities. This addresses a key focus of the RCA's Race Relations and Advocacy team (which encompasses Disability Concerns, Women's Transformation and Leadership, and Race Relations) to help the RCA become a denomination freed from racism, sexism, and ableism.

The RCA-CRC Disability Concerns Book of the Year for 2023 is *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* by Amy Kenny. Thanks to a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Disability Concerns is making up to ten free copies available to any church or group that makes a commitment to read and discuss the book (<https://network.crcna.org/topic/justice-inclusion/disability-concerns/advocacy/disability-concerns-book-year-my-body-not>). Disability Concerns staff hosted an online book club in January 2023 that included about 20 regular participants over three weeks and concluded with a live Q&A session with Amy Kenny that drew about 50 participants.

As of late February 2023, 34 groups were reading the book, and 225 print copies had been mailed, in addition to 18 e-books and 17 audio books.

RCA-CRC Disability Concerns convened an online event called "Get in the Loop" on February 6 that helped churches (including audio/visual technicians) learn more about the benefits of hearing loop technology for those who use hearing aids and cochlear implants. Two experts, Dr. Juliette Sterkens and Dr. David Myers, explained how churches can support people living with hearing loss through hearing loop

technology. Following 45 minutes of presentation, a lively Q&A was cut short after 20 minutes and has continued offline with Sterkens, a knowledgeable, articulate, and seasoned audiologist who retired from her audiology practice in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, after 40 years to begin her “encore career” as the professional hearing loop advisor for the Hearing Loss Association of America. The video recording of this practical and informative session has been archived and can be shared with churches and individuals interested in learning more about this technology that is widely preferred for its clarity and ease by those with hearing loss who have experienced the technology first hand.

## **Next Generation Engagement**

Next Generation Engagement is committed to helping congregations create intergenerational relationships. Through awareness, equipping, and unleashing resources, the team offers partnership and collaboration to bridge the barriers between generations and promote healthy, thriving relationships.

To promote awareness of generational barriers that exist within the church, Next Generation Engagement distributed an electronic newsletter to over 600 readers. Often the resources promoted by this newsletter sought to equip readers for the current realities or shifting realities for young people as they seek to navigate faith and leadership. This newsletter was ended in March 2023 in an attempt to streamline other avenues of communication, such as the News and Resources and Faithward newsletters.

The Next Generation Engagement team has also partnered with Faithward to continue creating awareness and equipping resources that are geared toward all generations and their interests. Our team edited our original Thanksgiving Day toolkit to be more inclusive for Canadian churches and Indigenous People’s Day. We also partnered to create a Deconstruction Toolkit to promote awareness of what young people continue to endure as they discern their faith in an ever-changing world. The Next Gen team also partnered with a collaborative group of young leaders focused on writing about particular areas of interest like creation care, racism, discipleship, and leadership.

The Next Generation Engagement team, in partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, has been working on a mentoring program called Generation Spark that is designed to promote relationships across generations. Generation Spark has thus far served more than 50 congregations during its five years of existence. The team hosted a collaborative learning event in Minneapolis, Minnesota, composed of congregational leaders, classis leaders, and emerging adults all committed to further including young people into leadership in all levels of our two partner denominations. In addition to promoting learning about mentoring, Generation Spark also helps congregations support younger leaders to step into ministerial leadership. Out of this learning event, the Generation Spark team formalized an emerging leader advisory group that serves to inform denominational decisions as well as program decisions for Generation Spark.

We also celebrate the many years of work by congregations that are committed to elevating all generations of leadership. Many of the stories we hear come from congregational participation in the Growing Young Cohort, a partnership that was established with Fuller Youth Institute. One example is Jeff Watson's story. As of January 1, 2023, Jeff is officially the senior leader of First Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan. This story began four years ago when the congregation hoped to start addressing intergenerational ministry more effectively. The senior pastor at the time, Bud Pratt, wanted to leave a legacy that was committed to helping more young people stay connected to their faith throughout their lifetime. First Reformed participated in the Growing Young Cohort and devised a strategy that included leadership development of key young leaders like Jeff. Together they developed a transition plan for Bud to step into retirement while naming Jeff as the next senior leader. Congregations like First Reformed are experiencing deeper engagement and leadership of young people, greater attendance of younger leaders, and, most importantly, enriched relationships that have offered all generations a greater spiritual walk.

This past year has also resulted in greater partnership with the Tenx10 Collaboration, a discipleship movement that is geared toward making faith matter more to young people. This movement partners with more than 20 denominations and more than 40 church and parachurch organizations and is committed to offer resourcing for every ministry context. The Next Generation team has presented Tenx10 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education, and we've continued to introduce youth ministry leaders around the RCA to the Tenx10 resources. The team also invited the Tenx10 team to present at the joint meeting of the racial and ethnic council executive teams in January 2023 to promote awareness of the importance of faith formation to youth and emerging leaders and also present a possible tool as a resource for our denomination.

The Next Gen team pays special attention to equipping ministry leaders working with youth and young adults. The team sent out a survey to all RCA congregations recorded to be using the Children and Worship program in order to better understand how to support the ministry and the faith formation of children. In partnership with staff liaison Carol Jones, the Next Gen team has continued to wonder how to best support our congregations and trainers that use Children and Worship. Shelley Henning, who partners with the Next Gen team, launched an online course for children's ministry leaders called Foundations; 12 congregations participated in this course and learned how to holistically engage and form the children entrusted to their care. To better support youth ministry leaders, the RCA is contracting with a youth ministry leader with more than 30 years of experience. He is serving as a youth ministry coach to help support and coach new youth ministry leaders.

## **Church Multiplication**

In October 2022, we celebrated the retirement of Randy Weener, who served in Church Multiplication for seven years, most recently as director of Church Multiplication. Randy planted Spring Valley Church in Allendale, Michigan, served as a

youth pastor, and continues to prioritize coaching and leadership development of church planters.

This year, the Church Multiplication team developed and launched a new streamlined, online form in order to better assist RCA classis leaders as they develop new congregations. New congregations are emerging all over North America. In Sioux Center, Iowa, which saw many formerly RCA congregations leave the denomination in the past few years, Martha Draayer and Jason Lief, who both teach at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, have planted a new congregation that reaches both Spanish- and English-speaking people. A new congregation in New Hampshire led by Pastor Jelty Ochotan already has over one hundred adults and kids in attendance.

Church Multiplication has also launched a new coaching certification program in collaboration with Fuller Seminary that is being co-lead by Randy Weener. Leaders interested in coaching development are working in cohorts with Randy and leaders from Fuller who have ICF certification (International Coach Federation).

Church Multiplication also launched a beta program in three regions to help simple, fresh expressions of churches emerge. This program allows local leadership to curate grants that assist leaders to launch simpler forms of congregations (dinner churches or house churches, for example). This program aims to spur on leaders, pastors, and congregations that are feeling called to create new expressions of the church.

## **Race Equity and Justice**

The Dismantling Racism Prayer Movement is in its third year. It emerged at the end of the summer of 2020, as the RCA bravely engaged in conversations around racial injustice and systemic oppression. This prayer movement is rooted in Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier's 1 Cor. 13 Project and seeks to pray into dismantling the sin of racism. This is a discipleship based, transformational process moving people to godly repentance and action. A keystone of this year's prayer gatherings is praying into white allyship and the RCA's new antiracism policy adopted at General Synod 2022. Already congregations, classes, and regional synods are moving to adopt, resource, and invest in this policy. The prayer team includes co-chairs Rev. Nancy Boote and Rev. Dr. Micheal Edwards, with elder Cynthia Peters, Rev. Dr. Joanne Van Sant, Pastor Jeremy Simpson, Rev. Liz Testa, elder Gerri Yoshida, and Rev. Dr. Gordon Wiersma. They come alongside a diverse group of RCA leaders and ecumenical friends who meet bi-monthly to learn, grow, share stories, and pray together.

The Race Relations and Advocacy team continues to gather with local churches to foster conversations and learning that eliminate barriers to belonging. Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, began a process of building a welcoming presence and learning ways to foster diverse worship experiences in the fall of 2022. Thus began a six-month journey of coaching that culminated in a four-week learning intensive of renewal and discovery led by Pastor Jeremy Simpson, Rev. Terry DeYoung, Rev. Anna Radcliffe, and Rev. Liz Testa. The focus was intergenerational ministry that is diverse, egalitarian, and embracing.

We are launching a diverse worship training that focuses on Revelation 7:9 and a global worship perspective; the training will provide support and resources. We recognize God's heart for diversity in the church, and we are excited to see that continuing to grow throughout the denomination.

In January 2023, the executive committees of the GSC's racial and ethnic councils met together in Orlando, Florida. This meeting was fruitful and significant as they decided to hold a full joint council meeting once every three years rather than every five years because of the need for more connection and partnership between the individual councils. It was a powerful time of racial reconciliation. The RCA's next Sankofa journey, in response to RE 22-2 (*Minutes of General Synod 2022*, p. 237) will be hosted in the fall of 2023 in partnership with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity. We remain committed to engaging the work of building a church freer of racism, ableism, and sexism.

As part of a multi-year focus on equity-based hospitality, a nine-session study has been created to help equip churches to "draw the circle wide" and welcome people in from the margins. This study is customizable for different contexts and offers scriptural, theological, and practical ideas for creating a culture of welcome and belonging, particularly around people with disabilities, the next generation, people with racial and ethnic diversity, and women. The study was written by Pastor Lauralyn Vasquez, with guidance and collaboration from Rev. Terry De Young, Ms. Ruth Langkamp, Rev. Anna Radcliffe, Ms. Grace Ruiter, Mrs. Stephanie Soderstrom, Rev. Liz Testa, and Dr. Peter Watts.

# **Report of the General Synod Council on Global Mission**

## **Working together to share God's love with the world**

RCA Global Mission exists to strengthen and grow the global church by supporting ministries of compassion, developing leaders, and sharing the good news. Our goal is to provide engagement opportunities for Reformed Church in America (RCA) churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful that help us all to live and love like Jesus.

### **Stories of God's Goodness**

From Bangkok to Kenya to Hungary, and everywhere in between, God has been moving and God's people have shown up in amazing ways over the last year. Here are a few highlights:

#### *Thailand*

RCA mission partner Rev. Dr. Rawee Bunupuradah meets often with pastors and Christian leaders in Bangkok, Thailand, to encourage them and pray together. But in one particular instance this past year, Bunupuradah felt God at work in a special way. Bunupuradah was praying with a pastor who serves at an international congregation that provides ministries to refugees and asylum-seekers in the city—a challenging, sacrificial ministry. As they prayed, Bunupuradah and the pastor walked through a quiet green space. In this peaceful place, the pastor felt God's presence, recognizing God was walking with him through all of the unseen worry and anxiety in his heart about his ministry and the future. The pastor lit up with a smile, expressing the joy he experienced as God's Word repeated in his mind over and over, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." Never had he experienced such a time of prayer like that day. He felt seen and known by God, thanks to the guidance of Bunupuradah.

#### *Japan*

RCA Global Mission is built around partnership. That partnership was strengthened in Japan this past October when an official memorandum of agreement was signed in Tokyo, Japan, between RCA Global Mission representatives and missionaries Nathan Brownell and Wayne Jansen and its affiliated legal entity in Japan (the IBS Shadan); Resonate, which is the global mission arm of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA); and the Leadership Training Institute for Reconciliation.

The CRCNA and RCA missionaries and supervisors recognized the urgency of focusing our energy and resources together in a more intentional way for the hope of the gospel to reach the next generation. Although the challenges of Japan's mission field seem insurmountable, this agreement brought us together. We pray that this collaboration would encourage more projects between our sister denominations and bring new missionaries to the field to help raise up the next generation of leaders for the church of tomorrow in Japan.

### *Bahrain*

One hundred and twenty years! That is the amount of time, to the day, between the opening of the very first clinic in Bahrain by RCA missionary Samuel Zwemer and the new state-of-the-art King Hamad American Mission Hospital that was opened in January 2023. The ways the RCA has blessed and been blessed by the people of Bahrain in those 120 years are many and significant. The relationships built and fostered by RCA missionaries cleared the path for this new hospital to be blessed and financially supported by the royal family. We praise God for the many RCA missionaries and churches that have supported various missionaries and their work over the years—making a large impact on the lives of people in the Arabian Gulf. This new chapter of the American Mission Hospital promises to bring excellent medical care to the region and to continue the legacy of the RCA caring for the people of Bahrain, both medically and spiritually.

### *Hungary*

A safe and warm home. It seems so basic, but when war breaks out in your country, a warm and safe place to lay your head at night becomes one of the top things you worry about every day. Thanks to the support of churches and people like you, refugees who fled Ukraine and landed in Hungary with nowhere else to go have had a safe place to live for over a year. Hundreds of people have been welcomed, cared for, fed, and housed. They have received assistance in finding work, and the children have had the opportunity to continue their education. They have access to pastors and therapists to help work through trauma imposed by war. We pray that the war in Ukraine will end soon, but until it does, we will be there to support those in need.

### *Brazil*

Andre Satare Mawe is a tribal chief along the Amazon who came to know Jesus through the ministry of RCA partner the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPM). Mawe had an encounter with God, and he experienced the power of Christ transforming his hard heart into a soft heart. As a result, he accepted the call to become a “pastor of his people” and trained at the Missionary Training Center through the support of faithful churches and individuals, like you, who give through RCA Global Mission. Today, Mawe is a tribal church pastor on his reservation and is the supervisor of mission efforts focused on reaching unreached people groups in the Amazon. RCA Global Mission supports IPM’s vision to plant 100 new churches and send 100 missionaries by 2030. Since 2018, you and your churches have made it possible to produce 33 new churches and equip 37 missionaries. To God be all the glory!

### *Kenya - Maasailand*

The church is growing among the Maasai! Through sharing the gospel in word and deed, our partner Maasai Outreach Mission engaged in intentional evangelism in the remote areas of southwestern Kenya in 2022. Bishop Simon Muntolol has recorded 2,160 new baptisms in this last year, which is the highest number ever recorded in this ministry. Muntolol shared, “We realized the most souls won were of villagers



from 14 areas where we had given out water rollers ... This support was given by RCA churches and individuals and Christ's name was glorified through this act of practical love."

#### *Kenya - Pokot*

Members of self-help groups among the Pokot are serving as the salt and light of Christ and creating genuine transformation in their communities. Empowered by the gospel and sustainable community development principles, each group aims to identify needs in their churches and communities and mobilize local resources toward sustainable solutions.

Seeing the need for food security and business development opportunities, a self-help group in Chesau village, Alany, purchased four goats for five of the seven families in their group from their weekly savings contributions. Once every family has a goat, they will have a meeting to discuss what God might be leading them to do next. God is transforming communities, thanks to our partnership with the African Inland Church and your faithful support. Thank you!

#### **Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares**

The mission personnel and staff of RCA Global Mission would like to express appreciation to the churches and individuals of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) who so generously support our mission programs. The RCA mission program is supported almost entirely by contributions and Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares. Without you, there would be no RCA Global Mission.

The Reformed Church in America has over 80 active partnerships in over 40 countries around the world. There are 49 missionaries and 46 partner personnel (those employed by the partner but supported through RCA Partnership-in-Mission shares). These mission personnel were supported by 433 churches and 484 individual donors through Partnership-in-Mission shares. There are over 120 active projects, including disaster response and projects of compassion. These projects were supported by gifts from 341 churches and 1,327 individual donors.

#### **GM 23-1**

**To set the value of a full Partnership-in-Mission at \$6,900 for 2023 (no increase over 2022); and further,**

**To ask every RCA congregation that does not currently support an RCA missionary with a Partnership-in-Mission share to consider taking on a full or partial share of support.**

## **Transitions in Mission Personnel**

### *Peter and Patty Ford*

After 40 years, Peter and Patty Ford officially retired from their faithful mission service on March 1, 2023. Peter and Patty served in six countries across the Middle East and East Africa. Their work brought them into a variety of leadership development, pastoral, and theological education roles often centered around Christian-Muslim relations or within contexts that required living peacefully among neighbors of different faiths.

### *Craig and Christa Hollander*

After almost 20 years, Craig and Christa Hollander concluded their missionary service in partnership with Mission Aviation Fellowship and RCA Global Mission on August 1, 2022. Through their service, more people in the interior of Kalimantan, Indonesia, have had access to doctors, medicine, food, Bibles, educational materials, and building supplies. In addition, your support made every flight Craig piloted possible, many of which brought pastors or missionaries to serve the inhabitants of the world's largest Muslim nation in the name of Jesus Christ. We praise God for the Hollander family's faithful service over the years.

### *Deb Wilson*

Since 1994, Deb Wilson has faithfully served God in Cambodia. Deb helped establish the Garden of Life counseling center to train professional Cambodian counselors to bring widespread healing among the people of Cambodia. Your support of Deb in this work has helped provide professional trauma training that embraces Christian values for Cambodian counselors. Deb ended her service with the RCA on September 30, 2022.

### *Sally Vis*

For just over 17 years, Sally Vis served the RCA in a variety of mission capacities. Sally and Marlin were appointed to be the first mission co-workers to Israel and Palestine for the RCA. Living in East Jerusalem for three years, they helped plan and lead tours of the region. Since returning to the U.S., Sally has been the point person for coordinating trips to Israel and Palestine. Over the years, Sally has built many relationships throughout the region and is highly respected. Sally ended her service with the RCA on January 30, 2023.

### *Haluk and Wendy Bilgen*

After 25 years of living and working in Turkey and 8 years of serving in partnership with RCA Global Mission and Words of Hope, Haluk and Wendy Bilgen have concluded their mission work as of June 1, 2023. Haluk and Wendy have shared the gospel of Christ in a Muslim-majority country through the discipleship of new followers of Jesus, teaching at a seminary, producing Christian radio and TV

broadcasts, counseling local and expatriate believers, and helping ministry leaders develop leadership, team building, and communication skills. We praise God for their faithful service and wish them the best on their next endeavors!

#### **GM 23-2**

**Let it be resolved that the 216th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Central College in Pella, Iowa, from June 8-13, 2023, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Peter and Patty Ford, Craig and Christa Hollander, Deb Wilson, Sally Vis, and Haluk and Wendy Bilgen and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission.**

#### **Deaths**

**Dora Boomstra** passed away on March 7, 2022. Dora served as a missionary in India for 42 years. She was a great visionary and a vibrant missionary who sacrificed everything in the service of God, especially for the well-being of girl children and women. She was described by many at the Vellore Diocese as the driving force behind the formation of Vitva Ratna Villa School in Ranipet, India, through which, to this day, many girls are afforded the opportunity to be educated.

**Eugene Heideman** passed away on May 15, 2022. Eugene's life was filled with service to God and others, serving part of that time in South India with RCA Global Mission and the Church of South India. He was an esteemed author of several books, including collections focused on the mission history of the RCA.

**Amy DeKruyter** passed away on December 20, 2022. While Amy did not serve as a missionary with RCA Global Mission, she served faithfully as the coordinator for volunteer services from 1996 to 2006. Amy left a deep, meaningful impact on our staff and also the larger RCA community.

**Dr. Alan Beagley** passed away on January 28, 2023. Alan and his wife, Jeanette Koolhaas-Beagley, served in Taiwan from 1987 to 1994. Alan served at the Tainan Theological College and Seminary, in partnership with the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, training up leaders for the next generation of the church.

**Janet Pofhal** passed away on February 7, 2023. Janet and her husband, Harry, served as teachers at the Katpadi Industrial Institute in North Arcot District in Southern India from 1963 to 1972. Janet is known to be the last RCA missionary heavily involved in the Women's Fellowship in Vellore. She continued her involvement after returning to the U.S. and found ways to fundraise through garage sales and other efforts to support the fellowship even from afar. We honor Janet for her work and the impact she made.

*This report acknowledges known deaths that occurred from spring 2022 to spring 2023. We recognize that some names may have been unintentionally omitted, and for*

*that, we greatly apologize. If you know of names we have missed, please contact us at [mission@rca.org](mailto:mission@rca.org).*

## **Retired Ministers of Word and Sacrament**

During 2022, 34 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service. Those who retired are being recognized by the General Synod through its endorsement of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

### **L 23-1**

**To adopt the following resolution:**

**These individuals have loved Christ and fed his sheep. They have devoted themselves to spreading the Word and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.**

**Their contribution to a needy world is rich beyond measure; their record is on high.**

**The Reformed Church in America, with admiration, deep affection, and overflowing thanks to God, celebrates their lifelong service.**

**Brian Akker  
Bettendorf, Iowa**

**Philip Assink  
Edmonds, Washington**

**Paul Boersma  
Holland, Michigan**

**Verlyn Boone  
Sioux Center, Iowa**

**Kenneth Bradsell  
Boothbay Harbor, Maine**

**Bruce Bugbee  
Ladera Ranch, California**

**Paul Burmeister  
Hudsonville, Michigan**

**Mark Bush  
Muskegon, Michigan**

**Miriam Bush  
Muskegon, Michigan**

**Kim Donahue  
Danville, Kentucky**

**Lorene Duin  
Holland, Michigan**

**Henry Elgersma  
Lansing, Illinois**

**David Ellis  
Prescott Valley, Arizona**

**Roberto Fois  
Branchburg, New Jersey**

**George Grevenstuk  
Dorr, Michigan**

**James Harrison  
Hudsonville, Michigan**

**Mark Heijerman  
Martin, Michigan**

**Jon (J.R.) Henderson  
Waverly, Tennessee**

**Daniel Jelsma  
West Olive, Michigan**

**Roger Lokker  
Cresco, Iowa**

**Jonathan Manlove  
Kaleden, British Columbia**

**David Mayer  
Warren, Michigan**

**Thomas McCrossan  
Niskayuna, New York**

**Stephen Norden  
Holland, Michigan**

**Bruce Osbeck**  
**Wyoming, Michigan**

**Paul Pratt**  
**Wyoming, Michigan**

**Randall Prentiss**  
**Staatsburg, New York**

**Edward Schneider**  
**Kentwood, Michigan**

**Edward Schreur**  
**Redlands, California**

**Thomas Smith**  
**Orange City, Iowa**

**Donald Topp**  
**Holland, Michigan**

**Lori Walber**  
**Brooklyn Park, Minnesota**

**Randy Weener**  
**Grand Rapids, Michigan**

**Martin Winters**  
**Bridgewater, New Jersey**

## Necrology

Name	Date of Birth	Date of Death	Age
Elzie Richardson Jr.	January 12, 1933	January 7, 2022	88
Roger Kleinheksel	July 24, 1938	January 7, 2022	83
Matthew Warfield	May 24, 1989	January 8, 2022	32
Kenneth Working	January 6, 1933	January 10, 2022	89
Lynn Post	March 27, 1930	January 17, 2022	91
James Rozendaal	October 13, 1934	January 24, 2022	87
Robert Vander Aarde	August 20, 1936	January 26, 2022	85
Robert Shaver	August 25, 1935	January 27, 2022	86
Eurie Smith III	October 19, 1936	February 17, 2022	85
Harold Goldzung Sr.	December 20, 1933	February 25, 2022	88
James Ferrone	June 9, 1944	February 27, 2022	77
Jack Millard	March 22, 1938	March 5, 2022	83
Raymond Ortman	December 17, 1937	March 16, 2022	84
Judith Marvel	February 26, 1947	March 27, 2022	75
Donald DeYoung	November 14, 1930	March 30, 2022	91
Cornie Keunen	July 23, 1931	March 30, 2022	90
William Brownson	June 27, 1928	April 1, 2022	93
Robert Dykstra	January 8, 1932	April 11, 2022	90
John Peale	September 2, 1936	April 22, 2022	85
James Brinkhuis	March 17, 1931	April 23, 2022	91
Ralph Ludwick	June 22, 1930	April 28, 2022	91
David Risseuw	May 10, 1941	April 30, 2022	80
Jeffery Thibodeau	May 28, 1958	May 15, 2022	63
Wayne Hoglin	January 7, 1944	June 2, 2022	78
Wayne Van Regenmorter	May 3, 1952	June 5, 2022	70
Leslie Seaton	July 28, 1928	June 10, 2022	93
Barbara Alexander	May 7, 1947	June 12, 2022	75
Irven Jungling	February 22, 1933	June 14, 2022	89
Cecil Martens	April 20, 1928	June 25, 2022	94
Harold Lay	November 20, 1946	June 27, 2022	75
Frank Guinta Sr.	September 4, 1923	July 1, 2022	98
Brian Hellenga	September 17, 1951	July 4, 2022	70
Raphael Johnson	February 15, 1949	July 9, 2022	73
Patricia Irwin	October 11, 1954	July 24, 2022	67
James Anderson	August 13, 1942	August 16, 2022	80
James Moore	April 15, 1940	August 20, 2022	82
Edwin Parsil Jr.	December 12, 1934	September 1, 2022	87
Shirley Montanari	November 5, 1932	October 1, 2022	89
Clara Woodson	January 1, 1927	October 5, 2022	95
Randall Smit	August 14, 1968	December 2, 2022	54
Wai Choon Tan	April 28, 1945	December 11, 2022	77
James Esther	September 23, 1941	December 12, 2022	81
Dennis Ferguson	October 13, 1946	December 17, 2022	76



## Report of Words of Hope

Words of Hope believes that all people in all places should have access to God's Word. With Words of Hope, people are connected daily to the truths of Scripture so that they can grow in faith and share it worldwide.

Words of Hope works to share the good news in all ways possible in order to provide access to Scripture in heart languages, remote locations, and a variety of media types. Where poverty, geography, or persecution hinder the spread of the gospel, Words of Hope partners with indigenous Christian leaders to equip them to more effectively minister in their own language and context, among their own people.

Words of Hope's regions of ministry include Albania, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Niger, North America, South Sudan, Turkey, and Uganda. Each ministry field requires its own unique media outreach approach. Depending on the variety of resources and challenges in a given region, an assortment of radio programs, text messages, social media, print materials, and satellite television are all used to proclaim the gospel.

Some notable highlights from Words of Hope's ministry in the past year include the launch of a distance-learning course in Farsi in partnership with Western Theological Seminary; the retirement of Words of Hope's Turkish ministry director, Haluk Bilgen; and a devotional writing workshop for Albanians that will equip the ministry there to produce original Albanian devotional content from start to finish.

For many years, Christian audio programming has been available inside the country of Iran. More recently, our discipleship efforts there have expanded to include online worship services and in-person training conferences. Iranian converts are nurtured in their faith to the point where they can lead secret house churches inside Iran and disciple more new converts themselves.

Words of Hope worked together with Western Theological Seminary last year to develop an advanced distance-learning course in the Farsi language that would better equip Iranian believers interested in ministry and evangelism. A theology course taught by Western's Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline is now available in Farsi alongside a translation of the book *Practicing Christian Doctrine* by Beth Felker Jones.

Originally, the plan was to have the seminary course materials available for the Persian students online, but due to the ongoing protests in Iran, government scrutiny of private internet browsing has increased significantly. Instead, hard copies of translated books and audio and video materials have been smuggled into the country for use. On March 1, 2023, the first 14 Persian students began their systematic theology course. The course will conclude in August, and assessments of the students will be carried out by Words of Hope staff.

Another area of direct partnership with the Reformed Church in America has been in ministry in the country of Turkey. Haluk Bilgen has served for many years as both a missionary with RCA Global Mission and as Words of Hope's ministry director in the region. This year, Haluk is officially retiring from these roles. As he and his wife, Wendy, enter a new era of life and ministry, we are grateful for the many ways that the Lord has worked in and through them to bring the hope of the gospel to the people of Turkey.

Exciting new developments are underway for Words of Hope's ministry efforts in Albania. Albania has a long history with Christianity, dating back to the biblical account of Paul hearing a man from Macedonia calling for his help in a dream. Today, however, in a land of three million people, evangelical Christians make up less than 1 percent of the population. The majority of Albanians are either nominally Orthodox or Muslim.

Words of Hope Albania first pioneered the effort to translate the North American daily devotional for use in Albania. The team puts these translated devotionals on an app and uses them to make daily radio program content. Now, Words of Hope has held a first ever three-day-long devotional writing workshop to raise up indigenous Albanian writers. This workshop has equipped over two dozen Albanian Christian leaders to write original Albanian devotionals that will speak directly into their own unique cultural context. Please pray that this equipping will help the far-outnumbered believers that we come alongside in Albania to share their faith broadly and effectively.

Words of Hope is deeply grateful for the support of RCA churches that continues to sustain this outreach ministry. We celebrate this generosity, knowing that these dollars are allowing people to be introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thank you for sharing hope worldwide as we work together to proclaim the good news in all ways possible.

## Report of the Church Growth Fund, Inc.

The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. (CGF) is a non-profit corporation that functions under the supervision of the RCA General Synod. The CGF supports the work of the denomination by making affordable rate loans to current and former RCA churches and related agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings and other properties used in ministries. The CGF loan programs offer unsecured loans up to \$200,000 and secured borrowing up to \$5,000,000.

As a primary source of funding for loans, the CGF sells interest-bearing investments called savings certificates. The CGF offers two types of savings certificates:

1. Term savings certificates, which are available in maturities from one to ten years.
2. Demand savings certificates, which allow the investment and redemption of amounts in the certificate at any time (subject to the limits described in the CGF Offering Circular).

As a way to support the denomination, the CGF contributes a portion of its earnings annually to the General Synod Council (GSC), which awards the funds as ministry grants for three RCA programs:

1. Church Multiplication provides grant funding to church plants. In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2022 (FY22), the CGF contributed \$500,000 for church plant grants.
2. The Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund (Next Gen) provides scholarships to middle school-age children through post-college young adults to cover part of the cost of mission trips and internships, disaster response work, vision and study tours, and missional training experiences. Funding for Next Gen mission scholarships was not needed due to continued reduction in travel as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in FY22. Therefore, the CGF did not contribute funds to the Next Gen fund in FY22.
3. The Flourishing Churches Grant Program provides grants for facility improvements to economically challenged RCA congregations whose ministries are thriving. In FY22, the CGF contributed \$300,000 for this program.

More specific information on CGF loans and how to invest in savings certificates is available on the CGF webpage at [www.rca.org/cgf](http://www.rca.org/cgf).

### Assets

In FY22, total assets decreased by \$4.6 million to \$80.6 million, driven primarily from a reduction in the loan portfolio of just over \$6.0 million. CGF assets at the end of FY22 consisted primarily of loans of \$49.5 million and cash and investments of \$30.3 million. The CGF funded \$1.1 million in new loans to seven churches in FY22 while receiving \$7.1 million in loan principal payments from existing borrowers.

Despite national and global economic challenges, the overall financial health of CGF church borrowers remains strong. This has resulted in few delinquent loans in the CGF portfolio and has contributed to the CGF continuing its long history of never having experienced a loan principal loss. We continue to have a few church borrowers that are challenged to repay their loans, and the CGF works in partnership with these affected congregations to ensure viable continuance of their ministries.

## **Savings Certificates**

At the end of FY22, the CGF had savings certificate investments of \$31.7 million, representing a decrease of \$3.2 million from the previous fiscal year end. In FY22, the CGF received \$4 million in new savings certificate investments plus reinvested interest of \$383,110, which was offset by redemptions of \$7,583,102. Savings certificate investors continue to recognize the favorable return received on their funds as well as how their investment supports the mission of the CGF. Funds received from investment in savings certificates are used by the CGF to make loans to current and former RCA churches throughout the United States and Canada.

CGF savings certificates are state-regulated securities. Currently, the CGF is authorized to sell savings certificates in 27 states, which are listed on the CGF webpage at [www.rca.org/cgf](http://www.rca.org/cgf). Rates of interest paid on savings certificates, along with other information on the CGF and how to invest in savings certificates, can be found on the webpage.

## **Earnings**

In FY22, the CGF achieved net earnings from operations of \$1.7 million compared to \$2.1 million the previous year (FY21). Included in FY21 results was a one-time, non-recurring estate gift of over \$300,000. Excluding this amount, net earnings from operations would be down only 4 percent compared to the previous year. The difference in earnings from operations was the result of several factors. Loan interest declined from the previous year due to a decrease in average loans outstanding described above, coupled with a decrease in the average portfolio yield from the previous year. This decrease in revenue was somewhat offset by an increase in interest and dividends received on the CGF's investment portfolio. Interest expense paid on savings certificates decreased in FY22, as the average savings certificate portfolio was down from the previous year, coupled with a reduction in the average cost of funds. Finally, operating expenses increased 11 percent, driven by higher travel expenses with the resumption of in-person meetings, software costs, and personnel expenses with the addition of a new executive director and administrative assistant during the fiscal year.

Total earnings for the year were negative \$1.6 million, compared to a positive \$1.8 million the previous year. The negative change in net assets is attributed to net unrealized losses on the CGF's investments, which totaled \$2.4 million for the year. This was a non-cash expense, as all major stock and bond market indexes were down significantly for the year, which contributed to the unrealized losses. This figure also includes \$800,000 in contributions to the GSC for ministry grants.

## **Ministry Grants**

In 1999, the CGF began contributing a portion of its earnings to the GSC to be used for grants to new church plants. From 1999 through FY22, the CGF has contributed more than \$7.5 million to support RCA church multiplication. In that time, 422 church plants have been approved, and the majority of them have received grant funds to help start their ministry. In FY22, the CGF contributed \$500,000 to support church multiplication efforts.

In 2014, the CGF began contributing annually to support Next Gen mission scholarships, providing financial assistance to RCA youth for mission trip experiences. In FY22, travel for youth mission trips continued to be hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic; as a result, there was not a need for funds for this program. Since the inception of the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund, however, the CGF has been its primary financial supporter, making contributions totaling \$450,000. Since the program has been in place, 2,758 young people have benefitted from scholarships awarded.

In 2018, the CGF launched the Flourishing Churches Grant Program, which provides grants of up to \$50,000 to churches for facility improvements necessary to continue and grow already successful ministries. To date, 43 RCA congregations have been Flourishing Church grant recipients, and the CGF has contributed a total of \$1.45 million to this program.

As stated earlier, the CGF contributed \$800,000 in FY22 to fund RCA ministry grants.

## **Financial Strength**

A measure of financial strength of an entity is its level of net assets, also known as capital or equity. As of September 30, 2022, the CGF had net assets or capital of \$48,582,717. This represents the accumulation of earnings and contributions received over its years of operations.

The funds received from savings certificates are used by the CGF primarily to make loans to current and former RCA churches. The ability of the CGF to repay savings certificate investors is related to its level of capital, net earnings, and repayment of the loans funded from certificate investment dollars. CGF loans typically are secured by first mortgages on church facilities. The CGF follows strict guidelines in approving loans to make sure congregations can sustain such debt payments. While past performance is no guarantee of future events, the CGF has never experienced a loss of principal on any loan. No CGF savings certificate investor has ever experienced a loss of investment or missed receiving an interest payment.

<b><u>Financial Highlights</u></b>	<b><u>FY 2022</u></b>	<b><u>FY 2021</u></b>	<b><u>FY 2020</u></b>
Total Assets	\$80,587,349	\$85,167,480	\$82,981,397
Net Assets (Capital)	\$48,582,717	\$50,162,464	\$48,357,704
Savings Certificates Outstanding	\$31,672,760	\$34,878,929	\$34,428,846
Number of Churches with Loans	98	105	112
Dollar Amount of Loans Outstanding	\$51,185,285	\$57,216,216	\$59,327,650
Number of Loans Funded in Year	7	9	10
Dollar Amount of Loans Funded in Year	\$1,091,112	\$6,913,058	\$5,205,239
Net Earnings from Operations before Ministry Grants	\$1,702,643	\$2,109,725	\$1,756,086
Contributions to GSC for Ministry Grants	\$800,000	\$780,000	\$791,000

### **Future CGF Activity**

The General Synod held in October 2021 approved changes to the CGF's articles of incorporation and bylaws that would explicitly allow outstanding loans to churches that were formerly organized as RCA churches to remain outstanding, and that would also allow the CGF to make new loans to former RCA churches. Continuation of the lending relationship between the CGF and a former RCA church is not automatic. The CGF has a process in place for borrowers that intend to leave the denomination to follow, which includes completing an Application for Continuance of the CGF loan, which allows the CGF to do a thorough review of the church's financial condition and other factors before granting continuance.

Additional revisions were made to the CGF's articles of incorporation and bylaws to clarify that CGF savings certificates will be available to current or former RCA members, donors, assemblies, institutions, and agencies (and their corporate affiliates).

The changes mentioned above have benefited churches that have left the denomination by not disrupting their ministries and maintaining favorable loan terms. In addition, these changes have allowed the CGF to broaden its potential customer base and advance its mission of providing affordable rate loans to former and current RCA churches for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings used in ministry. This will in turn allow the CGF to continue to contribute funds to the GSC for ministry grants to support growing church planting initiatives, Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund scholarships, and grants to flourishing but financially challenged churches in need of building renovation for ministry.

The CGF is thankful for the support of its investors and borrowers as we continue in ministry together, and pray that the best interests of Christ's kingdom are served in all that we do.

## **Report of the Board of Benefits Services**

The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and incorporated and approved by an Act of the Assembly of the State of New York on April 16, 1923, under the original name “The Ministers’ Fund of the Reformed Church in America, Inc.” Later, the name was changed to “The Board of Pensions of the Reformed Church in America.” It had operated continuously as a New York not-for-profit corporation until 2019, when the board of directors voted to redomicile to the State of Michigan. This action was approved by the General Synod during its 2019 session.

In the fall of 2019, The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America, Inc., (BOBS) was incorporated as a Michigan domestic nonprofit corporation. Thereafter, all operations, assets, liabilities, and contract rights of the New York corporation were transferred to the Michigan corporation. Dissolution of the New York corporation was approved by the State of New York, effective August 31, 2022.

On April 16, 2023, BOBS celebrated 100 years of incorporation.

The General Synod has delegated to BOBS the responsibility to manage and administer the retirement and insurance programs required by the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Formulary No. 5, to manage and administer the BOBS’ retiree chaplains and assistance programs, and to ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits, long-term disability benefits, and any other programs or services related to the financial well-being of eligible RCA-ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the RCA.

The board met on October 20, 2022, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and on March 16, 2023, in Orlando, Florida. The volunteer board consists of at least eight but not more than sixteen directors, including pastors and professionals from business, finance, investments, and law. The composition of the board is as follows: one person designated by the General Synod Council (GSC) from among its moderator or the president or vice president of the General Synod, the general secretary of the General Synod or his or her designee, one member of the GSC with interest and experience in the work of the Board of Benefits Services designated by the GSC from among its members, and at least five and no more than thirteen directors-at-large.

### **Ends and Executive Limitations**

BOBS, like the GSC, utilizes the principles of policy governance to conduct its work and to guide its oversight and supervision of its executive director in the fulfillment of the purposes it was established to accomplish by the General Synod. Key to its use of the principles of policy governance is the responsibility to state clearly the reasons BOBS exists. In policy governance, the reasons are stated as “ends.”

The board provides direction to and oversight of the executive director's work through the following ends that were adopted at the October 2020 board meeting:

E-1 Manage and administer the retirement programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-1.1 Participants have a means to wisely set aside funds at a rate commensurate with other church plans.

E-1.2 Participants have a means to convert accumulations into retirement income choices including guaranteed lifetime income options.

E-2 Manage and administer the insurance programs required by the *BCO* Formulary No. 5.

E-2.1 Reasonable health insurance benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants through our partnership with Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). Recognizing that the partnership with RBA is a board decision, the executive director is tasked with the following end: "Advocate for the purposes of E-2.1 and monitor and report the effectiveness of current partnership with RBA to the board."

E-2.2 Ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants.

E-3 Manage and administer the retiree chaplains and assistance programs.

E-3.1 Active and retired participants and spouses have access to an assistance fund that may be available based on demonstrated need and is limited by available funds.

E-3.2 Employ a network of retired pastors and elders who maintain contact with and provide pastoral care for retired ministers and their spouses or surviving spouses and with lay missionaries who served for ten or more years.

E-4 Provide other programs or services related to the financial well-being of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.

E-4.1 Participants and eligible participants have access to and are encouraged to use information and educational resources that allow



them to make timely financial decisions regarding their retirement and their health, life, and disability-related benefits.

E-4.2 Investigate and, if appropriate, ensure availability of programs or services related to multidimensional wellness and well-being.

## **Review of Services and Ministries**

As stated in the *BCO*, a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Formulary No. 5) for all ministers serving the church under call or contract by paying the stipulated contributions to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. In addition, consistories must provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance for a minister and his or her immediate family (*BCO* Appendix, Formulary No. 5). As of 2020, an additional requirement states that if the minister and his or her family elect medical coverage through a spouse's employer-sponsored group plan, the church will compensate for "any medical premium costs incurred by [the pastor's] immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated" (*BCO* Appendix, Formulary No. 5). These stipulations apply equally to full-time and part-time ministers.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this general rule. The *BCO* states that "a consistory shall fulfill the provisions of the call form (Appendix, Formulary No. 5) for retirement and insurance for all ministers serving the church under call or contract unless (a) regarding retirement, the minister is covered by the retirement plan sponsored by the Regional Synod of Canada or the retirement plan of the communion where the minister's membership is held, (b) the classis determines that the minister is serving the church part-time, as defined by the Board of Benefits Services, and that circumstances warrant that the consistory be exempt from this requirement, or (c) the minister is serving less than part-time as defined by the Board of Benefits Services" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 [2022 edition, p. 15]).

## **Retirement Services, Fidelity Investments, and Fund Management**

To participate in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program ("403(b) plan"), employers need to complete and submit an adoption agreement to the Board of Benefits Services' office. The adoption agreement is a compliance document that recognizes the 403(b) plan as the retirement plan of the employer and allows a consistory some flexibility in defining the terms of its participation in the 403(b) plan. If an employer submits funds on behalf of its ministers, the board also recognizes this action as evidence that the employer has adopted the agreement. Staff will continue to request adoption agreements from employers as required by the plan. The adoption agreement can be downloaded from the employer section of the BOBS' webpages ([www.rca.org/benefits/employers](http://www.rca.org/benefits/employers)).

Fidelity Investments provides the recordkeeping services for the retirement plans. BOBS creates a shell account within the Fidelity system for new participants and then Fidelity invites the new participant to complete their enrollment online through

the Fidelity NetBenefits website. Participants are automatically enrolled in the appropriate target date Freedom Fund and have the option to allocate their contributions to 18 other available funds. Participants are directed to the Fidelity website to set up employee contributions, change investment options, provide tax information, and list and update beneficiaries. Seventy-six percent of all participant funds remain invested in the target date Fidelity Freedom Funds.

All employers are expected to use Fidelity's Simplified Contribution Platform (SCP) or Plan Sponsor WebStation (PSW) to remit their contributions electronically through the Fidelity website instead of manually by check.

In the summer of 2022, Fidelity Investments became the primary point of contact for distributions related to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, rather than BOBS staff. NetBenefits now has an automatic withdrawal tool that allows participants to select the best withdrawal option for them by modeling different scenarios. This provides participants with a more meaningful experience and helps them determine how much they might receive, how long their money will last, and what might be left upon death.

In its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement programs in collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC). BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants from Creative Planning Retirement Services, who take an active role in monitoring the investment options and administrative expenses associated with our retirement plans. Creative Planning also verifies that any revenue sharing and fees collected from Fidelity are consistent with fee agreements that are in place.

Six percent of participants are enrolled in the Fidelity Personalized Planning and Advice (FPPA) program. FPPA is an optional service that provides professional management of a participant's plan account for a small advisory fee based on total assets invested. Participants in this service receive ongoing investment management, retirement, and financial planning support from a team of professionals. The strategy aligns with the participant's personal goals and is monitored and adjusted based on the market or on life changes. This investment service is optional. Enrollment campaigns are held annually to allow a participant to enroll at a discounted price to determine if the program is a good fit for them.

In order to maintain security and reduce fraud, Fidelity uses two-factor authentication (TFA) for participants performing certain high-risk transactions (password and user ID requests, rollover requests, etc.) on [netbenefits.com/atwork](https://netbenefits.com/atwork).

BOBS owns 22 annuities on behalf of our participants or their beneficiaries. These annuities have been purchased with funds from the non-qualified RCA Retirement Plan and were purchased in the name of BOBS to avoid immediate taxation for the participant. In 2021, we suspended the purchase of annuities in the name of BOBS

through 2025. Participants can still purchase an annuity by taking a fully taxable distribution and then purchasing an annuity in their name.

Thos Shipley, retirement plan administrator, and Feifei Liu, benefit actuarial analyst and project coordinator, are in regular contact with any number of participants, beneficiaries, church administrators, and Fidelity to service the needs of our participants from enrollment through retirement.

#### *Fund and Administrative Fee Changes*

Because of a recent fund review with the Investment Advisory Committee and our financial consultants from Creative Planning, BOBS made changes in its investment lineup. On November 21, 2022, the Oakmark International Fund (OAKIX) and Allspring Emerging Markets Equity Fund (EMGNX) were removed, and existing balances and future contributions were transferred to an existing investment option, MFS International Diversification Fund (MDIZX). In addition, as of May 24, 2023, the Fidelity Government Money Market Fund Premium Class (FZCXX) replaced the Fidelity Government Money Market Fund (SPAXX). This will lower expenses for participants and increase the yield. Participants who are not satisfied with how their current elections were modified are able to make changes by logging on to NetBenefits at [netbenefits.com/atwork](https://netbenefits.com/atwork) or by calling Fidelity at 800-343-0860.

Effective January 1, 2022, the administrative fees charged to participants on employer contributions was reduced from 19 basis points to 10 basis points. A decrease in operational expenses, earnings from the ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund and other sources, and an increased value in retirement plans allowed for BOBS to reduce the fee. The administrative fee remains at 10 basis points for 2023.

#### *Housing Allowance Designation*

At its October 2022 meeting, the board approved the following housing allowance designation for eligible participants taking distributions from the RCA retirement plans.

For calendar year 2023, to designate up to 100% of distributions from the RCA Retirement Plan and the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program as housing allowance for participants in the plan(s) who are eligible for the housing allowance under relevant provisions of the United States Internal Revenue Code.

Housing allowance letters are emailed and mailed to retirees who have money in either plan at the end of each calendar year and are available on the BOBS' retirement webpage.

#### *Tiered Approach to Selecting Investment Options*

BOBS' retirement plans offer a broad array of investment options. This variety enables participants to select options that best suit their individual preference and

goals. To assist with participants' selections, the investment options have been organized into three tiers:

- Tier I – Target Date Funds: an asset mix of stocks, bonds, and other investments that automatically become more conservative as the fund approaches its target retirement date and beyond.
- Tier II – Core Investment Options: allows participants to construct a basic investment portfolio utilizing low-cost funds.
- Tier III – ESG Investment Options: environmental, social, and governance-themed investment options help participants find investments that align with their principles.

This tiered approach allows participants to more easily select those investment options that are appropriate for their individual goals, time horizon, and risk tolerance.

For additional help with determining an investment strategy, participants should work with their personal financial advisor, visit Fidelity NetBenefits at [netbenefits.com/atwork](https://netbenefits.com/atwork), or meet one-on-one with a Fidelity planner by calling 800-642-7131.

Additional educational resources about environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investing can be found on the BOBS' webpages at [www.rca.org/esg](https://www.rca.org/esg).

#### *Social Screening Constraints and Environmental, Social, and Governance Investing*

BOBS' investments follow the current investment policy statements, which require the investment managers to seek to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, the production and distribution of tobacco or alcohol, adult entertainment and pornography, or firearms.

Our plan currently has four ESG funds: Fidelity International Sustainability Index (FNIDX), PIMCO Total Return ESG Institutional (PTSAX), Pioneer Balanced ESG K (PCBKX), and Parnassus Core Equity Institutional (PRILX), a fossil-fuel-free fund.

General Synod 2021 took two actions regarding ESG investing: CA 21-6 (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, p. 206) and ONB 21-9 (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, p. 119). As a result, the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC) created an ESG subcommittee to discuss these two recommendations. Two BOBS board members with professional experience in retirement plans and investing are members of the IAC and of this subcommittee. The ESG subcommittee reported back to the full IAC and shared the following:

- Industry standards for ESG ratings and definitions are a work in progress. The criteria and scoring methods are constantly evolving. Recently, there is also significant political and regulatory pushback of ESG standards. At this point,

the RCA is not behind the industry on incorporating ESG criteria into our policies.

- In this frequently changing environment, we are being cautious and prudent and believe it is not a good time to integrate ESG criteria into our investment policies. As fiduciaries to the retirement funds, the subcommittee remains committed to balancing both investment growth and our ESG impact.
- The subcommittee commits to paying attention to the developing industry standards related to ESG and will meet annually to review the ESG environment and determine if we should take future action.

#### *RCA 403(b) Retirement Program Plan Document Changes*

At the March 16, 2023, board meeting, minor changes to the plan document were approved, effective April 1, 2023.

- The definition of Plan Year (Section 2.32) was changed to reflect that the financial reporting is done on a fiscal, not calendar, year.
- Updates throughout the plan were made to clarify the distribution process for lay foreign missionaries (various sections).
- The definition of Employer (Section 2.16) was changed to provide better clarity and so that the language is in line with the IRS code.

#### *RCA 403(b) Retirement Contribution Verification Project*

The RCA 403(b) Retirement Program holds funds for 1,500 active participants with a value more than \$276 million as of April 3, 2023. BOBS staff continues to collect the necessary information from RCA employers for the 403(b) contribution verification project. The contribution verification project was initiated in 2012 to audit the participation and payment of the required employer contributions related to the retirement accounts of eligible ministers under call or contract. Many employers were out of compliance with the plan document and the BCO by not contributing the required 11 percent of compensation to eligible RCA ministers' retirement accounts. Approximately \$1.8 million has been collected and added to the retirement accounts of RCA ministers since this project has begun. However, there is still a shortfall of an estimated \$912,794 that churches should have contributed to these accounts.

The necessary information is requested annually from employers through the Retirement Security Form (RSF), a confidential portion of the Consistorial Report Form (CRF). Each year, a significant number of churches fail to complete the RSF, do not respond to the requests for payment, or only provide the basic information requested to perform the review. As a result of not having the needed information, it is impossible for staff to verify that the proper contributions have been made. The plan document states that the responsibility for making contributions lies with the church employer. Staff feel confident that we have made reasonable efforts to collect these contributions on behalf of our participants, but we cannot do this without the cooperation of the churches.

Churches and participants can help BOBS by:

1. Completing and submitting the Retirement Security Form in its entirety with accurate information.
2. Responding to inquiries from BOBS staff and, if needed, contributing the amount requested to cover the shortfall in contributions.
3. Reviewing quarterly statements to ensure that the church has made the required 11 percent contribution.

### *Reallocation Program*

The RCA Retirement Plan, a non-qualified plan, holds funds for 388 active participants with a market value of almost \$190 million as of April 1, 2023. This plan was closed to new participants and contributions as of December 31, 2004.

Following approval by the 2015 General Synod, the legal plan document of the RCA Retirement Plan was amended to allow the reallocation of participant funds from the RCA Retirement Plan to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. BOBS implemented a process in the summer of 2015 for participants to reallocate their retirement savings. This reallocation is a two-step process that requires participants to provide relevant information to confirm their eligibility and determine the dollar amount that can be reallocated. Staff work closely with Fidelity Investments in the process, and the review is completed in strict compliance with the IRS 415(c) rules. Participation in this program is encouraged but optional.

The reallocation program was offered again in the summer of 2022 to participants in connection with the 2021 tax year. One hundred and sixty-three participants were able to reallocate almost \$6.59 million from the RCA Retirement Plan to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program.

The reallocation program will be offered again this year to participants in connection with the 2022 tax year. Information will be sent to eligible participants on June 1, 2023, with a July 31 due date. Final eligibility and the amount that can be reallocated each year will be determined by BOBS based on the information provided by the participant and in accordance with the IRS annual contribution limits and IRS regulations. Participants are able to participate in the reallocation program while working for an RCA employer and for five years after they are no longer earning wages from an RCA employer.

More information about the reallocation program is available on the BOBS webpage at [www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/reallocation](http://www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/reallocation) or by contacting BOBS staff at [retirement@rca.org](mailto:retirement@rca.org).

### *Insurance Programs*

BCO Formulary No. 5 requires that churches “promise to pay the stipulated contributions to the Reformed Church in America retirement plan and provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance” for RCA-ordained ministers of Word and sacrament and their families.

BOBS and the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) provide a number of insurance products so that consistories can easily fulfill this promise.

The Reformed Benefits Association was created in 2013 by the Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) for the provision of health and welfare benefit plans for ministers, lay employees, and retirees of each denomination and other eligible employers. The RCA is represented on the RBA board by Dr. James Kuplic, Leanne Bough, Doug Struyk, and staff representative and executive director of Benefits Services Kelly Oliveira.

BOBS continues to collaborate with the CRCNA regarding the provision of medical benefits through the RBA. RCA and CRCNA entities are eligible to participate in RBA benefit offerings by agreeing to the Terms of Participation. The terms require that entities enroll all eligible full-time staff in health insurance (unless the employee has coverage through a spouse, parent, or retiree health insurance plan). The RBA currently offers three medical insurance plans for its members: the premium plan, the consumer plan, and the co-pay plan. Part-time employees working a minimum of 20 hours per week are also eligible to participate. A church may elect group life insurance coverage of either \$175,000 or a new \$75,000 as a stand-alone benefit. Optional benefit offerings include dental, vision, supplemental life, accident, and critical illness insurance.

All eligible active RCA-ordained ministers of Word and sacrament who are regularly working a minimum of 17.5 hours per week are automatically enrolled in long-term disability (LTD) insurance administered through BOBS. Those who are not enrolled in life insurance through the RBA are automatically enrolled in group life insurance administered through BOBS. BOBS contracts with Lincoln Financial for both life and long-term disability plans that include voluntary plans where the participants can purchase increased coverage for themselves, their spouses, and their children. Premiums for insurance, which had remained the same since 2019, increased two percent in 2023. Commissioned pastors, while not mandated to have coverage, are eligible to enroll in BOBS' life and LTD plans. In providing these benefits for eligible ministers, churches have access to an affordable group plan that allows them to easily fulfill the requirements of Formulary No. 5.

Beginning January 1, 2022, BOBS expanded its coverage to include ministers ordained outside of the RCA who are serving in an RCA church. Due to agreements already established by the denominations involved, this coverage does not include ministers ordained in the CRCNA or Formula of Agreement partner churches.

Churches are billed quarterly for BOBS' group plans. In order to not jeopardize the terms of a group plan, a church must pay the premiums to BOBS directly for their pastor's coverage. Reminders are sent to the church if an invoice is not paid by the due date. If payment is not received, a notice of cancelation is sent to the minister, to the treasurer, and to the classis. The loss of or lack of coverage leaves the minister

without financial security, is a violation of the BCO, and puts church employers out of compliance with Formulary No. 5.

Ministers without charge can be covered by group life and LTD for 90 days after their last day of work. The most recent church where the minister served is responsible for paying the premiums for this extended period. Upon termination, policies can be converted or ported to an individual plan.

All participants are encourage to keep their beneficiary information up to date by using the beneficiary designation form ([www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Life-Beneficiary-Form.pdf](http://www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Life-Beneficiary-Form.pdf)).

Cineca Anthony, BOBS' life and LTD administrator, works with churches to ensure proper insurance coverage is available and provided to eligible RCA ministers. She also guides pastors and/or their beneficiaries as they navigate the insurance system when claims need to be filed.

Churches can help BOBS in two ways:

1. Keep BOBS staff aware of current salary information. This information is requested at the time of enrollment and during each open enrollment period following. BOBS also requests current salary information in a special campaign each summer. This information is essential so that ministers are enrolled in the proper amount of long-term disability coverage.
2. Make quarterly payments for insurance through electronic fund transfer (EFT) or pay by credit card through the online payment site instead of sending manual checks. Fewer manual checks will help us to improve efficiencies. This can be conveniently done by completing the ACH form that is part of the church's quarterly invoice or by contacting Terri Boven at [tboven@rca.org](mailto:tboven@rca.org).

#### *Minimum Standards for Insurance*

As stated in Formulary No. 5 of the BCO, "Such insurance coverages shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services" (2022 edition, p. 139). For 2023, the minimum standard of coverage established by BOBS is met by offering coverage that approximates the consumer plan, as offered by the RBA.

- A coinsurance of 80 percent, an individual deductible of \$3,000, and a family deductible of \$6,000
- A maximum in-network, out-of-pocket cost of \$5,000 for an individual and \$10,000 for a family
- Coverage that is 80 percent after the deductible has been met and until the out-of-pocket maximum has been reached
- 100 percent coverage of eligible medical expenses once the out-of-pocket maximum has been met



### *Definition of Part Time*

Similar to the requirement that BOBS set the minimum standard for medical insurance, BOBS is also required to establish the definition of “part time.” Because each provider has varying eligibility requirements, the definition of part time varies based on the product.

- For life and LTD insurance purchased through BOBS, part time is defined as working a minimum of 17.5 hours but not more than 29 hours per week. Those working 30 hours per week or more are considered full time.
- For the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, part time is defined as anyone working 1 to 19 hours per week; however, consistories are required to make contributions for all ministers serving the church under call or contract. Those working 30 hours or more are considered full time.
- For medical insurance, part time means anyone working a minimum of 20 but not more than 29 hours per week. Those working 30 hours per week or more are considered full time.

If insurance is purchased through the RBA, its terms of participation require that any insured member must work a minimum of 20 hours per week to be enrolled in medical, dental, and vision insurance. For further clarification, contact the RBA at 800-701-8992.

These definitions are published in the “Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information” document that is updated and distributed to ministers, churches, classis clerks, and regional synod executives each fall. The electronic version of this document is posted on the RCA website at [www.rca.org/airb](http://www.rca.org/airb).

### *Retiree Chaplains and Assistance Programs*

Through the retiree chaplains program, BOBS employs a network of 27 retired pastors and ordained elders who visit, befriend, assist, and maintain contact with over 1,000 retired ministers and their spouses or surviving spouses across the U.S. and Canada, and with lay missionaries who served for ten or more years. This ministry, coordinated by GSC staff member Mornier Rich, has been in existence since the early 1970s and is intended to keep retirees connected to the RCA and to communicate the needs of our retirees back to BOBS. The retiree chaplains maintain an intentional, personal, and pastoral relationship, especially when the retiree lives in a community where there is not an RCA congregation. As retiree chaplains meet with retirees throughout the year, they are able to identify when there is a financial need and are frequently the first point of contact in distributing the assistance application for new needs.

The *In Touch* booklet is a compilation of reflections from our retirees edited by retiree chaplain Bob Terwilliger. The booklet is published and sent to retirees three times a year, and individual reflections are posted on the webpage for retirees: [www.rca.org/benefits/retirees](http://www.rca.org/benefits/retirees).

Each spring, the retiree chaplains gather in person to share stories, receive any updates on internal processes, and spend time together in prayer. The retiree chaplains met in person in Holland, Michigan, on April 25 and 26, 2023.

The assistance program is a ministry available to eligible ministers, their surviving spouses, and dependents who are experiencing long-term or immediate financial need. Lay missionaries with ten or more years of services and former employees of the Southern Normal School are also eligible for grants from the assistance program.

- Financial assistance grants are primarily awarded for needs related to housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, funeral grants to surviving spouses, and EBPH retirement contributions for disabled ministers. At times, a one-time grant is provided for an immediate, unexpected, or urgent need.
- While rarely requested, financial assistance is also available for costs related to the higher education of children of deceased ministers and to assist in the payment of medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church plant.

To be eligible for monthly grants, recipients must have exhausted their retirement account(s) and have established financial need through a formal assistance application. Each year, assistance recipients are required to complete and submit a new application. Mornier Rich, coordinator of retiree chaplains and assistance programs, and Kelly Oliveira, executive director of Benefits Services, review applications and award grants for the upcoming year. Applications are distributed and reviewed throughout the year as new financial needs are presented; grants are awarded when needed. Twenty-six monthly grants totaling \$12,121 per month were approved and will provide assistance in 2023 for essential needs or medical insurance premiums.

#### *Board of Benefits Services' Assistance Grant Assessment Request*

For many years, General Synod has approved a request to support the Assistance Program through assessment dollars. The ERISA Insurance Endowment Fund was established in 2019; the earnings from this endowment can be used to fund the Assistance Program. Due to this new revenue stream, BOBS will not be requesting the \$2.00 per member assessment it has requested in the past for the funding of the Assistance Program for 2024.

This means that, as of January 2024, the retiree chaplains and assistance programs will be funded only through endowment earnings and contributions. We are grateful that assessments and administrative fees from the retirement plan are no longer needed to support these critical ministries. We are also grateful for the many churches, organizations, and individuals who donate to the Assistance Fund each year. (If you would like to be one of them, visit [www.rca.org/give/bobs-assistance-fund](http://www.rca.org/give/bobs-assistance-fund).)

## *Well-being and Education*

To address the emotional well-being of pastors, BOBS has contracted with Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services to provide free, confidential, short-term Christian counseling services through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our contract includes an expanded network of providers so that pastors and their families can seek services at a local clinic in their community. Ministers and members of their household are entitled to up to three face-to-face consultations per problem. In addition, clergy have access to assessments, articles, videos, templates for legal forms, and training via an online tool. The EAP is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To receive services, call 833-244-2490 and identify yourself as an RCA member.

The Ministerial Excellence Fund ([www.rca.org/ministerial-excellence-fund](http://www.rca.org/ministerial-excellence-fund)) was created to reduce or eliminate ministers' personal debt and to give them a jump-start toward long-term financial health. Through grants from Lilly Endowment Inc., matching funds from BOBS, and funds from individual donations, BOBS has given \$1.5 million over a three-year period to eliminate clergy debt. The Lilly Endowment Inc. believes that financial burdens carried by pastoral leaders are significant barriers to effective, faithful, and fruitful ministry. Through this process, grant recipients are expected to disclose their financial situation, agree to financial counseling, meet regularly with an accountability partner, and participate in a financial educational program. We hope, through this grant program, that financially struggling clergy will be given the tools to become financially healthy clergy, and the impact will be that both pastors and their congregations thrive.

BOBS encourages every church to take a special offering to give to their pastor in October, November, or December. As an extension of the Ministerial Excellence Fund, we provide a matching grant of up to \$2,000 to pay down student loans or medical debt. Ministers are encouraged to take this opportunity to invest in themselves by using their own money to receive the matching grant if their church is not able to participate. We are pleased that, in total, over \$80,000 in student loans and medical debts was paid down for 23 ministers in the 2022 Bless Your Pastor campaign ([www.rca.org/benefits/bless-your-pastor](http://www.rca.org/benefits/bless-your-pastor)). Since 2019, over 100 ministers have received a grant from the Bless Your Pastor campaign. This opportunity will be offered again in 2023.

Two new types of grants were available in 2022:

1. The Retirement Kickstart grant was established to incentivize ministers who are behind in saving for retirement to make or increase their employee contribution into their RCA 403(b) Retirement Program account. To qualify, clergy needed to contribute an additional two to four percent of their salary into their account. Those awarded the Retirement Kickstart grant received a contribution between \$2,000 and \$4,000 directly into their RCA 403(b) retirement account.

2. The Clergy Revitalization grant was created to offer ministers a two- to three-week paid leave to participate in a revitalization experience, including professional counseling or spiritual direction. BOBS collaborated with local congregations and, in 2022, awarded over 100 Clergy Revitalization Grants, totaling just over \$240,000, to help clergy become revitalized for ministry in ways that will bless the RCA for years to come.

Through our partnership with Everence Financial, clergy can participate in a seven-part financial planning process with a team of Everence Certified Financial Planners. They address cash flow, protections, taxes, investing, estate planning, retirement, and charitable giving. This yearlong experience costs \$1,500 per pastor. BOBS was able to subsidize half of that cost with the grant from the Lilly Endowment, and half of the remainder is subsidized by funds raised from classes, bringing the final cost to only \$375 for ministers. BOBS appreciates the quality of this service and has noticed that new participants are enrolling because of the positive word of mouth from those who have already participated.

BOBS also maintains a partnership with LSS Financial Counseling to provide pastors with a free service that focuses on creating a budget, debt consolidation, student loan management, and improving credit scores. This service is available not only to our pastors, but also to anyone in their household. Each person who utilizes the service gets up to six sessions with a certified financial counselor. Due to a change in federal policy, a student loan forgiveness program is available to clergy and others who work for nonprofit organizations. Because this has significant potential for our clergy, BOBS expanded our contract with LSS Financial to cover all RCA ministers, commissioned pastors, seminary students, GSC staff, and their households. Those eligible can consult with a professional from LSS Financial to navigate the student loan forgiveness program. These programs are free for those who participate because BOBS is able to cover the cost for this service through the Economic Challenges Facing Pastoral Leaders (ECFPL) Phase II Lilly Endowment Inc. grant.

With the knowledge that congregational financial health is directly connected to a minister's participation in benefits, BOBS partnered with the GSC Advancement department and the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving to host Cultivating Generous Congregations learning communities for RCA churches. The curriculum was provided by the Lake Institute and presented by BOBS and Advancement staff through a hybrid of in-person and online gatherings. The first offering was held in Long Island on March 2, 2023, where a cohort of churches gathered in person to begin the three-month experience. Plans are in the works for another cohort that will gather in northwest Iowa. This project is funded by money left over from a previous Lilly Endowment Inc. grant.

After the success of the September 2022 "Ready to Retire" workshops, BOBS offered two more sessions of the same workshop in January. Thos Shipley and Billy Norden developed content and presented an interactive online workshop to help participants understand timelines, tasks, and resources as they prepare to retire. All retirement plan participants age 50 and above who were not yet retired were invited to attend.

Fifty-eight participants attended the September workshops and another thirty-eight attended the January workshops. Participants provided positive feedback through a follow-up evaluation and were grateful for the experience. We plan to offer these workshops three to four times per year.

BOBS invited all classis clerks and regional synod executives to sign up for a 30-minute listening session. Almost 40 people signed up for these conversations. Through these listening sessions, we asked about the main priorities of the clerks and how engaged they are in the work of BOBS; how they address the BCO-mandated benefits for their racial and ethnic churches, church plants, and financially struggling congregations; and what they need from BOBS now and as we strategically think about BOBS' services in the future. We heard over and over about how much time and energy is being spent caring for the churches and pastors who are leaving, and there is concern for what will be left, which, in many cases, will be smaller churches that cannot afford benefits. Many shared their hope for rebuilding. BOBS is grateful for our partnership with the classis clerks and regional synod executives as we continue to find the best ways to care for our ministers.

BOBS created a process for welcoming and orienting newly ordained ministers of Word and sacrament in 2020 and has built upon it by educating newly ordained ministers on the enrollment process into the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. Newly ordained ministers are invited into a conversation with retirement and financial education coordinator Billy Norden, where they spend time learning about the benefits promised to them in the *Book of Church Order* and the services provided by BOBS. This process now includes an opportunity for the new minister to complete their enrollment with Fidelity while receiving support from BOBS staff to help navigate the process. They also receive an easy-to-understand summary of their benefits in a packet sent by the general secretary. This summary and conversation are intended to help the minister be grounded in their benefits knowledge early in their ministry. We feel confident that when ministers enter the ministry talking about and understanding their benefits, finances, and retirement plans, they will be better prepared financially for their own retirement and more equipped to lead their congregations in financial discussions and generosity.

The Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information booklet is updated and distributed to ministers and churches each September. An email link was sent to all ministers, churches, classes, and regional synods, and a hard copy was mailed to each church. A PDF copy of the booklet can be found online at [www.rca.org/airb](http://www.rca.org/airb).

The BOBS' webpages ([www.rca.org/benefits](http://www.rca.org/benefits)) are regularly updated with new resources that help participants understand how to navigate their insurance and retirement plans. Ministers, lay people, and employers can access the webpages to find forms, plan documents, policies, and educational materials. The most recent webpage enhancement was the addition of informational videos that present ideas about how to prepare for retirement and an easy-to-understand explanation about the retirement plan functions of BOBS and Fidelity.

The Board of Benefits Services' monthly newsletter has a blend of critical information about our retirement and insurance plans, regular communication about clergy who have passed away, and financial health articles written specifically for clergy. Recognizing that clergy finance and church finance are interwoven with one another, BOBS continues to provide articles that relate to both personal finance for clergy as well as leadership topics about congregational stewardship and generosity. These articles are featured in BOBS' newsletters, on social media, on the BOBS' financial health webpage ([www.rca.org/benefits/financial-health](http://www.rca.org/benefits/financial-health)) and on [Faithward.org](http://Faithward.org).

### **Board and Staff Transitions**

The Board of Benefits Services expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Philip Doeschot, Lucille Perkins, Larry Ten Haken, Kenneth Tenckink, and Arvin Wester for their faithful service as retiree chaplains. We welcome Ronald Cassie as our newest retiree chaplain, as well as returning retiree chaplain Gene Poll.

BOBS also thanks Jack Doorlag and Doug Struyk for their service as board members.

### **Finances and Annual Audit**

Please see the report of the Office of Finance on pages 46-58 of this workbook to review BOBS' finances and annual audit.

### **Re-domiciling Corporation in Michigan**

General Synod 2019 approved the articles of incorporation and the bylaws of The Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America, Inc., a Michigan nonprofit corporation. As a result, a new corporation was established and vendor contracts, agreements, and assets were transferred, effective January 1, 2020. January 1, 2020, also marks the time that BOBS began doing business as a Michigan nonprofit corporation.

Petitions for the dissolution of the New York corporation were submitted to New York State in spring 2021, and the New York State Attorney General's office approved the dissolution of the BOBS New York corporation, effective August 31, 2022.

BOBS maintains office space, staff, and day-to-day operations in The Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1606, New York, New York 10115.

### **An Equitable Future**

The following paper, "An Equitable Future," discusses some challenges that many RCA churches of color are facing regarding the provision of the required benefits for their ministers. How the RCA has structured the required benefits for RCA ministers should be studied and adapted in order to create a system that provides more flexibility and honors cultural traditions, while also maintaining a high standard of care for RCA pastors. In some cases, this may mean we need to seek culture change

in areas where we discover unhealthy culture that leads to pastoral burnout and long-term harm. The paper highlights some of the realities that are preventing all churches from adequately providing for their minister's financial well-being and topics to consider as the denomination seeks to be a multicultural denomination freed from racism.

## **AN EQUITABLE FUTURE**

### *A Conversation with the Board of Benefits Services of the Reformed Church in America*

First published in July 2022

Author: Rev. Billy Norden (Retirement and Financial Education Coordinator, BOBS)  
Edited by: Kelly Oliveira (Executive Director, BOBS), Mornier Rich (Coordinator of Retiree Chaplains and Assistance Programs, BOBS), and Becky Getz (Writer and Editor, GSC)

Reviewed for accuracy by: Rev. Daniel Davila, Bizzy Feekes, and Rev. Imos Wu

### **Overview**

On May 3-4, 2022, six people gathered at the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) office in New York City to have a conversation about compensation and benefits for non-white/non-Anglo clergy in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The group was composed of RCA ministers, a seminary student, and BOBS staff members. Present were Daniel Davila, Bizzy Feekes, Kelly Oliveira, Billy Norden, Mornier Rich, and Imos Wu. Sharon Atkins was invited but was not able to attend because of employer restrictions due to a spike in COVID-19. This report will detail the grant that allowed for this conversation to occur, how the need for this conversation emerged, the structure of the two-day dialogue, and some of the barriers that were identified to financial well-being. The report will conclude with some possibilities and hoped-for outcomes as a result of this conversation.

### **Funding Source**

In September 2020, Billy Norden was invited by the Leadership Education School of Duke Divinity to participate in a cohort called "Seek the Welfare: Faith, Community, Sustainability and New Vision." Over a 12-month period, the cohort was to travel to four different sites across the country to learn how different Christian leaders are implementing sustainable Christian communities that seek welfare and equity for diverse groups of people. The cohort members were challenged to think about how their own work could be inspired by what they learned. The first event was virtual because of the pandemic, but there was hope that other events could happen in-person. As the pandemic continued to unfold, the entire experience became online-only. As a result, the Leadership Education School had excess funds that they wanted the cohort to have access to. Each member of the cohort was invited to apply for a \$5,000 grant that fit within the focus of the program, while specifically enhancing



the ongoing personal work of the participants. Billy wrote a proposal to use the funds to have this conversation in New York City.

## **A Problem Identified**

When a minister becomes ordained in the RCA, they receive an initial email from the Board of Benefits Services, giving them a brief overview of the benefits that their churches are responsible for providing them according to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, the services and ministries administered by BOBS, and an invitation to a follow-up conversation to walk through the information and address any questions the minister may have.

In 2021, the Classis de las Naciones submitted a number of forms to inform the General Synod Council (GSC) staff of new ordinations and newly organized churches. As Billy Norden met with the newly ordained ministers, it became clear that many of these ministers were not aware of the requirements for RCA ministers of Word and sacrament and RCA churches to participate in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program, life insurance, and long-term disability insurance, and for churches to provide health insurance that meets or exceeds the minimum requirement as required in the *Book of Church Order*. The pastors Billy spoke to articulated that they would love to receive these benefits, but that there was no way their congregations could afford them. Generally speaking, for a full-time minister and his or her family, a benefits package is usually greater than \$25,000, and health insurance is usually the largest portion of that cost.

Two realities were held in tension in those conversations. For many congregations with few financial resources, coming up with this amount in addition to current expenses is unrealistic. But the other reality is that RCA churches cannot opt out of these benefits for full-time ministers. These benefits are required by the *Book of Church Order* and are a critical resource for the long-term well-being of clergy.

After this discovery, helpful conversations were held between BOBS staff members; the classis executive, classis clerk, and ministers from Classis de las Naciones; and then-director of Church Multiplication, Randy Weener. Those conversations resulted in increased communication and education about the required benefits, but the barrier to funding benefits still existed. One question from a pastor during those conversations was important: “What should we do in the meantime while General Synod works on this?”

The unfortunate reality at that time was that no one was working on it.

Many church members and ministers in the Classis de las Naciones are Hispanic, hailing from many countries spanning Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. We at BOBS know that if a stated goal of the RCA is “Living into a multicultural, multiracial future freed from racism, sexism, and ableism” (as stated by the RCA’s Office of Advocacy and Race Relations, [www.rca.org/office-of-advocacy-and-race-relations](http://www.rca.org/office-of-advocacy-and-race-relations)), then it is highly problematic if our Hispanic ministers are not getting benefits, while a vast majority of our white ministers are.



Close to this time, a representative from our Korean churches contacted us, asking if BOBS could present some information about benefits to a gathering of churches in New York. We were excited to connect with our Korean churches in this way because past experience had indicated that there is a barrier to Korean RCA churches participating in RCA benefits programs.

All of this caused us to wonder, “What else should we be aware of? What other barriers or considerations might exist in other non-white RCA communities?” Considering these two questions, we wanted to get a broader perspective from the experience of people in our African American and Black communities, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, Hispanic and Latino communities, and Native American, Indigenous, and First Nations communities.

From these questions, and with grant funds available to us, a conversation with the aspiration of “An Equitable Future” was born.

### **Participants and Structure of the Conversation**

As we entered into this conversation, we were well aware that six people couldn’t possibly represent the diversity of every community within the RCA. However, we did believe that beginning the conversation, even if it couldn’t possibly reflect every aspect of our diversity, was better than no conversation at all. Around the table, six voices were able to represent some aspects of our diverse racial and ethnic communities, and our voices included those of men, women, ministers, seminary students, and the Board of Benefits Services.

After allowing ample time for introductions and getting to know one another, the heart of our time together was painting a picture of reality within the contexts we were connected to. This was an opportunity for deep listening as we began to understand the realities, challenges, and differences within the RCA. The second day began with an overview of the services BOBS offers and the values and theology behind these services. Believing that positive change occurs when we discover shared values, we began to identify the values regarding financial well-being that might be embraced across diverse communities. Finally, we began to dream and discern what action steps might lead to a more equitable future in the RCA.

### **Barriers and Problems Identified**

As we expected, the more we spoke with each other, the more layers and challenges were unveiled.

#### *Complexities Multiply*

The first and most obvious issue is that it is insufficient to categorize groups into the categories of the three RCA racial and ethnic councils (African American Black Council, Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries, and Hispanic Ministries Council) and Native American Indigenous Ministries. There are significant variations among Taiwanese, Chinese, and Korean churches, just as there are among Puerto

Rican, Mexican, and Venezuelan churches, just to name a few examples. Just as there is no one cultural description that fits all Asian people and churches, the same is true for every grouping in the RCA. There is wide variation from church to church. This makes identifying strategies for change and impact much more difficult.

As if this didn't make things complex enough, within each specific cultural context there are generational variations that add to differences within each community. For example, younger members of Korean churches may be more open to talking about finances than older generations. Likewise, in our Hispanic churches, second-generation children of immigrants might have significantly more financial resources than first-generation immigrants do. Churches composed of primarily second- or third-generation congregants have very different needs and financial strategies than churches that are composed of primarily first-generation immigrants.

We also learned together that there is not a shared vocabulary across cultural lines, and in some cases, helpful vocabulary for one group could be harmful vocabulary for another. For example, we discovered that for many Hispanic churches, having a missionary ideology and mentality was motivating and helpful; however, for our Native American communities, the missionary terminology brings with it centuries of harm and damage, and that language is unacceptable in that context. As we will discuss more in depth, language—like full time or part time, vocation and call, health and well-being—is vastly different depending on the context in which one ministers. The more we spoke, the more complex our dream about an equitable future became.

### *Vocation and Call*

One vocabulary word that became a focus was the term “covocational.” Covocational replaces the previous term bivocational to describe someone who has two or more careers at the same time. The underlying reality is that many pastors of all races and ethnicities view having an additional funding source outside of congregational ministry a necessity. Especially in communities of color, funding sources outside of congregational ministry is a very common practice. For our African American and Black churches, renting building space to other churches is a common practice to bring in extra revenue. For our Hispanic churches, it is common for ministers to have their primary income come from other work, while more moderate income comes from the church budget.

The adoption of the term “covocational” and the discarding of the term “bivocational” has to do with the concept of call. In most communities, regardless of race or ethnicity, call to ministry is viewed as a whole-life commitment. And so it follows that for a person to consider oneself a part-time minister is a rejection of God's whole-life call to ministry. The term covocational is a way to embrace the fullness and wholeness of ministry, while also acknowledging another aspect of life that involves work and compensation.

While this makes sense from a theological perspective, it becomes problematic from a BOBS perspective. In the RCA, if one is a full-time minister, one must participate in the benefits required of a full-time minister. Benefits are also required for part-time

ministers. A benefits waiver can be filed for part-time ministers; the waiver must be approved by the classis. This is, of course, discouraged, but it is an option. Based on requirements from our vendors, BOBS must have a clear reporting of how many hours per week a minister is employed, and BOBS must make sure that the benefits given and received are appropriate according to that reporting.

We also heard in our conversation that many pastors in our Hispanic communities report having full-time non-church jobs while also working full time for the church. It caused us to wonder, specifically when it comes to administering benefits, how the ministry hours are being counted and calculated in these circumstances. While it might be possible for someone to work 80+ hours a week, it seems to us that those situations would be rare and would be unsustainable in the long term.

Finally, in regard to covocation, we learned that while many Asian churches can only afford to pay for part-time work, the minister is strongly discouraged from finding work with additional income outside of that specific ministry. In this case, there is an embrace of a whole-life call to ministry but an inability to compensate a minister for that level of service.

#### *Relationship between Congregation and Pastor*

The relationship between the congregation and the pastor makes a significant difference when it comes to giving benefits. This is true no matter what racial or ethnic context we examine, but the following are some specific revelations we heard.

- In some Asian churches, ministers' salaries are intentionally kept low to qualify them for government or local aid programs. Part of the salary is provided in the form of rent or a leased car. Other times the pastor will receive cash as payment. This can create an unhealthy dependency of the minister on the church and does not provide any financial stability for the minister's future.
- In some Asian cultural contexts, there is the overt belief that a pastor should suffer. This belief can be held by the minister, the congregation, or both. There can be an outspoken aversion to a minister living comfortably or being able to afford nice or new things.
- In some Asian churches, ministers who are first-generation immigrants are not comfortable receiving benefits because many of their members don't have benefits due to the type of work they can find. For this same reason, many ministers who are second-generation Asian Americans leave those types of churches.
- In some Hispanic cultural contexts, there is hesitancy to apply for healthcare through the Affordable Care Act, based on one's citizenship status. While healthcare is available for undocumented residents, many are suspicious of the U.S. government and refuse to enroll. It can create a challenge for clergy to receive healthcare benefits if many in the congregation aren't receiving similar benefits.
- Likewise, in Native American contexts, there is a strong distrust of U.S. government programs. Additionally, many Native American communities find

themselves in financial hardship, so organizing a church and funding a salary package for a minister is far outside of current reality. Finally, we heard that there is an expectation of helping others in need, even if you have very little to give.

- In some African American Black churches, there is likely to be more of an openness to a covocational minister, but the expectations for the time and presence of that minister remains very high. Ministers are expected to be at most events, exhibit a high level of member care, and care for the many programmatic, facility, and administrative needs of the congregation.

### *Financial Literacy*

Mornier Rich highlighted the reality that financial literacy and financial education is lacking in some of the African American Black churches that she is connected to. She shared that a debt reduction and financial literacy class offered by New Brunswick Theological Seminary was a significant catalyst for positive change in her life as well as the lives of her children. She perceives that there is a significant need for resources like that.

Similarly, Daniel Davila Sr. noted that many who immigrate to the United States, in his context, quickly (and surprisingly) adopt the consumerist mindset that is the norm in the U.S.

In various communities, financial programs are available but not utilized. One of the causes is skepticism of government resources, as noted above. Other reasons are inaccessibility and language barriers.

### *Underfunctioning of Classes*

When examining the structure and polity of the RCA, it is clear that while BOBS exists to provide and administer the benefits program, it is the responsibility of the classis to educate its members about benefits, oversee the proper participation in benefits, and hold churches accountable should they fall out of compliance with *BCO* requirements.

While some classes are carrying out those duties accordingly, BOBS staff reported that there are a significant number of classes that are not. Examples include:

- In some classes with a significant number of Hispanic churches, churches have been organized that aren't financially sustainable enough to pay both denominational assessments and clergy salary with benefits.
- In some classes with a significant number of African American Black churches, new ministers from other denominations aren't properly vetted, causing a break between RCA order and the practices of the congregations.
- In some classes with a significant number of Asian and Asian American churches, congregations have been brought in from other denominations without proper onboarding and orientation, creating a disconnect between RCA standards and the practices of the congregations.

- The feedback we heard about our Native American communities is that there is a lack of unified leadership and connectedness. We can't say conclusively whether this is an issue at the classis level or if this is more of a concern and responsibility for the General Synod.

We find that some classis clerks are not appropriately knowledgeable about benefits requirements, some classis committees do not have practices in place to oversee church compliance to benefit requirements, some churches do not administer benefits correctly, and there is not a consistent system for catching these mistakes in a timely manner. This observation is not limited to classes with a higher percentage of people from a racial or ethnic background that is not white, but the concern is prevalent throughout the RCA.

### *The Wrong Leverage Point*

BOBS has two main touch points: ministers and classes.

Put yourself into the shoes of this minister. You pastor a small congregation. Many of your members work in the service industry and are struggling to make ends meet. You are aware that expenses for the congregation are a point of high anxiety, and your compensation is by far the biggest item in the budget. Even if you knew that you needed appropriate benefits for the well-being of yourself and your family, would you advocate for yourself and push the congregation to increase giving and budgeted expenses to meet your needs? Many feel like they cannot, and that there is no one to advocate on their behalf.

A reality that emerged in this discussion is that any real change will need to happen at the level of local church leadership. This is where education, good communication, and accessible resources might be most impactful. Ironically, it is also the area of the RCA structure where BOBS has the least access, influence, and connection.

### *Imbalanced Resources*

An older model of ministry expansion had white ministers with Dutch heritage going to minister to people with non-white racial and ethnic backgrounds. That model has shifted (and we would argue that the shift was much needed) to a model where leaders indigenous to a certain community are empowered, equipped, and sent to do ministry in their local communities.

Consider this situation: A young Native American person feels a call to ministry in her local community. She doesn't come from wealth, just as many in her community don't come from wealth. She goes through an undergraduate program and then through seminary, accumulating student debt along the way. She then returns to her community, to which she feels called to bring God's love and care. She is well educated by credible institutions and equipped to serve. However, she now has a significant amount of debt and will be serving a community that has no means to pay her at a level that will cover her most basic living expenses, let alone her benefits needs. This is a cycle that will continue to repeat itself.

In many of our racial and ethnic communities, there is an appropriate hope that over time, with the right resources and care, they can become financially sustainable and even financially vibrant. If we hope to see these communities thrive, they will, for the time being, need financial support that comes from an outside source with a clear plan of shifting that responsibility over time to the local community.

## **Possibility and Hope**

Going into this conversation, we knew that we would likely uncover more challenges than solutions. However, there were a number of insights from this conversation that are cause for hope and new possibilities.

### *Relationships as Key to Positive Change*

Face-to-face conversations, where all people present commit to deep listening, are key to transformative change. Through conversations like these, the subject of finances and benefits guidelines can move from an adversarial experience to a collaborative experience. Relationship building results in identifying shared values and a desire for the well-being of the other. For positive change to take place in the RCA, in-person conversations will be a key in moving toward shared values and outcomes.

### *Creative Contribution Systems*

An emerging reality may be that ministers receive their primary compensation from an employer outside of the church. If that employer doesn't offer a tax sheltered retirement plan, we wondered if there are ways a minister could contribute to the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program. One suggestion was that a minister could give money to the church, with the understanding that the church would then contribute those funds into the 403(b) account as an employer or employee contribution. This idea was suggested because individuals can only contribute to the 403(b) program through payroll deduction. This idea raises a number of questions, though: Is this legal? Would there still be a tax benefit to saving in this manner? Would this honor the laws surrounding the clergy housing allowance benefit in retirement? How would the church record the donation from the minister?

Based on information from our legal counsel at Conner & Winters, there is a provision in Internal Revenue Code for self-employed ministers to contribute directly to 403(b) plans, but all money contributed must be earned doing work that the IRS considers ministry work.

While this concept leaves much to be answered, the question is important. Is there a mechanism to allow ministers to save for retirement in the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program if most of their income is from another source?

### *Contextual Financial Literacy Resources and Tools*

Dave Ramsey's "Financial Peace University" is likely the most popular and readily available Christian personal finance resource in the United States. While the foundational principles in these resources are widely applicable, we have found that this resource is geared toward a white, evangelical, middle-class audience.

How much more impactful could it be if each of the communities represented in this conversation had financial literacy resources that were written in the language of the people, were contextually sensitive and familiar, were free from assumptions, and were written by someone who understands the particular gifts and challenges of that community? We wondered if it might be worth an investment from the General Synod to commission and produce some of these resources. Could it be worth it to create resources about personal finance, stewardship, and generosity that were contextually relevant? Additionally, there is a need to train and equip leaders *from* each community to teach this material. This idea hangs on the belief that personal financial health precedes the financial health of the religious institution.

### *Shifting from a One-Size-Fits-All Approach*

Going into this conversation, we had a main focus of "how do we get all of our churches and ministers in compliance with our retirement guidelines?" so that our non-white ministers could have enough to retire in dignity, without experiencing poverty in their later years.

We sensed a shift in thinking as the conversation progressed. As we uncover the multiple contextual differences and challenges, it becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach won't work in the future church. Especially as we identified that a congregation's funding might shift outside of member donations, and as ministers enter a covocational reality, it will become less realistic for a traditional retirement plan from one employer.

A new question began to emerge: How do we provide a structure and accessible resources so that clergy have the option to save for retirement and receive other critical benefits, but in a way that fits their context and needs? Perhaps equity won't look like the same dollar amount or savings account for every person, but will look more like a structure with equal access for all.

An unsettling question emerges from this reality: Will a multi-employer plan like the RCA 403(b) Retirement Program be sustainable in a future that looks like this? The strength of the RCA 403(b) Retirement Plan works when all of our churches participate at the required level. If this is not the primary requirement going forward, how would BOBS function, be funded, and execute its responsibilities?

There are two other significant things to note. First, we've recently received feedback from Everence financial planners who have worked with RCA clergy. They reported: "Prior to working with RCA ministers, as we designed financial plans for clergy in other traditions, it was rare that they would be 'okay' as we forecasted

expenses versus income in retirement. With RCA clergy, it is rare for any of them that they won't be 'okay.'" Other denominations have given similar feedback—that they wish they had the retirement account requirements that the RCA does.

Second, the “suffering servant” mentality might sabotage a minister if retirement savings requirements become decentralized and contextual. As noted previously, many ministers have a belief that they should suffer, so they may not take appropriate measures to save for retirement. Will this be permissible? How might this impact the BOBS Assistance Fund? The reason many RCA clergy don't suffer in retirement is in large part due to the requirements and administration of the RCA Retirement Plans as mandated by the BCO.

### *Significant Point of Leverage: Young People*

A theme that emerged across cultures in the conversation was that change might be most possible with young people, regardless of racial or cultural identity. Two main reasons emerged for this possibility. Conversation participants reported that many young people are more open to conversations about money than members of older generations. It might be easier to form relationships, talk openly about money, and discover workable solutions together. Second, when it comes to retirement, time is the greatest asset when it comes to building wealth. Financial advisor Shawn Persing recently likened saving for retirement in your 20s as “having a cheat code for a video game.” By targeting young clergy or church members with good resources and benefits structures, we might be able to have the greatest impact in the long term.

The significant downside of this is that for many young people, retirement can seem so far off that it does not get priority in their life and finances and can be put off for too long. Young clergy who are motivated and passionate about the church might be willing to sacrifice retirement savings because it doesn't feel relevant to them yet.

### *Classis Engagement*

As mentioned above, the classis is the assembly in RCA polity that has the most influence in this discussion. It is at the classis level that education, oversight, and accountability are most likely to occur. It is worth considering what incentives or penalties for classes might be established so that benefits standards are properly administered by each church. Are there resources from the General Synod or BOBS that might incentivize greater attention to this? Are there penalties, such as not seating a classical delegation to General Synod, that might hold classes to greater accountability?

### **Where We Go From Here**

Earlier, this paper mentioned an important question that came up during the events that led up to this conversation, and we'll write it again here: “What should we do in the meantime while General Synod is working on this?” The reality, of course, is that beyond this conversation, there is no active work being done. It is the sincere hope of



the participants in this conversation that the work will continue on in RCA classes and the GSC's racial and ethnic councils.

The Board of Benefits Services is bound to the plan documents, the *Book of Church Order*, and the Internal Revenue Service. BOBS will continue to honor these commitments by administering the benefits programs with excellence, guided by the Covenant of Care.

Wherever the work continues, if change is to occur, it must eventually be initiated at the General Synod level. Without action from the General Synod to amend the provisions related to benefits in the *Book of Church Order*, BOBS must continue to administer benefits in a manner consistent with current *BCO* provisions, even if that manner doesn't fit the different contextual realities within the RCA.

While we've identified that a one-size-fits-all solution is likely not what is needed in the future, that challenging reality also comes with a great deal of promise. There are so many possibilities before us, including available resources, savings tools, the Affordable Care Act, and thoughtful institutional partners like Fidelity, Everence, LSS Financial, and the Lilly Endowment. There is a wealth of resources around us, should we choose to collectively and creatively work on this.

The Board of Benefits Services maintains a commitment to keeping this conversation alive and to working with willing partners to create a more equitable future for all of the RCA's pastors. BOBS will make this document available to leadership throughout the RCA, and representatives from BOBS will present these findings to the Joint Racial and Ethnic Councils meeting in August 2022.

Likewise, BOBS will connect with the president, chairperson, or other designated representative of each racial and ethnic council to learn how we might work together for positive change in the RCA.

Lastly, there is something important to name before introducing a few final questions. As Mornier Rich articulated, there is a historical pattern in the U.S. and the RCA of white communities pointing out problems like this, and then handing it off to communities of color and saying, "the ball is in your court." This practice is damaging and contributes to systemic racism. Any solutions that lead to an equitable future for everyone in the RCA will take a commitment and partnership between white communities and communities of color together.

We'll end with these questions: Which councils, agencies, commissions, staff members, and classes should partner together for an equitable future? Where and who in the polity and structure of the RCA has the most leverage for change? How might the continuation of this discussion unbind systemic racism, rather than contribute to it?

## **Conclusion**

The BOBS' board approved "An Equitable Future" and voted to include the paper in its entirety in the BOBS' report to this General Synod. It also voted to recommend that General Synod take action in the following ways:

### **BBS 23-1**

**To commend "An Equitable Future" to all RCA assemblies in the United States; and further,**

**To direct the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, in its role as advisor to the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism, to study the paper, to partner with the racial and ethnic councils and the Board of Benefits Services to seek ways to address a more equitable future, and to report back to General Synod 2024.**

## Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The *Book of Church Order* states that “the [Commission on Christian Action] shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2022 edition, pp. 113-114]).

The Commission on Christian Action (CCA) takes seriously its role of calling the church to faithful and persistent witness and action in the world and so exhorts the church to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-10).

### Work Assigned to the CCA by General Synod 2022

The General Synod of 2022 asked the CCA to contact Alliance for Hope International regarding their resources and studies done on ending violence in society. The CCA has sent communication to Alliance for Hope International, and we look forward to working with them toward preemptively ending the violence that is so prevalent.

### Workers' Rights

In the past, the CCA has made statements supporting the rights of immigrant workers. These words come from the report of the CCA to the General Synod of 1993:

Guided by the law of God, we should not be party to the exploitation of workers; we should be eager to speak in the defense of foreigners who are cheated, abused, or denied justice in any way. ...

Through a multitude of channels, our efforts should aim to imitate the restorative work of God by assuring strangers a secure place, a dignified life, blessings in present crises, and hope for the future.

At a minimum, this model suggests Christian participation in programs to provide legal assistance and emergency relief, as well as access to housing, education, and jobs for strangers (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 1993*, p. 89).

These were, and continue to be, words that we stand by, yet they are externally focused. They, properly, look at the best interest of newcomers into North America. Have we been as zealous in advocating for, and seeking to protect, workers who labor in businesses owned by or patronized by members of the church? Have we taken such care in protecting workers who labor on behalf of the denomination herself? Often, in our zeal for righteousness we look toward others and forget to look inward and see how we might be doing (or not doing) justice to our fellow siblings in Christ.

The CCA is asking the potentially fraught question: Have our members who own businesses, our congregations, our institutions, and our assemblies been just and righteous in the treatment of those whom we employ? This topic is especially pertinent in the current economic environment of inflation and uncertainty. Do we indulge in practices that more closely resemble business tactics of the world rather than the protection of workers that would more closely resemble what the gospel calls us to practice?

Looking into our “own house,” anecdotal stories indicate that, with increasing frequency, employees of our congregations and institutions are hired on as independent contractors instead of employees. This, at times, is practiced even in cases in which these employees are exclusively employed by these institutions. Such practices may allow our business-owner members, congregations, and assemblies to avoid participating in the unemployment insurance program or supplying benefits to our employees whom we label as “independent contractors.” These practices are certainly legal and can financially protect our institutions, but the commission questions whether they are always the most appropriate choice when we seek to bear a witness of justice and righteousness to the world. Furthermore, we are unsure or unclear whether Christ’s commandments to care for our siblings is always taken into account in these business decisions. In short, we are asking whether the denominational management of employees, at all levels, lives up to the Christian purity that we aspire toward, and how transparency may be employed to ensure that all those who labor on behalf of Christ’s kingdom are treated justly.

Related to these employment practices is the common use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and non-disparagement clauses in circumstances of employee terminations. It has come to our attention that in many cases of termination of employees who are not protected by unemployment insurance, any severance package given is contingent on the signing of such NDAs. NDAs have received much bad publicity in recent years. In the well-publicized cases of Mars Hill Church and Hillsong, NDAs were used as a means of controlling employees and keeping secrets within the institutions in question. Such documents, at worst, give the distinct impression that the Reformed Church in America may have something to hide. We are not privy to the internal Human Resources and personnel discussions that have made these documents a prominent part of General Synod Council (GSC) staff terminations, but we seek to understand their intention and use so that misunderstanding may be washed away.

On the topic of workers’ rights, the CCA makes the following recommendations:

**CA 23-1**

**To instruct the General Synod Council to send a letter through classis clerks, urging our congregations and member business owners to treat those in their employ as employees rather than independent contractors and urging their participation in unemployment insurance to benefit employees; and further**

**To instruct the General Synod Council to send a similar letter to RCA institutions and affiliated institutions with this same request.**

**CA 23-2**

**To form an ad hoc committee, meeting remotely via Zoom or other technology, to seek further transparency and understanding around the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and unemployment insurance for denominational (GSC) staff. This committee will be chaired by the moderator of the Commission on Christian Action, and membership will be made up of at least one person from each of the following groups or GSC staff departments: GSC legal counsel, GSC human resources, GSC financial offices, General Synod Council, and the Commission on Theology, along with others who may be deemed appropriate at the chair's discretion, in consultation with the committee membership. This committee's purpose will be to understand the current practices affecting GSC staff and seek to bring a legally, financially, and theologically sound recommendation to the General Synod of 2024 related to ending any unnecessary NDA and unemployment practices.**

**Peace in the Holy Land**

In 2012, the CCA gave an extensive report to the General Synod concerning peace in the Holy Land. This was in response to instructions given to this commission in 2010. One may review this report in the 2012 minutes of General Synod (*MGS 2012*, pp. 109-121). Since then, despite peace efforts by various groups, the commission and the General Synod have said little about the Holy Land. Perhaps, ten years after the above noted report, it is time to revisit peace in this place. Israeli citizens, just a few generations away from holocaust, with pogroms targeting Jews still a cultural memory, and with the Six Day War a very recent memory, are naturally cautious and place security and self-preservation above all things.

In order to seek safety and security since the Six Day War, Israel has occupied the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank. There are many who believe that in Israel's zeal for space and security, the rights of those living in these occupied lands have been trampled.

Examples of these violations as reported by Palestinians (to members of an RCA group visiting there in November 2022) are:

1. Ongoing Israeli occupation of Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank since 1967, despite UN resolutions that state that areas occupied during warfare must be only occupied "temporarily." Many would argue that an occupation since 1967 is more than "temporary."
2. According to that same UN resolution, such occupied areas must never have permanent settlements by those who occupy it. Israel has established, and

continues to establish, settlements on the West Bank as well as in East Jerusalem.

3. Israeli control of utilities in these occupied areas and, in many cases, restriction of the supply of utilities to Palestinian occupants.
4. Little, if any, resources are given to these Palestinian-occupied areas for infrastructure repair, maintenance, and capital improvement.
5. Justice in occupied areas is done by military, not civilian, courts. Court procedures are not what we would consider acceptable or “free and fair” in either the United States or Canada.
6. Palestinians in the occupied areas and also in East Jerusalem are given different-colored license plates than Israelis. People driving with these different plates are restricted in their movements and are often detained at checkpoints longer than those with standard-colored license plates.
7. Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem are taxed but are not allowed to vote. It is a similar situation to that faced by colonists who fought the U.S. War of Independence against Britain in the 1700s because, among other things, “taxation without representation” was considered unjust.
8. During a recent trip to the Holy Land by members of the Reformed Church in America, the treatment of Palestinians was described by trip members as resembling how Black and Brown Americans were treated in the United States under “Jim Crow” laws.

Given the treatment of the Jewish people throughout history, it is understandable why this group is concerned with security and safety. The Six Day War did nothing to convince Israeli citizens that they were not endangered. Subsequent terrorist bombings, many of which were perpetrated by Palestinians, have only increased the fear of Israelis and the Israeli government. Yet many religious Jews both in and out of Israel have begun to question the righteousness of how Palestinians, both in and out of the occupied lands, are treated.

A new generation is now rising into leadership in Israel and in Palestine. These young adults are further removed from the Holocaust and they do not remember the Six Day War. Palestinians in this age group are more educated and are more likely to work in positions where they interact with Israelis. Likewise, younger Israelis are meeting and working with Palestinians. Each group is now interacting with people of the other group and is less likely to simply see the others in stereotypical terms. Groups such as “Parents Circle” unites both Palestinians and Israelis who have suffered the loss of loved ones in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This group sends out teams of speakers, one Israeli and one Palestinian, to speak to both Israeli and Palestinian people, urging the forging of peace in order to end innocent casualties from further conflict.

In short, there are glimmers of hope in the midst of this long conflict. Some might call this hopeless, yet we are reminded that as people of faith, we follow a God and Savior who has accomplished much more unlikely tasks than this. As people of faith, we must never be hopeless.

The Commission on Christian Action respectfully requests:

**CA 23-3**

**To resolve to pray in the name of Christ Jesus for global peace—particularly naming peace in the Holy Land and any other noteworthy conflicts at the time—at each of the worship services held during meetings of the General Synod until peace comes.**

**CA 23-4**

**To urge classes and congregations (through classis clerks) to begin a study of the conflicts in the Holy Land with the attempt to understand the fears of each side of the conflict, making use of the following resources, among others, for this study:**

1. Joshua and Sally Vis - <https://joshvis.com/resources>
2. RCA Middle East Peacemakers - [www.facebook.com/groups/550613948318966](https://www.facebook.com/groups/550613948318966)
3. The Parents Circle - Families Forum - [www.theparentscircle.org](https://www.theparentscircle.org)

**CA 23-5**

**Be it resolved, that General Synod 2023 expresses its sincere gratitude to Rev. Liz Testa, Rev. Dr. Joshua Vis, and Sally Vis for their leadership in hosting a Holy Land trip in November 2022; and further,**

**To direct GSC staff to broadly publicize any such future trips in the coming years to encourage more RCA members to embark on these learning journeys.**

## **Indigenous Peoples**

It is part of our history as nations and as churches that historically we committed a great deal of violence and abuse against people who were native to the North American continent. For this, we have much to repent of. Native populations on our continent continue to suffer in poverty and live with the social problems and issues that come from such poverty.

The CCA applauds our denomination for participating in the General Synod's annual land acknowledgement. This is an important step in acknowledging our culpability, repenting, and beginning to stand with Indigenous people as they seek to rise from the depths of their poverty. We are also grateful for the Commission on Christian Worship for taking up this commission's recommendation for a Liturgy of Lament outlining the roles that the RCA and her members have played in this suffering and injustice (CA 21-3, *MGS 2021*, p. 204).

Likewise we applaud the fine work that has been done by the re-forming Native American and Indigenous Ministries (NAIM) Council. Their work can be found at

[www.rca.org/native-american-and-indigenous-ministries-council-shares-stories-and-finds-hope-at-first-meeting](http://www.rca.org/native-american-and-indigenous-ministries-council-shares-stories-and-finds-hope-at-first-meeting).

The CCA pledges its support for the efforts of that council and encourages all bodies within the RCA to do the same.

The CCA would like the RCA and all members and participants in Reformed Church communities to do even more to stand with and help lift Native and Indigenous communities out of poverty. We suggest that we begin to support Native- and Indigenous-owned businesses with the goal of adding to the prosperity of their communities.

In this light, we make the following recommendation:

**CA 23-6**

**To encourage RCA agencies, assemblies, and individual congregations to research and consider making any purchases through Indigenous-owned businesses, and to make a list of some of these businesses available on an RCA webpage for the Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council.**

A number of organizations and publications have already developed these types of lists to help consumers find Native- and Indigenous-owned businesses to shop at. The commission suggests linking to some of these already-created lists as a starting point, with the option for NAIM to add or remove resources if desired. Examples of existing lists include:

- [www.slice.ca/indigenous-owned-businesses-to-support-across-canada](http://www.slice.ca/indigenous-owned-businesses-to-support-across-canada)
- <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jaydonono/gift-ideas-from-indigenous-canadian-brands>
- <http://www.beyondbucks.com/p/buy-native.html>
- [parade.com/1298881/jessicabrent/indigenous-owned-businesses](http://parade.com/1298881/jessicabrent/indigenous-owned-businesses)

## **Spiritual Abuse**

As the CCA noted in our report to General Synod 2022:

The notion of abuse being perpetrated at the hands of the church and her leaders is something the CCA believes all should be horrified by. While the notion of spiritual abuse is not new, it's an area of concern that researchers are uncovering more of than ever and is something that affects people across a variety of spectrums: men, women, old, young, straight, queer, cisgender, transgender, elders, deacons, congregants, and pastors. The Commission on Christian Action is gathering resources on how congregations can educate themselves regarding spiritual abuse, how survivors of this abuse can seek healing and justice, and how the church can work to prevent this tragedy from escalating further.



We believe these words continue to be true and the matter of spiritual abuse remains a critical issue facing the RCA and the universal church.

Upon gathering these resources, the Commission on Christian Action found that many denominational initiatives have already started doing this work. In this, we remind you of the work of the Commission for Women and the office of Women's Transformation and Leadership, particularly with the *We Are Speaking* statement. This document calls us to commit to standing with women and girls who have experienced harassment, abuse, and sexual violence. It also is a calling to commit to a healthy relationship between all. No one under any circumstance should be mistreated.

We are also called to this through the work of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) and the GSC's racial and ethnic councils. Through the antiracism policy that was approved by General Synod 2022, their work encourages us to "confess that our sin [of racism] 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 of the right to develop our personal and corporate identities." These reminders call us to "commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional synods, and General Synod)" (*MGS 2022*, excerpts from RE 22-1, p. 236). In this, we are called to acknowledge and lament the ways the denominational system has contributed to the abuse that we are committed to dismantling.

Looking to the Christian Reformed Church in North America, one of our ecumenical partners, we can also admire and be inspired by their commitment to this work through their Safe Church Office.

The CCA also wants to acknowledge the value the denomination has in repentance. At the local level, there are rules to hold church leadership accountable in this way. In the responsibilities of the elder, the *BCO* states that we shall, and are therefore, called to "exercise Christian discipline with respect to any who continue in sin without repentance" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 4 [2022 edition, p. 22]). The church is also meant to, according to the responsibilities of a deacon, "serve those in distress and need. The deacons shall minister to the sick, the poor, the hurt, and the helpless, shall aid the victims of the world's abuse, and shall express the social concerns of the church. They shall oversee and carry out their work as those concerned with the redemption of humankind. Their focus is turned toward service and ministry both to the world and in the church" (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 6, Section 2 [2022 edition, pp. 22-23]).

On a denominational level, the Commission on Christian Action reminds the 2023 General Synod of the commitment that was made at the previous General Synod:

The RCA's General Synod, meeting at Central College in Pella, Iowa, on June 9-14, 2022, affirms the worth and human dignity of all persons, regardless of sexuality or gender, as beloved, shared image-bearers of God; and further,

To lament the ways in which the RCA and church universal has failed to consistently recognize the equal worth of all persons and has resorted to fear or frustration when speaking about human lives in our midst, rather than speaking to all with love and compassion. Specifically, we acknowledge and lament the harms experienced by LGBTQ persons, whom we embrace as children of God who are welcome in the RCA (MGS 2022, CA 22-6, p. 179).

With this information, we as a denomination are called to not only acknowledge the harm that we have done, but to also now move forward in preventing further abuse and in seeking justice.

Along with this work and commitment that is already in place, the CCA would like to draw the General Synod's attention to many other issues that have come up within our denominational context, including clergy abuse and how we as a denomination treat our employees (denominational employees, our clergy, and other church staff).

With this goal in mind, the Commission on Christian Action offers the following recommendation:

**CA 23-7**

**To urge members of the congregations, classes, and regional synods of the Reformed Church in America to educate themselves on the resources highlighted in the CCA's 2023 report on spiritual abuse in order to equip congregations and members to address spiritual abuse, both locally and systemically.**

Below are a few resources for further exploration that the Commission on Christian Action urges all congregations, classes, and regional synods to examine and use for their own study.

*Online Resources*

- [www.netgrace.org](http://www.netgrace.org)
- The Reformed Church in America's "We Are Speaking" statement: [www.rca.org/we-are-speaking](http://www.rca.org/we-are-speaking)
- Faithward's "Addressing Sexual Abuse and Violence in Worship Resources": [www.faithward.org/addressing-sexual-abuse-and-violence-in-worship-resources](http://www.faithward.org/addressing-sexual-abuse-and-violence-in-worship-resources)

*Print Resources*

- *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*, by Jennifer Baldwin
- *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing From Spiritual Abuse*, by Neil Damgaard
- *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, by Chuck DeGroat

- *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*, by Diane Langberg

### **Areas of Continuing Moral Concern**

General Synod 2022 took seriously the CCA's efforts to address hunger and food injustice. So that this important issue isn't forgotten, we provide the following examples of ways one of our commissioners has worked to mitigate the effects of hunger and the related and co-existing condition of homelessness. Dianna Smith reports that her congregation's and local community's efforts include:

1. Providing bag breakfasts and lunches, along with a common drop-in center that [the church] work[s] with to get food and water to everyone.
2. For those living in tents, there are heaters called "bully heaters" that use individual propane tanks. These can mean the difference between life and death in cold weather.
3. Churches offer dinners on a regular basis; the key is to have the local homeless organization (here it's called Milford Advocacy for the Homeless) to reach out to those in need. In the winter, [the church] provide[s] warm coats and clean socks.
4. A laundry brigade, where volunteers gather dirty clothing and the local laundromat gives a discount to get all the clothes clean. Dry clothing is a big issue.
5. For those living in their cars, providing a safe space for them to park and rest. A church parking lot can be ideal.
6. A dedicated social services worker who helps those who may not have sufficient identification to receive government services.

The CCA is also interested in continuing to research and focus on topics such as mental health, further identifying ways that the RCA can respond to spiritual abuse, and environmental concerns that face the RCA and her Global Mission partners. We look forward to addressing these in the coming year and bringing them to General Synod 2024.

Respectfully submitted,  
Cameron Van Kooten Laughead, moderator

## **Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education**

From the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b (2022 edition, p. 121):

1. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA's progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families.
2. The commission shall develop and advocate for strategies for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA.

### **The CCDE Stands with CORE**

In January of this year, the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE) received a letter from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), expressing interest in how the CCDE might collaborate in supporting and promoting the application of the newly adopted antiracism policy. Our commission appreciates CORE reaching out to us and looks forward to working together to educate and support Reformed Church in America (RCA) churches and church members in the implementation of the antiracism policy adopted by the 2022 General Synod. We believe that our call to be disciples of Jesus includes bringing justice to all and working toward reconciliation where there has been division. We believe that racism, both systemic and individual, is antithetical to the way of Jesus Christ, and therefore part of being a disciple of Jesus in our time and place involves fighting racism in all its forms.

Our commission calls on churches to review their education and discipleship programs and see how those programs support our mission in fighting racism in all its forms. In that effort, we encourage churches to utilize the Belhar Confession in their discipleship and education programs. The Belhar Confession is uniquely applicable to our work of antiracism, as it declares, “the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Our commission also encourages churches to look for other resources to guide them in this work. We particularly recommend the work of two leaders in this field: Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil ([saltermcneil.com](http://saltermcneil.com)) and Jemar Tisby ([jemartisby.com](http://jemartisby.com)). The Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE) annual event also provides numerous resources and workshops on antiracism and bilingual education; for this reason, the CCDE strongly encourages those in who work in Christian education and discipleship to attend APCE's annual event.

## **Financial Generosity and Stewardship as Aspects of Discipleship**

This year, the CCDE had discussions around the importance of viewing financial generosity and stewardship as aspects of discipleship. We believe there is more work to be done to effectively guide our congregations in talking about these subjects in more healthy and helpful ways than some of our old models of conversation. In cooperation with RCA staff, the CCDE encourages congregations to consider participating in a regional learning community called Cultivating Generous Congregations. These learning communities are able to be offered at a low cost to congregations thanks to the support of a Lilly grant. Many churches have already benefited from these learning communities, and new learning communities are already being launched in 2023. More information can be found at [www.rca.org/cgc](http://www.rca.org/cgc).

From the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b (2022 edition, p. 121):

3. The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship with RCA congregations.

## **Collaboration with RCA Communication**

In August, a member of our commission connected with Christina Tazelaar, RCA chief communication officer, to discuss the idea of members of the CCDE contributing to the RCA's bimonthly news and resources email as well as the Faithward website. We are excited about continued communication and work with RCA staff and being able to share with the RCA and beyond through these avenues.

## **Thank you, RCA Next Generation Staff!**

The commission would like to take this opportunity to affirm and give thanks for all the denominational staff who have been working so hard through the ever-evolving landscape of our denomination. We have been working most closely with Anna Radcliffe, who has affirmed the CCDE's desire to collaborate and has kept us informed regarding what she is working on in the area of next generation discipleship. We look forward to future opportunities to connect.

From the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b (2022 edition, p. 121):

4. The commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church's teaching ministry.

## **Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE)**

The CCDE strongly advocates for professional development as a way to support and encourage Christian educators. The Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE) is doing this work faithfully and is an excellent source for curriculum and

resources. APCE's annual conference is a useful way for Christian educators, whether they are volunteers or part-time or full-time staff members, to connect with each other, encourage each other, find inspiration and resources, and fellowship together. For example, a workshop at the 2023 annual APCE conference entitled "Opening Doors to Discipleship" unveiled a new training website aimed at faith formation leaders in the Reformed tradition.

The Opening Doors to Discipleship website (<https://odtd.net>) has four main sections: Leadership, Reformed Theology, Educational Practices, and Explore More. The Leadership section includes modules on exploring your call, calling others, equipping others, and a Faith Formation Ministries Path. The Reformed Theology section contains modules on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible and Covenant Community. The Educational Practices modules incorporate defining learning, approaches to learning, teaching methods, designing lesson plans, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, the Explore More modules address various topics, including older adult faith formation, children's ministry, and intergenerational faith formation.

The website also contains helpful information and resources for safety training, which the commission also researched and advocated for in its report to General Synod last year.

The Opening Doors to Discipleship website offers suggestions for a starting place in accessing its content depending on whether the user is a volunteer, an educator, or a church leader. It represents an enormous amount of work and provides a wealth of useful resources to educators of all positions. Instead of spending time and energy trying to duplicate a rich resource like Opening Doors to Discipleship, the commission wants to highlight and share this resource with educators.

This year the commission met in conjunction with the APCE's annual event. Members from our commission were richly blessed by the workshops and encouraged by meeting other Christian educators from all over North America. We will continue to advocate for Christian educators to attend this conference and urge each congregation to show their love and support for Christian education by sending at least one Christian educator to the next annual APCE event, which will take place in St. Louis, Missouri, from January 25-27, 2024 (and supporting their attendance financially).

### **Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA)**

In conjunction with the APCE annual event in January 2023, the Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA) held their 42nd annual meeting. Approximately 40 RCA educators were present, hailing from New Mexico to New York and many places in between. Participants celebrated a new season for the RCA and CERCA. While much angst has been expressed across the RCA from churches leaving, CERCA celebrated the RCA's past and looked excitedly toward a hopeful future.

When contrasted with many of the other partner denominations of APCE, the RCA looks like the Revelation 7:9 future that we have espoused and sought to enact. From RCA staff members present to new CERCA officers blessed by an experienced and faithful past leadership, there was reason for great hope and celebration. In particular, CERCA recognized the service of many RCA individuals, including Willa Brown, Phil and Stephanie Doeschot, Micheal Edwards, Jane Richardson, Jane and Larry Schuyler, and Arlene and Bill Waldorf.

The CCDE also encourages those working in RCA Christian discipleship and education ministries to consider applying for a CERCA scholarship to help defray the cost of an educational opportunity that will provide personal and professional growth. The scholarship application can be downloaded at [www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CCDE-scholarship-application.pdf](http://www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CCDE-scholarship-application.pdf).

Respectfully submitted,  
Mark Swart, moderator

## Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2022 edition, pp. 69-70]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the *Book of Church Order* in this way (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2022 edition, p. 114]):

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

### RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed newer ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world.

Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.



This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming the world at this point in history.

This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. In this report, the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but on the work and witness of the RCA.

### *World Council of Churches*

The World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.” The WCC gathers its fellowship from 352 churches in 120 countries representing over 580 million Christians worldwide.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years. The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Karlsruhe, Germany, from August 31 to September 8, 2022, under the theme “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” Over 4,000 participants from around the world gathered at the Assembly for fellowship, learning, and worship together. RCA delegates to the 11th Assembly included Rev. Eddy Alemán, Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Rev. Laura Osborne, and Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce. The Commission on Christian Unity commends to everyone the message of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches entitled “A Call to Act Together.” The WCC 11th Assembly also published many public statements, including “War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region,” “Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East,” “Statement on Confronting Racism and Xenophobia, Overcoming Discrimination, Ensuring Belonging,” and “The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community.” For a full list of publications from the 11th Assembly including public statements, Bible studies, and messages, visit the WCC website: [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org).

The World Council of Churches convened several themed Pre-Assemblies before its 11th Assembly. One of these Pre-Assemblies, the Ecumenical Youth Gathering (EYG), convened in Karlsruhe from August 27-30 and gathered 400 ecumenical young leaders around the world for worship, prayer, and learning. RCA minister Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce served on the design team for the gathering as the team’s Chair for

Spiritual Life. Rev. Duensing Pearce served in her role on behalf of the Global Christian Forum.

The Central Committee of the WCC serves as the governing body of the WCC between Assemblies. The Central Committee implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget, secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies. Central Committee members are nominated and elected at each Assembly. During the 11th Assembly, a need was expressed for more diverse voices on the Central Committee, including young people, women, people with disabilities, and indigenous peoples. Responding to this, Rev. Eddy Alemán nominated Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce to serve on the Central Committee. A previous RCA general secretary has also made a similar decision to create greater representation on the Central Committee. General secretary Eddy Alemán continues to stay connected to the work of the World Council of Churches and still has the option to attend Central Committee meetings.

Rev. Prof. Dr. Jerry Pillay was installed as the general secretary of the World Council of Churches on February 17, 2023.

For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, go to [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org).

#### Letter to the World Council of Churches Regarding War in Ukraine

The 2022 General Synod adopted ONB 22-9:

To instruct the general secretary to convene a meeting with other appropriate RCA ecumenical officers or representatives and at least two representatives from the Commission on Christian Unity to craft a resolution to be brought to the World Council of Churches (WCC), calling for the suspension of the Russian Orthodox Church from WCC membership until it repents of and retracts its support for Russia's unprovoked, unjustifiable and brutally inhumane war against Ukraine; and further,

To instruct the general secretary to distribute the resolution to all RCA assemblies and congregations; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Theology and the General Synod professorate to examine whether the conditions surrounding Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine meet the criteria for a declaration of status confessionis, a full break in communion due to the gravity of the breach of faithfulness to the gospel by any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia's (and Belarus's) war against Ukraine, for report and recommendation to the 2023 General Synod.

General secretary Eddy Alemán addressed this mandate from General Synod verbally at the meeting of the WCC Central Committee on June 15-18, 2022. Afterward, Rev.

Alemán worked with the Commission on Christian Unity and others to draft a formal letter to the World Council of Churches addressing motion ONB 22-9. The letter was sent to the World Council of Churches on November 16, 2022, and a response was received from the World Council of Churches' general secretary Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay on January 13, 2023. The Commission on Christian Unity continues to be in conversation and prayer about ways to continue this conversation with the World Council of Churches regarding the war in Ukraine. Both Rev. Alemán's letter and Rev. Dr. Pillay's response are included below. The Commission on Christian Unity would like to extend thanks to those outside the commission who gave significant wisdom and help writing the letter: Rev. George Montanari, Christina Tazelaar, Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Rev. Dr. Jim Payton.

Dr. Jerry Pillay  
General secretary  
World Council of Churches  
P.O. Box 2100  
CH-1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

November 15, 2022

World Council of Churches Central Committee and Dr. Jerry Pillay,

With a heavy heart, the Reformed Church in America as a founding member of the World Council of Churches, writes to you, our ecumenical sisters and brothers in Christ, because of Russia's war against Ukraine, and the way that our common Christian faith has been used to justify this war.

We share with all of you the grief and horror of the loss of life in Ukraine, the destruction of its historic and beautiful cities, the devastation of its farmland and other environmental treasures, the attempted decimation of its language and cultural heritage, the forced displacement of nearly one-third of its population, as well as the wasteful, tragic loss of life of Russian soldiers and the resultant grief among Russian families, not to mention the global impact of this war and the current threat of nuclear catastrophe, whether intended or accidental. Yet this grief and horror is multiplied because of the language used by leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church seeking to give religious justification to this violence. Our own denomination's initial impulse, voted on by our General Synod, is to call for the suspension of the Russian Orthodox Church from membership in the WCC until such support for the war is retracted and reversed.

We understand the WCC's preference to remain in dialogue in times of disagreement. To work for peace in this way is a good and Christ-like example for the nations of the world who are otherwise not so inclined. We were grateful to hear about the WCC's pilgrimage journey to Kyiv, and the fruitful relationship building

work begun there which continued at the 11th Assembly. We share in the WCC's frustration that ROC leaders in Moscow have not been open to a similar dialogue.

We share the WCC's value that, at a minimum, dialogue is important. In Christian unity, we ought not be afraid to say or hear even the most difficult things from one another. We urge the Moscow Patriarchate to open their doors for dialogue with WCC leadership.

Dialogue also helps understand that issues are often more nuanced than appear at first. We ourselves are learning more of the long, deep roots of this conflict between those of Russian and Ukrainian heritage. We have learned that others in the Russian Orthodox Church have spoken against the war. We have learned that the Russian Orthodox Church representatives to the General Assembly did not allow this conflict to influence the reception of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine into WCC membership. For such learnings through the dialogues we have had, we are grateful.

Yet, a core conviction crosses all lines of Christian tradition, that violence is never the answer to resolve our conflicts. We recall and affirm again the declaration of the first WCC Assembly in 1948, that "war is contrary to the will of God." Jesus always calls us to be people of peace. And while the worldwide Church raises its voice to call the nations of the world to peace, we have particular responsibility within the Church of Jesus Christ to ensure that our faith is never used to justify war, that our faith is never co-opted by the kingdoms of this world to sanction violence and oppression. We find such religious justification of this war to be an egregious and lamentable breach of our common Christian faith. This is not right, and we speak against it, consistent with the history of the WCC's witness against war, and its ongoing pilgrimage for justice and peace.

We grieve and lament this brokenness within the Church. We grieve and lament that Christ's glorious name suffers indignity by being attached to the violence and suffering of this war. Our heart is not only heavy, but broken.

We are left to wonder why the global Church would not formally acknowledge the division in the Church that our hearts are experiencing and that our world is witnessing. The separation in the Church, predating this war, yet torn all the further because of this war, is real. Due to the misuse of the Christian faith to support the war in Ukraine by leading figures within the Russian Orthodox Church, we call for appropriate action to be taken by the WCC for this member in our communion, up to and including temporary suspension of the rights of membership. We urge our beloved brothers and sisters in the Russian Orthodox Church to withdraw their public and religious support of this war. Consequently, we petition the World Council of Churches through its appropriate mechanisms to implement a process leading toward suspension of the Russian Orthodox Church's membership, unless, by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, such a reversal of its present position and action become evident.

With prayers for Peace,

Rev. Eddy Alemán, General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America  
The Reformed Church in America Commission on Christian Unity

WCC Response Letter



**World Council  
of Churches**

**General Secretariat**

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Rev. Eddy Alemán  
General Secretary  
Reformed Church in America  
4500 60<sup>th</sup> St SE  
Grand Rapids  
MI 49512 – 9670  
United States of America

Geneva, 12 January 2023

Dear Eddy,

New Year's greetings from World Council of Churches. I am responding to your letter dated 15 November 2022 addressed to the WCC central committee and myself, requesting that the WCC "implement a process leading toward the suspension of the Russian Orthodox Church" from membership in the WCC.

We remain grateful for the witness of the Reformed Church in America – for its expressions of grief about the impacts of the war in Ukraine and its concern about the role of the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church.

As you are aware, the central committee, meeting in June 2022 in Geneva, discussed the possibility of suspension, including the concerns expressed by the general assembly of the Reformed Church in America. At that time, the central committee agreed by consensus not to initiate suspension, but to pursue dialogue, recognizing the WCC as a unique platform, not only for the pursuit of justice, reconciliation and unity, but mutual accountability between members of the fellowship.

These efforts continued at the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, where the delegates responded to the war and challenged the Russian Orthodox Church in a statement on "War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region". My predecessor, Ref. Prof Dr Ioan Saucă, provided significant leadership in promoting dialogue through his pilgrimage to Kyiv in August 2022, his efforts during the assembly in Karlsruhe and his pilgrimage to Moscow to meet directly with and challenge the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Your letter is poignant reminder that “for just as the body is one and has many members ... if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12.26). Our efforts for dialogue and peace - building will continue. I will share your letter with the leadership of the central committee, as the appropriate mechanism for our ongoing discernment and response to the war and the role of the WCC member churches.

Together with the RCA, we pray for peace and reconciliation, for the end of this conflict and for the unity of the body of Christ.

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay  
General Secretary  
World Council of Churches

### *World Communion of Reformed Churches*

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) comprises over 100 million Christians in Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian churches. The WCRC, working with its 233 member churches, is active in supporting theology, justice, church unity, and mission in over 105 countries.

The WCRC is called to communion and is committed to justice. Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC is always being transformed as it strives for the full and just participation of all. In our diversity, we seek to be a living expression of “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As a global koinonia, with all the partners God provides, we work for the transformation of the whole world, so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

Discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being Reformed together. These are verbs in the present tense, verbs that incarnate what we are called to do as a global family, as regional groups, and as member churches. This we do together; our koinonia is God’s gift to be received and nurtured. A reformed community is always reforming according to the Word of God.

Some highlights of the WCRC’s work in the past year include the inauguration of a WCRC ecumenical office in Rome, Italy, where we join several other ecumenical bodies. This will allow greater opportunity for ecumenical engagement, dialogue, and joint justice work. Additionally, in 2022, the search for an executive secretary for Mission and Advocacy culminated in the selection of Ms. Muna Nassar from Palestine. Finally, planning for the next General Council, scheduled for 2025 in Thailand, is underway, with many groups working at various components of preparation.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual executive committee meetings have been held via Zoom, which makes global conversations logistically

challenging. Thus it is with joy that we will return to an in-person meeting from May 19-24 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Since mid-2021, the WCRC has been functioning with a “Collegial General Secretariat” model, which includes the executive secretary for communications, Philip Tanis of the Reformed Church in America. Phil is nearing the completion of his second and final term, and we gratefully acknowledge his work on behalf of the WCRC and the RCA. The Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal continues as WCRC vice president from the Caribbean and North America region.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal

### *Global Christian Forum*

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) creates space for a new methodology of worldwide ecumenical dialogue based on relational fellowship. The GCF seeks to widen the ecumenical table, drawing together world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African-Instituted churches.

Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the Global South, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF’s work.

The guiding purpose statement of the Global Christian Forum is “to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.”

The Global Christian Forum is planning its fourth Global Gathering on April 14-19, 2024, in Ghana. The theme of the gathering is “That the World May Know” from John 17:23b.

Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the International Committee of the Global Christian Forum and on a task force planning the next Global Gathering. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as a youth delegate to the International Committee.

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit [www.globalchristianforum.org](http://www.globalchristianforum.org).

### *National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA*

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include over 30 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC, and our general secretary, the Rev. Eddy Alemán, serves on its governing board. The RCA is also represented on the NCC's Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations, Christian Education, Faith Formation and Leadership, and Faith and Order. Among others, the commission would like to acknowledge the work of Kitt Jackson, Jeff Lampen, and Rev. Laura Osborne at these Convening Tables.

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie was appointed to a two-year term as interim president and general secretary in 2022. She is the first African American woman to serve in the role of general secretary, having previously served as a presiding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Southern Africa, as well as in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Texas.

The current priorities of the NCC are ending racism, combating mass incarceration, and working toward peace in interreligious relations. In the NCC's annual Christian Unity Gathering in October 2022, presenters focused on "The Challenge of Change: Serving a Never-Changing Christ in an Ever-Changing World." A recent partnership between the NCC and the Harvard Kennedy School is seeking to develop a faith-based campaign for reparations. Furthermore, the NCC has petitioned President Biden to establish a commission to study reparations in pursuit of racial healing and transformation. "The National Council of Churches historically has stood on the frontlines in advancing a vision of racial justice in America to build a beloved community," Bishop McKenzie stated. "This historic letter to President Biden from a diverse coalition of faith leaders speaks to the fierce urgency to preserve American democracy through reparative justice."

For more information about the NCC, visit <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us>.

### *Christian Churches Together*

Formed in 2007, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from five families: the Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations such as Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. It is this mix of 34 communions representing churches and religious organizations that makes CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. CCT calls itself and its member churches "to bring together the diversity of Christian churches and organizations in the U.S. to foster loving relationships, witness to the reconciling power of Jesus" ([www.christianchurchestogether.org/about-us](http://www.christianchurchestogether.org/about-us)).



In 2023, Christian Churches Together held its forum in October in Indianapolis, Indiana, with the theme “Who Does Jesus Call Our Christian Churches to be in a Polarized Society?” Speakers and participants engaged in dialogue on the church’s role in our polarized society. Speakers were from five families of CCT meeting in various churches around the city. Events included fellowship over meals, small groups, and an evening to lament and lean into our unity. The RCA delegation consisted of RCA ministers Dale Buettner and Kim Pavlovich.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates applaud the annual convocations as opportunities to build personal relationships with people across the church in the U.S., to come to explore and understand the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Monica Schaap Pierce is the executive director of CCT. Their website ([www.christianchurchestogether.org](http://www.christianchurchestogether.org)) provides additional information about the organization’s mission and activity. There you will also find common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

### *Formula of Agreement Relationships*

In 1997, the RCA, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. Leaders from within the RCA have historically served in positions with the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on the ecumenical committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service.

Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Rev. Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula’s provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational

staff of each of the Formula of Agreement churches have produced a revised guide in “The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament” document: [images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf](https://images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf). We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories that are considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula of Agreement churches.

### *Reformed-Catholic Dialogue*

The partners involved in this dialogue are the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America. This dialogue represents the ninth round of Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue in the United States. Although we have been engaged in deep dialogue for nearly 50 years, reconciliation remains an unfinished project and an urgent matter. This round of dialogue is looking at justification, sanctification, and justice.

### **Anabaptist Rapprochement**

In 2019, the CCU was instructed by General Synod to “explore possibilities for repentance and reconciliation, being particularly attentive to the ways in which our ecumenical partners have pursued rapprochement with Anabaptists, and report back to General Synod 2021” (*MGS 2019*, H 19-2, p. 276). Pandemic realities meant that the commission lost this instruction for a time, but it has now begun work on it. The commission has begun to explore what other ecumenical partners have done in terms of rapprochement and what possibilities there may be, particularly around tables we share in common with Anabaptist denominations such as at Christian Churches Together, for “repentance and reconciliation.” The commission hopes to have more to report either by the time of General Synod in June or in the following year.

### **Interreligious Relations**

The 2022 year brought a little more normalcy since COVID began. The work of interreligious relations is done through many people. In conjunction with the Commission on Christian Unity’s Interreligious Sub-Committee, the coordinator for interreligious relations works to connect churches and individuals to their neighbor of another faith. This takes shape in many ways: through partnerships, the rich history of interfaith work, and new initiatives.

Here are some highlights from 2022:

**Interreligious Sub-Committee:** The Interreligious Sub-Committee (of four people) of the Commission on Christian Unity works in different parts of North America and the world to help share their faith and connect to their neighbors of another faith through chaplaincy, counseling, teaching, preaching, bridge building, and so much more. This team met with the Interfaith Sub-committee of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and will continue to do so two to three times a

year since our values and mission are quite similar. The Interreligious Sub-Committee will be looking for a few more people to join the team.

**Global Partnerships:** The coordinator for interreligious relations shares a lot of the load with RCA Global Mission. There is a great connection with the Al Amana Centre in Oman where there have been a few intercultural trips. A group of CRCNA and RCA college chaplains traveled to the Al Amana Centre in 2022, and a group from New Brunswick Theological Seminary traveled there in early 2023. Also, there has been much collaboration with the refugee ministries coordinator to encourage churches to connect to their neighbors in powerful and tangible ways.

**Religions for Peace-USA (RFPUSA):** RFPUSA is a new partnership that has been formed to help with awareness of other faiths and also, at times, related justice issues. The partnership has monthly gatherings to get people involved in the work.

**National Council of Churches:** The RCA has a spot on the NCC's Interreligious Convening Table. This table coordinates and participates in dialogues with other faiths to raise awareness. The Interreligious Convening Table has volunteers involved in three of the dialogues now: the Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian, and Jewish-Christian dialogues.

**Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign:** This campaign works to stop bias against our Muslim neighbors. The RCA has been a longstanding member of the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign and has a seat on the steering committee. In 2022, two in-person Faith over Fear trainings were conducted in Grand Rapids and Iowa. Two Resetting the Table Workshops were also conducted; these workshops help individuals and groups have better conversations around hard or polarizing topics.

**Journey into Friendships:** This is a collaborative network with the CRCNA and has been since its inception almost five years ago. This network invites people to walk together with others who work with diaspora people groups and those who need a place to start. Our focus has been on immigrants and migrants, refugees, international students, and Muslim-Christian relations. Journey into Friendships has monthly network meetings on different topics and a larger consultation in the summer. The focus for 2022 was on sharing stories in the Heartland area.

**Learning Communities:** Three learning communities around diaspora are taking place in the RCA. One learning community is focused on campus pastors and interfaith work, one is Journey into Friendships, and the third is specifically for Michigan campus pastors who work with international students. These networks help share resources, build community, and create connections.

## **In Conclusion**

In 1996, the General Synod adopted "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America." This powerful and visionary document continues to provide a poignant message 27 years later in the face of a fragmented world and denomination:

Jesus Christ's prayer for unity within his church (John 17) was to the end that the world might know that the Father had sent him. The reality and power of God's kingdom in Jesus flow through our ecumenical efforts. These efforts proclaim that we have been called out of fragmentation into unity, that we are a reconciling community, and that as Christians our diversity will not prevent us from working toward an authentic experience of oneness in Christ. Christian unity can offer a visible witness to the power and purpose of God who reconciles our broken and divided world.

In this time of political, social, and religious polarization, the Commission on Christian Unity and its ecumenical appointees continue to find ways of reconciliation with those from other Christian traditions. This work is happening globally, nationally, and locally in formal ways through the various agencies mentioned earlier in this report. It is also happening informally in local contexts. For instance, some local churches are working together to run a community food pantry. In another place, members from a Lutheran church and a Reformed church have joined together to form an ecumenical bell choir. In yet another area, members of different denominations witness baptisms in churches other than their own.

There are many other stories to tell, so the CCU invites congregations to share their ecumenical work with the commission so that others may be inspired and encouraged to engage in their own ecumenical endeavors in their local context.

In this time when the local church is facing tremendous challenges, we hope it will be the impetus to explore ecumenical work within the community. The Ecumenical Mandate states, "One of the purposes of ecumenism, therefore, is to incorporate into our own faith and practice the full inheritance of the church catholic. It is entered into with the conviction that, individually and corporately, we need one another in order to grow up into Christ." This is both the gift and the challenge of ecumenism.

Respectfully submitted,  
Carlos Corro, moderator

## **Report of the Commission on Christian Worship**

The commission met in person on October 11-12, 2022, in Chicago, and again on February 6-7, 2023, in Grand Rapids, and via Zoom on March 8, 2023, to coordinate ongoing work.

### **Worship in Hispanic Congregations**

The Commission on Christian Worship (CCW) seeks to be welcoming and supportive of the many Spanish-speaking congregations developing as part of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Through the commission's work with the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, copies of the bilingual hymnal *Santo, Santo, Santo* were gifted to every delegate at General Synod 2022. Following General Synod, a number of cases of hymnals remained, and those hymnals were distributed to regions where they could be an inspiration and help. The work to translate the comprehensive 2018 Worship Survey was undertaken, and plans were developed for the distribution of this survey to congregations that worship in Spanish.

In relation to the commission's work of recommending translations of the Bible, the commission discovered through direct inquiry that the most common Spanish translation used by RCA pastors is the Reina Valera 1960. For translations in modern Spanish, the Nueva Versión Internacional (NVI) and La Biblia Dios Habla Hoy are both used in RCA congregations.

### **General Synod 2021 Call for a Liturgy of Lament**

General Synod 2021 passed recommendation CA 21-3 (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, p. 204):

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Christian Worship, to craft a Liturgy of Lament for use by RCA congregations relating to the specific roles the RCA has played in oppression of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people of North America, from our earliest days on the Lenape land our church forebears called New Amsterdam, to our members' involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, to present day issues of injustice and indifference.

This work continues. The CCW has clarified the initial request from the Commission on Christian Action, and now understands that a litany was more in mind than a complete liturgy. However, the CCW sees the possible benefit of having a complete liturgy that could be used for many areas of lament beyond the initial request for the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and people of color. A draft litany for the initial request has been created and is being coordinated with the other named commissions. The more robust project is also underway as a tool for the worshipping bodies of the RCA.

## **General Synod Worship**

The commission's guidelines to help shape and form worship together at General Synod are available (see *MGS 2016*, pp. 253-257), and were shared again with the General Synod president this year. It is a joy for the CCW to work with the president and vice president of General Synod on worship that brings many voices together in worship. The CCW hopes to continue to support the tradition of life-giving, God-honoring worship like that which happened at General Synod 2022. Additionally, the CCW has advocated with General Synod Council (GSC) staff for the inclusion of worship services on the General Synod video stream. This request was favorably received, and assurances were made that if technically and logistically possible, what is available on the video stream will be expanded to include synod worship.

## **Other Items**

The CCW reviewed the existing (yet never finalized) liturgy for churches that are organizing. The need for a new liturgy has been recognized and this work will continue.

The Commission on Theology reached out to the CCW regarding commending the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (also known as the NRSVUE). While there are no obvious problems with this newer translation, the CCW realizes that more understanding and discussion with General Synod professors is appropriate before making a formal recommendation.

Likewise, the CCW looks forward to dialogue with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) in relation to how worship materials can be both edited and created to help support the anti-racist heart and work of the RCA.

## **Thank You**

The commission expresses deep gratitude to Geimy Alvarado and Dirk Gieser, whose terms are ending on the Commission on Christian Worship.

Respectfully submitted,  
Dirk Gieser, moderator

## Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) serves a supportive role for the church, “making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the *Book of Church Order*” and providing “advisory responses to requests for interpretation of the *Book of Church Order*” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b [2022 edition, pp. 114-115]). To faithfully fulfill these responsibilities, the CCO met in person in Grand Rapids, Michigan (November 3-4, 2022), and in a series of three Zoom sessions (September 21, 2022; January 12, 2023; March 2, 2023).

On several other occasions, the commission consulted with General Synod officers, General Synod Council (GSC) staff, as well as officers and members of other assemblies, agencies, commissions, and institutions—both formally and informally—responding to requests for assistance interpreting or applying the provisions of our order. Representatives from the commission also attended the in-person and virtual meetings of the RCA restructuring team, serving as a resource following the mandate by the General Synod (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, RF 21-1, p. 94). The commission expects that a substantial portion of its work the next several years will relate to actions taken by the General Synod in response to reports and recommendations from the restructuring team.

### Referrals from General Synod 2022

#### *H 22-1 – RCA Archives Supervision Subcommittee*

To address concerns about compliance with denominational archives policies, the Commission on History proposed the creation of a new Archives Supervision Subcommittee to the 2022 General Synod:

To place supervision and authority for the RCA Archives and its staff directly under an Archives Supervision Subcommittee of the Commission on History consisting of two representatives of the General Synod Council and two representatives of the Commission on History and chaired by the moderator of the Commission on History.  
(MGS 2022, H 22-1, p. 216)

In response, the 2022 General Synod voted:

To refer H 22-1 to the Commission on Church Order, working with the Commission on History and any other relevant parties for report back to General Synod 2023 (MGS 2022, H 22-1a, pp. 216-217).

The commission’s response to this referral dates back to 2021, when three members of the commission served on the EC 21-23 RCA Archives working group alongside three members each from the Commission on History (COH) and the General Synod Council, as well as current and former GSC staff members. As the commission reported last year, that working group identified several short-term concerns and

longer-term considerations. (In addition to the CCO and COH reports last year, refer also to the GSC's report on the matter [*MGS 2022*, p. 73].)

During the past year, the commission has continued to have conversations with the Commission on History, officers of the General Synod Council, and GSC staff in order to stay informed of updates related to archives—and there have been several. In the spring of 2022, the GSC took action to ask the general secretary for archives compliance information to be included in the executive limitations reporting that occurs in the spring of 2023 and to explore the creation of a new executive limitation specifically related to the RCA Archives. Furthermore, amid other changes, direct supervision of the archivist within the GSC staff structure has been clarified, the position description has been updated, and in the winter of 2023, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto was hired as the RCA's new archivist. The commission is hopeful that Dr. Pallitto will help the entire RCA—all of its assemblies, commissions, and agencies—raise the bar in recording, preserving, and sharing the vital records of our shared story of ministry and mission.

Given these substantial developments, the commission does not recommend forming a new Archives Supervision Subcommittee at this time; however, we intend to continue monitoring the impact of these developments and plan to re-evaluate this decision in the next year or two in collaboration with the Commission on History and other relevant parties. Our reasons for this decision are several, which we will briefly summarize here.

First, the commission understands the underlying nature of the concerns presented to be management-related rather than order-related, and we are hopeful that resolution can be reached without a significant change to the order. As presently constituted, the General Synod Council is empowered to “select and supervise a General Secretary and to establish personnel policies through which other personnel may be employed as may be beneficial to carry out the work of the church” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6h [2022 edition, p. 111]). The GSC creates and monitors executive limitations policies that direct the general secretary in the leadership and supervision of the other GSC staff, either directly or indirectly, and the general secretary annually reports compliance information to the GSC. If a new supervisory structure was implemented, the commission has some concern about the implications and potential unintended consequences of singling out one specific staff position for unique treatment.

Secondly, when a concern is raised, as in this particular case by the Commission on History, which works closely with the archivist, there are processes in place to seek resolution. This is what has been unfolding over the last two years. Concern was brought to the GSC, and then to the General Synod itself, which resulted in specific actions having been taken by the GSC to more effectively monitor the area of concern. While the deadline for this commission's report to General Synod precedes the general secretary's reporting to GSC, we want to see the impact of these initial actions before determining whether more substantial action may be necessary, and we will follow up accordingly.



Finally, none of this is an attempt to minimize the concerns that have been raised. To that end, the commission has had the pleasure of discussing revisions or clarifications to the original proposal with the Commission on History, and we look forward to further collaboration if the steps outlined above prove insufficient. If ultimately proposed, it would be wise to recommend the supervisory subcommittee as an amendment to the bylaws of General Synod, with clearly defined composition and responsibilities. For instance, from a human resources and employment perspective, what actions would the subcommittee be empowered to take? Or, what would be the fairly weighted composition of the subcommittee? One suggestion is that the moderator of the Commission on History serve as the chair of the subcommittee in an *ex officio*, non-voting capacity. That would provide the COH and the GSC with equal voting representation, but may require a clear remedy to be prescribed in the event of split decisions (or, decisions could be made only by three-fourths or unanimous consent). Other specifics could be refined and specified, and ideally any final recommendation would come as a joint proposal.

#### *ONB 22-5 - Assessments for Affiliated Churches*

In response to an overture from the Classis of New Brunswick, the 2022 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, meeting electronically with representatives of classes with dual-affiliated consistories, to develop a plan that accounts for an equitable payment of assessments/covenant shares without placing an undue burden on either classes or the denomination, for report to the 2023 General Synod. (*MGS 2022*, ONB 22-5, pp. 107-108)

The General Synod's Office of Finance assesses classes based on the prior year's statistical reporting of its churches. Each classis is responsible to the General Synod for the payment in full of its assessment, unless a petition for assessment relief has been filed and approved (see R-5, *MGS 1991*, pp. 344-345). During the past year, members of the commission had conversations with various stated clerks and pastors about the nature of assessments for dual-affiliated congregations, but the commission continues to believe that the current provision in the *BCO* is equitable.

Since dual affiliation is primarily intended to aid a congregation in its local ministry, it is not presumed that such a congregation becomes any less of an RCA congregation, but that it remains an important part of the RCA's shared ministry, with the full rights and responsibilities thereof. If the nature of the church's dual affiliation is substantially different, then the classis and the church together could consider whether the relationship sought would be better characterized as a union church, which would then follow the provisions of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 7 in the *BCO* (2022 edition, pp. 23-27).

For affiliated churches, the *BCO* states that "[a]ny obligation of the consistory to pay assessments to the classis is not reduced by virtue of affiliation with another denomination, unless otherwise approved by its classis" (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 9, Section 1 [2022 edition, p. 28]). In accordance with this provision, a classis has

discretion to agree to a lesser assessment for one of its churches that is approved to dually affiliate with another denomination; however, the classis remains responsible for the full amount to General Synod. This inherently does not place “an undue burden” on the classis because the action requires the agreement and approval of the classis in the first place. As an illustration, consider the similar principle that when the General Synod assessments were calculated per capita, some classes collected assessments from their churches based on percentage of income. The opposite may now be true: with the General Synod’s transition to covenant shares, there may still be some classes that will continue to calculate assessments per capita.

### **Advisory Responses to Requests for Interpretation**

The commission received several inquiries related to the interpretation or application of the *BCO*. What follows is a summary of some of the more significant advisory responses provided by the commission.

#### *General Synod Appointed Trustees for Officially Related Institutions*

The commission received an inquiry into the nature of the officially related relationship between the colleges and the RCA, in particular as it relates to the requirement that “[t]he governing boards of all institutions of higher learning in the United States which are officially related to the Reformed Church in America shall at all times include at least three members who are designated by the General Synod” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 5 [2022 edition, p. 74]).

The commission’s understanding is that an institution being “officially related” to the RCA is not necessarily an “exclusive” relationship. So, for instance, a college could remain officially related to the RCA, continuing to have a fruitful partnership, while also forming new partnerships, perhaps even other “officially related” relationships that may be inclusive of other denominations and networks.

If the board of trustees of a college desires to pivot away from being officially related to the RCA by eliminating or falling short of the minimum three General Synod-designated trustees, the commission communicated that it believes the immediate impact would include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following items in accordance with the *BCO*:

1. the college would no longer send its president or other representative as a corresponding delegate to the General Synod, and, therefore, would no longer give a report to synod or enjoy the visibility that comes from doing so (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 3a [2022 edition, p. 124]);
2. the college would no longer be able to appoint two students as corresponding delegates to the General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 3b [2022 edition, p. 124]);
3. the college’s faculty would no longer be eligible for consideration as potential candidates for the General Synod’s Commission on Theology, unless the faculty member satisfies one of the other specified categories for membership (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9a [2022 edition, p. 119]);

4. furthermore, there may be an impact to endowment funds that are designated for RCA colleges, depending on the specific language of any designated gifts held in trust.

It is the commission's understanding that there will be a meeting in the fall of 2023 to discuss this topic further, with, at minimum, the general secretary and the presidents of the colleges. A member of the commission has been invited to participate and will do so. At this time, the commission does not intend to propose any change to the minimum requirements for officially related institutions, unless further instructed by the General Synod to do so.

### *Requirements for Membership in Local Churches*

What are the requirements that a board of elders can consider when receiving new members, and what conditions can a board of elders consider to determine that a confessing member is inactive? The commission affirmed the responsibility of the board of elders to “pass upon the qualifications of those who desire to make profession of faith” and “admit persons to membership” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2a [2022 edition, p. 21]). While churches have adopted a variety of approaches to discipleship and revitalization, the commission reaffirmed that the elders should be guided by our beautiful—and constitutional—liturgy, which contains a series of questions and commitments to which a church and an individual covenant together. The board of elders has some latitude in interpreting if “the relationship with the church” has ceased for one year and whether or not a member has “made faithful use of the means of grace, especially the hearing of the Word and the use of the Lord’s Supper, unless there are extenuating circumstances making such faithful use impossible” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2d [2022 edition, p. 21]).

### *Commission on Theology Membership*

Does the word “pastors” exclude specialized ministers in the list of members for the Commission on Theology: “membership shall include two persons from among the Reformed Church seminary faculties, one General Synod professor, two persons from among the faculties of the Reformed Church colleges, three *pastors*, and two laypersons” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9a [2022 edition, p. 119]; emphasis added)? The commission does not believe that to be the case, since the order defines a specialized minister as “a *pastor* and teacher of the people among whom the minister works” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 4b [2022 edition, p. 12]; emphasis added).

### *Retired Ministers as General Synod Delegates*

What does the phrase “actively serving” mean as a limitation of voting rights for minister delegates to General Synod (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 [2022 edition, p. 69])? The commission understands the qualification to mean that voting rights are limited to ministers who are either (1) actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of an assembly, or (2) actively serving in ministries with the approval of an assembly. This interpretation is consistent with the voting rights limitation for

ministers enrolled in a classis in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1 of the *BCO* (2022 edition, p. 31).

There are a number of statuses that may describe a minister of Word and sacrament; some are specified in the order, and some have developed as administrative classifications. Several of these categories clearly indicate that a minister is actively serving: called and installed, contract, or specialized ministry. The classis has the prerogative to determine what it considers to be “actively serving” among ministers in two more ambiguous categories: retired and without charge. The remaining categories clearly indicate that a minister is not or cannot be actively serving: inactive, suspended, demitted, deposed, deceased. The commission believes a reasonable rule to guide a classis’s consideration in the event of questions about active service is this: if the minister in question has voting privilege at classis, then that minister would have voting privilege at General Synod.

#### *Release Date for Church Transfers*

When is a transferring congregation truly “released” from the RCA? There are several major steps in the process of a congregation withdrawing from the RCA for the purpose of affiliating with another denomination: (1) the filing of a petition to withdraw, (2) classis approval of the petition, (3) amendments of organizational documents and payment of assessments, (4) reception by the new denomination, and (5) satisfaction of other stipulations, agreements, or promissory notes that may be unique to a given situation. There may be several different dates that correspond with those steps, some up to a year or more from the date of filing a petition or the date of classis approval. Given the peculiarities of each case, it is not possible (or at least not wise) to provide a single answer that would apply in all situations. As a general matter, however, the commission recommends using the date on Formulary No. 11 (the Certificate for the Transfer of a Church to Another Denomination), which formally releases a church from the jurisdiction of classis and commends the church to a new denomination.

#### *Covenant Shares and Union Churches*

The commission is grateful to Rev. Dr. Daniel Griswold, stated clerk of Holland Classis, who asked whether the provision for allocation of assessments with respect to union churches may need to be amended due to the adoption of covenant shares. The commission discussed and agreed that the language should be updated to allow for covenant shares, but also recognizes that there may be existing plans of union that continue to specify assessments based on membership. Therefore, both methods of calculation should remain in the provision. The commission recommends:

#### **CO 23-1**

**To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 7, Section 2p (2022 edition, p. 25) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):**

~~Per capita apportionments or assessments~~**Assessments shall be paid to each classis (presbytery) of jurisdiction on the basis of either the total communicant membership or percentage of income of the union church, equally divided among the denominations involved.**

## **Program to Counter Sexual Abuse**

The commission received a communication from an attorney with a proposal for his “Program to Counter Sexual Abuse.” While the commission noted the presence of certain order-related issues in the proposal, ultimately we believe the topic is worthy of consideration but initially outside of the commission’s purview. To initiate a broader conversation around response to and prevention of sexual harassment and abuse, the commission forwarded the communication to the general secretary as well as the moderator and vice moderator of the General Synod Council. The commission hopes that collectively we can help ensure that all the ministries of the RCA are both safe and accountable.

## **Ongoing Work**

### *Review of “Seminary” Language in the BCO*

In light of the General Synod’s approval of the request from Western Theological Seminary to become an officially related seminary, the commission has begun detailed work to carefully review the *Book of Church Order* for all instances of “seminary” language, to assess the implications and identify whether any amendments may need to be proposed. There is a surprising variety of similar but inconsistent language: “an RCA seminary,” “the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church,” “the Reformed Church seminary faculties,” “under the authority of one of the seminaries,” “a seminary not officially related to the Reformed Church in America,” in addition to a number of generic uses of “seminary,” “theological seminary,” and “accredited seminary.” Additionally, the General Synod adopted an amendment to the *BCO* last year that adds the phrase, “a seminary officially related to the Reformed Church in America.” The commission desires to use clear and consistent terminology throughout the *BCO*, and intends to provide one comprehensive set of amendments when ready. The commission also anticipates seeking feedback from and collaboration with the RCA restructuring team and other bodies, such as the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board.

There is one instance that the commission believes should be amended now rather than waiting for the full review to be completed. The Bylaws of the General Synod provision for student corresponding delegates currently says, “The students of each RCA seminary shall appoint two of their members as corresponding delegates” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 5 [2022 edition, p. 124]). The commission’s advisory work on Western’s request distinguished between an “RCA seminary”—that is, a seminary with the General Synod as the sole member of its corporation—and an “officially related seminary.” Assuming the intent is to continue having two students from Western gain experience as corresponding delegates, the commission

recommends the following so that seminaries officially related to the RCA are treated the same as colleges officially related to the RCA—at least insofar as corresponding student delegates are concerned:

**CO 23-2**

**To adopt the following amendment to *The Bylaws of the General Synod*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 5 (2022 edition, p. 124) for submission to the next General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):**

**Sec. 5. Seminary Students**

**~~The students of e~~Each RCA and officially related seminary shall appoint two ~~of their members~~students as corresponding delegates.**

**The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency shall appoint two students not enrolled in an RCA seminary as corresponding delegates.**

*Use of the Term “Presbytery” in the BCO*

The commission agreed that it may propose revisions to change a number of parenthetical references to “presbytery” in the Plan of Union for union churches to something more generally applicable, such as “or its equivalent” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 7, Section 2 [2022 edition, pp. 23-27]). Before doing so, the commission will seek guidance from the Commission on Christian Unity to confirm that there are not any unintended consequences of which we are not aware.

**Editorial Changes to the *Book of Church Order***

During the ordinary course of its work, the commission occasionally identifies stylistic, grammatical, non-substantive matters for correction in the *BCO*. The commission annually reports any such findings to the General Synod and then communicates the changes to the GSC’s communication and production staff to be reflected in the next edition of the *BCO*. This year, the commission agreed upon one editorial revision: in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Section 2 (2022 edition, p. 33), the first instance of “congregation” should be plural (“congregations”).

**Elections and Appointments**

The commission elected Christopher Jacobsen to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual term beginning July 1, 2023. Additionally, the commission appointed Joshua Scheid to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2023 General Synod.

### **With Thanksgiving**

The commission gives thanks to God for Jennifer Van Regenmorter, an elder and an attorney from Holland, Michigan, and outgoing moderator Joshua Scheid, a minister from Massapequa, New York, who have served Christ's church faithfully for six years through the commission's work. We acknowledge their significant contributions and express to them our heartfelt gratitude.

The commission could not complete its work without the invaluable diligence, guidance, and support of Paul Karssen. We are deeply grateful for your friendship and for your keeping us going "decently and in order."

Respectfully submitted,  
Joshua Scheid, moderator

## Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” (*Minutes of General Synod 2003*, R-41, p. 159). The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 5, Section 5 [2022 edition, pp. 115-116]) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is the Commission on History’s 57th report to a General Synod.

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

To do this work faithfully, the commission met electronically (via Zoom) on Thursday, March 2, 2023; Thursday, February 2, 2023; Wednesday, November 16, 2022; and Thursday, August 25, 2022. It met in person (and via Zoom) at New Brunswick Theological Seminary on Friday, October 7, 2022, and communicated regularly via email and phone.

Rev. Dr. Steven D. Pierce, senior pastor of Central Reformed Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan), has served as your commission’s moderator for the last five years (2018-2023) through a number of significant transitions, including staff changes, RCA Archives expansion and growth, the retirement of our former archivist (Russell Gasero), and the leadership transition from one general editor (Rev. Dr. Donald Bruggink) of The Historical Series of Reformed Church in America to another (Rev. James Hart Brumm). We are grateful for Rev. Pierce’s administrative skills, guidance, encouragement, and ability to effectively communicate your commission’s goals and objectives. Not only was he receptive to new ideas, but he often championed them and worked hard to make sure the Commission on History received all the credit. We bless the Lord for Rev. Pierce’s good work.

Rev. Katlyn DeVries, writing assistant, Western Theological Seminary (Holland, Michigan), will serve as your commission’s next moderator beginning July 1, 2023.



## Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, now in its 55th year, recently published the following books:

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

The following books are in process:

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

At our October 7, 2022, meeting, your commission renewed a five-year term for Rev. James Hart Brumm to serve as general editor of the Historical Series, beginning July 1, 2023. Rev. Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has served as general editor since July 1, 2018. Rev. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church (Altamont, New York) and Helderberg Reformed Church (Guilderland Center, New York), and an adjunct faculty member at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, continues as general editor of the Congregational History Series, a subseries of the Historical Series.

The Commission on History, working with the RCA Archives, continues to publish the Historical Series under Reformed Church Press, which allows us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon.

In January 2021, your commission launched the RCA 400 Series in celebration of our upcoming 400th anniversary in 2028. Rev. Steven D. Pierce serves as the general editor. Like the Congregational History Series, this is a subseries of the Historical Series. The books in this series will help educate the church on how our Reformed past *informs* the present and *grows* us into the future. Authors will draw from the deep well of our RCA Archives and attempt to answer several questions:

- What is the Reformed Church in America?
- How is it distinctive from other Christian communities?
- Which beliefs, values, and practices stand at the heart of this communion?
- What challenges has it overcome, and how is it being challenged today?
- How is it structured and governed?
- What biblical principles undergird and vitalize its ministries?
- How can its rich heritage help it move into the future?

Last year, the RCA 400 Series published two books:

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

Forthcoming books in this series include:

- *Pursuing Unity in a Divided World: The History of Ecumenism in the Reformed Church in America*, by Monica Schaap Pierce
- *The Reformed Church in America and the Reign of God: The Dilemmas of a Denomination*, by Daniel J. Meeter
- *Loving God with Heart and Mind: Thinking Theologically in the Reformed Church in America*, by Dan Griswold
- *Our Reformed Church: Four Centuries of a Living Faith*, by Steven D. Pierce

## **Archival Staffing**

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

The work of the Archives is mandated in the *Book of Church Order* (BCO); the BCO refers to the denominational Archives a number of times, a clear presumption that the work of the Archives must take place (e.g., Chapter 1, Part II, Article 5, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 5, Section 4; Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 5, Section 3; Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section b1). Early on, the Commission on History, the NBTS faculty, and the Sage Library staff worked together to care for the Archives. Then, in 1978, the denomination sensed that vigilant records management and the preservation of our documents would only be possible through the work of a professional archivist, and Russell Gasero was hired to fill that role. Since 1978, the Archives has grown tremendously, both in quantity of records and in scope of responsibilities, and struggled with a single staff person. In the last decade, the Archives added Matthew Gasero as an additional part-time digital archivist. The volume of materials and the scope of responsibilities continued to increase, yet, in the last three years, the staff has been cut in half. In June 2020, Russell Gasero retired from his position as archivist, and in September 2022, Matthew Gasero's employment was abruptly terminated.

The Reformed Church in America's new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, was hired on Monday, January 30, 2023. She brings a keen interest in history, experience working with rare books and manuscripts during her time as a humanities scholar, and training in archival science suitable to her recent master of information degree through Rutgers University School of Communication and Information. Most recently, Dr. Pallitto worked with refugees through the Reformed Church of Highland Park. Your commission looks forward to collaborating with our new archivist, creating opportunities for open communication and transparency, growing in trust and problem-solving together.

It should be noted that the archivist's job description was revised prior to the search process. The position summary is written as follows: "The RCA Archivist is responsible for the collection, custody, and care of records of the Reformed Church in America, the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuous ministry in North America. This includes the records of the General Synod, RCA assemblies and agencies, and their respective committees, commissions, subsidiary corporations, and other similar bodies (collectively, 'Supported Bodies') where such records are necessary or appropriate for the preservation of information that is important for historical, administrative, or legal purposes. The RCA Archivist works with staff of the Supported Bodies to preserve appropriate records and to provide information for their current projects and work responsibilities."

In addition, the archivist will encourage the submission of minutes and other records and similar documents of Supported Bodies that are important for historical, administrative, or legal purposes, accept and process them, and appraise them for purposes of determining the appropriate duration of their preservation (including permanent preservation). The archivist will ensure the orderly transfer and storage of records deemed worthy of permanent preservation. In addition, the archivist will assist researchers by providing access to archival materials, giving priority to researchers from supported bodies listed above, and assist in the development of records management procedures and retention schedules for General Synod Council staff and offices and for General Synod committees, commissions, and agencies. The archivist will serve as a consultant to the General Synod's Commission on History and advise the commission on the membership of its records subcommittee.

Prior to Dr. Pallitto's hiring, the Archives was closed for five months after the termination of Matthew Gasero's employment. Research projects were immediately disrupted, delayed, or postponed; appointments were canceled; and church leaders were unable to transfer records, all of which created a backlog of archival projects. Your commission expressed concerns regarding the handling of this situation, especially since the RCA digital archivist was the one staff person managing the day-to-day operations of the Archives. The digital archivist had regularly kept your commission informed of developments within the Archives, worked closely with the Archives Advisory Committee formed of commission members, served as managing editor for the Historical Series, and helped the Commission on History take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that illuminated our present ministries. In addition, he handled all aspects of the Office of

Historical Services. We are indebted to Matthew Gasero for his good work for your commission, the RCA Archives, and our denomination.

The Archives officially reopened on Monday, February 6, 2023.

Over the years, the Archives has grown and expanded with the help of an annual grant program.

Since October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the growing needs of the Archives to be a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and Archives, the Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary pledged an annual grant of \$10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC) for each of ten years, to expand the work of the Archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and to give it a more stable and secure base into the future. Because of financial constraints, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants. Thankfully, your commission has been able to annually provide the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. These resources have helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. Your commission acknowledges the significant extra demand this has put on the Historical Series Revolving Fund, and also the significant commitment this has represented on the part of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Your commission remains grateful that the seminary, under its president, Dr. Micah McCreary, has continued to honor that commitment.

It should be noted that with the sudden termination of the RCA digital archivist, your commission temporarily suspended its match of the grant provided by New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The grant only works when the Archives can engage in expanding its program beyond what the denomination budgets for the archivist. When a new archivist was hired, the grant program resumed for continued expansion, benefiting both our denomination and the seminary.

In addition to the annual grant program, there are creative ways to help fund the work of the Archives. Donations from individuals, churches, and classes are welcomed and appreciated. For example, when the Aberdeen Reformed Church closed within North Grand Rapids Classis, the executive committee of the classis voted unanimously to tithe a significant sum of the sale of the property to the RCA Archives. By taking that action, it allayed the ever-growing expenses of transporting, storing, and preserving important church records. Your commission strongly encourages other classes to consider doing the same.

### **Transferring Materials**

From March to August 2022, your commission worked diligently in the safe transfer of the archival collection of the Collegiate Churches of New York to the RCA Archives at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The entire Collegiate collection was entrusted to the RCA Archives and paid for by the Collegiate Churches of New

York. On Friday, October 7, 2022, a signing ceremony of the “Record and Document Maintenance Agreement” was held in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Those present included the following:

- Rev. Stan Sloan, managing director, Collegiate Churches of New York
- Rev. Dwayne Jackson, General Synod president
- Rev. Dave Zomer, member, Commission on History
- Rev. Dr. Steven D. Pierce, moderator, Commission on History
- Rev. Matthew van Maastricht, consultant, Commission on History
- Rev. James Hart Brumm, director, Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and continuing consultant, Commission on History
- Matthew Gasero, former digital archivist
- Rev. Leah Ennis, pastor, Reformed Church in America
- Dr. Patrick Milas, librarian, New Brunswick Theological Seminary
- Christina Tazelaar, chief communications officer, Reformed Church in America

This event was significant considering our long-standing relationship with the Collegiate Churches of New York. They trace their roots back to 1628 when the church was founded as The Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the City of New York. In 1696, the church was granted a royal charter from the King of England, making it the first corporation in this country (a document that is still in legal force in the State of New York). The transfer of these important records further illustrates just how important the Archives has been and continues to be as a place where people can come to gather firsthand facts, data, and evidence from letters, reports, notes, memos, sermon manuscripts, photographs, and other primary sources.

Our Archives also help us tell our story—stories of faithfulness, grace, and celebrations as well as stories of hardship, failure, and endings. Its very existence guarantees continued research on how the past informs the present and grows us into the future. With the Collegiate collection now secure, our Archives is ever-growing; it is precious and most valuable, reminding us that we are truly standing on the shoulders of giants—those men and women, chosen and called, flawed but forgiven. It is their memory and the work that lies before us that keeps us honest and courageous as we continue the ministry of our Savior, Jesus Christ, through the mission and work of the Reformed Church in America.

Your commission expresses its sincere appreciation and gratitude to our former digital archivist, Matthew Gasero, for not only recommending the idea of the signing ceremony to your commission, but for all his hard work, both seen and unseen, in ensuring that the Collegiate collection was properly and successfully transferred to the RCA Archives. Your commission also expresses its gratitude to New Brunswick Theological Seminary for hosting the signing event.

### **Remembering Francis J. Sypher**

Your commission would be remiss if we didn't mention Dr. Francis J. Sypher. As the Collegiate Churches of New York's archivist and historian, Dr. Sypher worked behind

the scenes on preparing the Collegiate collection for its move to the RCA Archives. On March 7, 2022, Dr. Daniel Meeter and Rev. Steven Pierce spent the day with Dr. Sypher, as well as Rev. Stan Sloan, in New York City, reviewing the Collegiate collection and discussing the process for transferring records to the RCA Archives. Just a few months after the Collegiate collection was transferred to New Jersey, Dr. Sypher died peacefully at his home on December 20, 2022. He was 81. Your commission was deeply saddened to learn of his death. He authored approximately 270 scholarly articles, reviews, and books. This includes several books for the Historical Series. Dr. Sypher was a dedicated and tireless student of church history, and his contributions will be enjoyed by historians, scholars, archivists, pastors, and many others for years and years to come.

May Dr. Francis J. Sypher rest in peace and rise in glory!

### **Current and Future Archival Projects**

Looking ahead, the Commission on History has much work to do.

In October 2022, the Commission for Women (CfW) invited this commission's involvement in planning a celebration honoring the five decades of women's ordination in the RCA as elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and sacrament. We have been honored to partner with the CfW to mark this momentous occasion, which has included collecting stories of women throughout the history of our denomination. We look forward to keeping this conversation alive and partnering with the CfW and the RCA's Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership to share these stories as we are able.

At the February 2, 2023, meeting, your commission approved the digitization of the Rev. Samuel Marinus Zwemer Arabian Mission diaries. As a Protestant missionary in the RCA, Rev. Zwemer made his home in Arabia and Egypt for most of 38 years (1890-1929). As a man with strong, unflinching convictions, steeped in the Calvinist tradition, he maintained a high Christology and stressed the unique work of Christ in the atonement and resurrection. His knowledge of Islam was most impressive, and while he wasn't a perfect man, he endeavored to love Muslim people through relationship building and yearned to see them gathered to Christ. Your commission will also work with the new archivist to provide for digitizing the *Christian Intelligencer*, *The Mission Field*, and *Mission Gleaner* as approved at the commission meeting in February 2022. The goal is to produce quality, legible digital copies of these publications that are searchable. Your commission will also seek the help of the General Synod Council to assist with funding for this project. In addition, your commission has requested that the RCA Archives procure Quark Express to prepare PDF versions of the *Church Herald*. As an invaluable resource, it is our hope these PDF versions will bless and enrich church leaders.

As we approach our denomination's 400th anniversary in 2028, your commission will work with Dr. Jaap Jacobs of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and other interested international scholars to prepare scholarly publications and seminars to mark our quadricentennial. Dr. Daniel Meeter will consult with Dr. Jacobs and others

on this matter, including members of your commission, our new archivist, and leaders from the Collegiate Churches of New York. Prospective partners may also include the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, the Roosevelt Institute (Middelburg, Zeeland), and the New Netherland Institute. Potential outcomes could be a conference with pre-circulated papers in 2025 and 2026 or a conference in 2028 with subsequent publication. The gathering could be held in the United States or in the Netherlands.

## **Supervisory Structure**

As was reported to General Synod 2022, the RCA Archives program began with the hiring of Russell Gasero in 1978 to be archivist on a part-time trial basis for three years. He transitioned to full-time as the RCA struggled to find funding for a permanent program. Originally, the archivist reported directly to the general secretary and was part of the General Synod Office. With the restructure from the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) and General Program Council (GPC) to the General Synod Council (GSC), the archives shifted both in supervision and placement, but always reported to the Commission on History twice a year. While the Archives was accepted as a vital and essential responsibility for the General Synod, it was always underfunded and understaffed as the workload grew.

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

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

Your commission has insisted that all assemblies and current staff assure compliance with the policy and procedures statement to assure the long-term legal, financial, and administrative well-being of the denomination—especially during a time of rapid change and restructuring and potential litigation. Last year, your commission recommended to place supervision and authority for the RCA Archives and its staff directly under an Archives Supervision Subcommittee consisting of members from the Commission on History as well as the General Synod Council. [For more information, please read our 2022 report, which can be found in *Minutes of General Synod (MGS) 2022*, pp. 210-218.] Your commission has discussed this recommendation with members of the Commission on Church Order and has considered their friendly suggestions. We will revisit this possibility in a year.

## **Reformed Church Historic Trust**

Last year, General Synod 2022 adopted the following recommendation:

### **H 22-2**

To explore the establishment and incorporation of a Reformed Church Historic Trust as a 501(c)(3) organization to support and benefit the RCA Archives, and that the structure will be determined by the Commission on History in consultation with the RCA's general counsel, the RCA's chief financial officer, and others as needed, and reported to the 2023 General Synod (*MGS 2022*, p. 218).

At the February 2, 2023, meeting, your commission unanimously approved making the following recommendation to this synod:

### **H 23-1**

**That the General Synod hold in abeyance the proposal to develop a Historic Trust to support the Archives until such time as the denominational archivist should recommend that work be resumed on it.**

Reasons:

- With all the staff changes over the last year, especially in the Archives, the work on this proposal has been significantly delayed.
- Once the new archivist has settled into her new position, she will be able to contribute to this conversation as we work to permanently guard that which is committed to our trust.

With the Archives holding almost 400 years of our history, heritage, denominational identity, and detailed agency records, your commission believes it is still a good time to make permanent its foundation and to provide for its growth. That said, it is exigent that our new archivist be a part of this process and serve as a key consultant.

## **Honoring Russell L. Gasero**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, General Synod 2020 did not convene. At that gathering, your commission had planned to honor Russell Gasero for his more than four decades of service as our RCA archivist. We bring that resolution to this General Synod to be acted on.

### **H 23-2**

**That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:**

**WHEREAS Russell Louis Gasero grew up in Steinway Reformed Church in Queens, New York, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, in 1973, and**



**worked in the Archives of the United Nations in New York City for five years, doing distinguished work in one of the world's elite archival programs, and**

**WHEREAS, in 1977, the Commission on History, seeking to preserve the heritage and properly manage the records of the Reformed Church in America, which had been stored in the library of the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America since it had removed to New Brunswick, New Jersey, some 160 years earlier, and which had never received professional attention, received the approval of the General Synod to begin a professionally managed archival program and then proceeded to recruit and hire Russell Gasero to be the first archivist of the Reformed Church in America, and**

**WHEREAS in the ensuing forty-two years Russell Gasero built the Archives of the Reformed Church in America from a collection of documents kept in closets at Gardner A. Sage Library into a comprehensive, fully accessible collection of documents, video media, and other artifacts, including over one-half mile of paper records stored in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, collecting and preserving the acts of apostles who make up the Reformed Church in America, and**

**WHEREAS, during that time, he earned a master's degree from the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1981, and continuously partnered with denominational staff, classes, synods, and consistories to faithfully preserve and catalogue their records, saving the Reformed Church in America and its agencies hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses—and even saving the acronym “RCA” for us—through timely accession of needed records that were anywhere from months to centuries old, and saving congregations untold thousands of dollars through such storage, and**

**WHEREAS he has partnered with RCA colleges to create internship opportunities, partnered with denominational staff members to create volunteer service opportunities, and visited scores of congregations and church groups, expanding the awareness of the whole church in the preservation of its history, and distinguished himself in the membership and leadership of professional groups and historical associations, including the Society of American Archivists, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, the American Association for State and Local History, the Dutch Cousins, and Beardslee Press, all**

helping to secure a bright future for professional archival work in the RCA and all of North America, and

WHEREAS he served the Commission on History not only as consultant but as staff and as production editor for The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, helping make possible over 100 volumes in that series which enlighten and edify the entire church and scholars far beyond us and saving tens of thousands of dollars in that mission, and

WHEREAS he worked with the faculty and administration of New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create a partnership with the Reformed Church Center, whereby scholarship is expanded, local congregations and classes are supported in their work, and a ten-year grant program was established that is helping the Archives expand its work, digitizing records to make them more easily accessible well into the future and expanding its program at no expense to the assessment budget of the Reformed Church, and

WHEREAS he has attended more consecutive General Synods than any other person in the history of the Reformed Church in America, often driving countless items across the country to the meetings not only for the Office of Historical Services and the Historical Series but also for other programs and agencies of the church, and bringing his wife, Maria, to many synod sessions to pitch in as volunteer labor, and

WHEREAS he has been a supportive presence to his staff colleagues for decades and has become the living institutional memory of the RCA,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 216th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in stated session at Central College in Pella, Iowa, the eighth through thirteenth days of June in the year of our Lord two-thousand-twenty-three, gives thanks to God for the life and ministry of Russell Louis Gasero on the occasion of his retirement and pray God's richest blessings on Russ and his wife, Maria, for the many years of their life ahead,

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the 216th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America declares Russell Louis Gasero to be archivist emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, and that the synod rise, in body or in spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Your commission celebrates the continuation of this important ministry and is glad to be working with our new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto.

### **Closing Remarks: Our History-Moored Faith and Its Humbling Effect**

In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes that “biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously.”<sup>1</sup> History is so important to God, according to Buechner, that God initiated it, entered it, and has promised to one day “bring it to a serious close.” In order to understand our past, which informs our present, the study of history becomes paramount. This is certainly true of Christian history as well as denominational history. The past affects the present, and ultimately the future, confirming the age-old wisdom that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>2</sup>

Your commission acknowledges that not everyone enjoys reading history. Depending on the subject, it can feel distant, tedious, and irrelevant. Yet Christianity is a history-moored faith, instructing us and helping us gain perspective. Buechner, contrasting Christian faith with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, says, “History is not an absurdity to be endured or an illusion to be dispelled or an endlessly repeating cycle to be escaped. Instead it is for each of us a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere.”<sup>3</sup>

While the “somewhere” has been debated over the centuries, Christian history points to God’s unbending faithfulness and the reality that life has a direction—one where we are being led back to God, to our life’s source, and ultimately to wholeness. Life and faith are rooted in the mystery of God’s love in Jesus Christ, merging in surprising ways throughout history. What’s needed are eyes that see and ears that hear.

Historically, ours is a faith that’s more interrogative and less doctrinaire.<sup>4</sup> In the Reformed tradition, we’ve grown accustomed to dancing with our doubts, and we attempt to tackle those nagging existential questions that encompass a wide range of subjects. This work is always done best in community. Together we accomplish these things while also affirming those tenets that have traditionally united us as a Reformed Church, as the body of Christ in North America:

- The wonder of creation;

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> George Santayana. *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), p. 284.

<sup>3</sup> Buechner, p. 38. He adds, “True history has to do with the saving and losing of souls, and both of these are apt to take place when most people, including the one whose soul is at stake, are looking the other way.”

<sup>4</sup> Daniel L. Migliorie. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 2.

- The humility of God in Jesus Christ;
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit;
- The miracle of forgiveness of sins;
- The gift of new life in communion;
- The call to the ministry of reconciliation;
- The promise of the consummation of God's reign.<sup>5</sup>

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

Your commission is fully aware of what's at stake as we consider our future as a Christian denomination. The fracturing of the Reformed Church in America is just one more ecclesial tragedy among many throughout history. It is troubling to witness churches and pastors leave our denomination. Some churches claim they can no longer function effectively in the RCA because of our ineffective structure (such as dependence on synod action and/or two-thirds of classes), which they claim has stalled the church's mission and its ability to correct wayward pastors, churches, classes, synods, and professors of theology who have differing interpretations of Scripture. Some have even claimed that those who remain in the RCA have outright rejected the authority of Scripture and that our churches are no longer gospel-centered.

Your commission would point out that these reasons and statements are often far from "grace-filled." We may have our differences, but those differences pale in comparison to what has united us over these many years. We endured quarrels during some very tense moments in the course of our denomination's history. While some left for new adventures, others stayed the course, recommitting to "walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace."<sup>6</sup>

Unity is at the heart of God's purpose for the church. The psalmist sang, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity ... For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore" (Psalm 133:1, 4b). Jesus prayed that his church would live in unity (John 17:20-23). The apostle Paul said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:13). God blesses the church when it lives in unity.

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<sup>5</sup> Migliorie, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Church Order*, Appendix: The Formularies, 3., p. 132.

A strict adherence to uniformity makes no allowance for differences. No deviations are tolerated, and the effort to eliminate differences becomes standard, creating an environment of sameness. Throughout the years, totalitarian governments have strongly enforced uniformity. Cults coerce uniformity. That is not who we are, have ever been, or will ever be. The RCA is driven by those tenets that have traditionally united us (refer to list above). We strive to invite everyone to sit at the table so they can “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). This takes a rigorous effort as we will continue to struggle to put our prejudices aside.

While we have a long way to go, your commission remains optimistic about our future together. For 395 years we have had a continuous ministerial presence in North America—148 years before the colonies gained independence from Great Britain. That is a remarkable fact. It means we remain the oldest operating Protestant ministry in this country, without any interruptions since 1628. We are standing on the shoulders of giants and will continue to build on this incredible Reformed foundation.

Because we are people of a story, and because history is critical to our survival, your commission has included a paper on the history of regional synods. It is our hope that synod delegates find the following paper illuminating. No matter what shape our denomination takes after some reasonable restructuring, your commission will continue to tell our story.

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF REGIONAL SYNODS, ESPECIALLY THEIR RESTRUCTURING**

*Drafted by the Commission on History of the Reformed Church in America  
for the occasion of General Synod 2023*

During this time of restructuring, the General Synod is paying particular attention to the role and purpose of regional synods. Do we need them? Why do we have them? What are they for? Would we be better off without them? This paper gives historical context to our deliberations.

What follows is 1) the purpose of regional synods as they originally developed and 2) an exposition on three times that the General Synod examined whether to keep them. We note that, for most of our history, the regional synods were known as “particular synods” and, before that, as “provincial synods.” In what follows we use the three terms interchangeably—regional, particular, provincial. In all cases, this body is that “middle judicatory” between classis and general synod.

### **Our First Regional Synods**

It may come as a surprise that our Reformed Church in America was originally considered a regional synod. Before forming our own denominational structure in the Americas, we met as the particular synod of North America. To understand this, we look back at our roots in the Netherlands.

Our ancestral Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands was never formally a national church. It was legally established province by province, and each province

had its own provincial synod. The first synod of any kind in the Netherlands was the Provincial Synod of Holland and Zeeland, convened in 1574.<sup>7</sup> As each province joined the Reformation, each one established, by law, its own provincial synod. For the next 242 years, until 1816, the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands was a federation of provincial synods, and for two-and-a-half centuries, these provincial synods met annually to conduct their proper business. By contrast, for a quarter of a millennium, Dutch general synods only met four times!

The first National (general) Synod met in Dordrecht in 1578. A second one met in Middelburg in 1581 and a third at The Hague in 1586. It was 32 years before another general synod met; this was the famous Synod of Dordt in 1618. After that, no general synod met again for two centuries, after the Napoleonic revolutions.

The provincial synods did all the synodical work. They supervised the state of religion and the interests of the churches within their provinces. They monitored doctrine and liturgy and supervised the classes' supervision of pastors. They oversaw the professors of theology, and they (not the classes) supervised the students and candidates for ministry. They corresponded ecumenically with other Reformed bodies. They witnessed to their provincial governments. For two centuries, if you said "synod," what you meant was "regional synod."

With no convened general synod for generations of living memory, it was only natural that our first synod in North America, in 1785, was a particular synod.<sup>8</sup> We saw ourselves as a new self-standing province of the Dutch Church, to which we had belonged in a lesser status for our first 150 years. Previously, we had been only a collection of congregations under the Classis of Amsterdam, and only in 1771 did we finally have a plan for an orderly organization. But effecting this plan was interrupted by the American Revolution. In 1783, when the revolutionary dust had settled, our leaders began a "weighty and impartial discussion" of our denomination's future in America, its legal standing in the new republic, and how it should be organized and governed.

As this particular synod met regularly, they began to realize that they were quickly evolving from a branch of the Netherlands church to an independent ecclesiastical body, and that they were necessarily approaching the status of a national synod. And so, upon the adoption and publication of the Constitution, the synod of 1794 declared itself to be a general synod. This was audacious, considering that it was the

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<sup>7</sup> For the early synods see F. L. Rutgers, ed., *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der Zestiende Eeuw*, second ed. (Dordrecht: Van den Tol, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> For the early North American synods, see Edward Tanjore Corwin, *A Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: The Board of Publications of the Reformed Church in America, 1906), 483-490, and Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America no. 24, Donald J. Bruggink, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 34-43.

first general synod in the whole Dutch Reformed world since the Synod of Dordt, and on foreign soil, no less.

The particular synod continued to meet annually, and in 1800, it divided into the Particular Synods of Albany and New York. The general synod met only every three years. To serve the critical decisions of denominational formation, its earliest meetings were conventions of ministers and elders from every congregation, but in 1800 its membership reverted to the Church Order's requirement of delegates from the particular synods (not the classes) of eight ministers and eight elders each.

Three events followed that tended to reduce the importance of the particular synods. First, their responsibility for theological education was removed by the Constitution, which assigned the theological professorate to the general synod and the supervision and examination of students normally to the classes. Second, in 1812, the membership of the general synod was changed from delegates from the particular synods to delegates from the classes, three ministers and three elders each.<sup>9</sup> Also in 1812, the general synod began to meet annually. Clearly, we had begun to expect from general synods what, for the previous 238 years, we had expected from particular synods.<sup>10</sup>

It should not surprise, then, that in 1820, the Particular Synod of Albany proposed abolishing particular synods, as did the Classis of Poughkeepsie a year later (for different reasons), but these proposals were outvoted. In 1848, a general synod report stated that church extension required particular synods. The Particular Synod of Chicago was organized in 1856 and, in 1869, the Particular Synod of New Brunswick. The new concern of particular synods was church extension and new church development, and this continued to be the case until the 1970s (when regional synod executives were still called "field secretaries").

### **The General Synod Report of 1899: Communal Superintendence**

A generation later the question of particular synods came up again, and the General Synod of 1898 appointed a committee to examine "the origin, connections relating to our Church polity and government, and the uses, past, present and future, of the Particular Synods," and, "if possible, to devise some plan of adjustment, which will be more efficient and satisfactory to the whole Church than the plan at present existing."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Corwin, *Digest*, 307.

<sup>10</sup> See the Commission on History's 2007 report to the General Synod, "A Historical Examination of the Relationship among RCA Assemblies," *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 310-312. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Corwin, *Digest*, 488-490.

The small but high-powered committee reported a year later, in 1899. The full report is worth reading, as it is remarkably relevant to the restructuring inquiry of 2023.<sup>12</sup> The report succinctly reviews the “origins” and “connections” of particular synods. It notes that particular synods solve the problem of “remoteness between and separating the whole, the *national*, and its minor, individual parts, the *Classes*, which had its difficulties and was a weakness.” In other words, the general synod is too broad an assembly to adequately govern and care for all the classes. No doubt this was the same motivation that had led to the creation of the Particular Synod of Chicago in 1856, after the rapid church growth arising from the Dutch and German immigration to the Midwest.

The report goes on to address the particular synods’ “uses.” It surveys their occasional constitutional uses in forming classes, transferring congregations, and serving as the “Court of final appeal” in most judicial cases. But when it comes to their main use, which is the ongoing “superintendence over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several Classes,” it notes that typically “the whole business sinks down into a matter of mere routine,” and “evidently the purpose and main ‘use’ of the Particular Synod is nullified,” and “it becomes a perfunctory affair.”

In the problem, the report finds an opportunity, and its language gets visionary, creative, and even, in modern terms, almost missional. In the report’s own words:

Your Committee deem that...what the present case demands; in short, [is] a better understanding of the place, purpose, and “uses” of the Particular Synod. It is contained in the words: “superintendence over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several Classes within its bounds.” With this made prominent, once a year for their delegates to meet and consider such a subject—the religious condition of each all concerned should not be, would not be, held a useless “expense” to be complained of or avoided, but a helpful gathering, full of interest to all. If, for instance, one Classis reported revivals, accessions, growth, there is the opening of a topic, perchance helpful to all; the germ, it may be, of a new impulse, new life, a new spirit. If, on the other hand, and year after year, one reports within its bounds “nothing done,” no life, no spirituality in its churches, to the Particular Synod has been assigned the responsibility, the duty, of looking into it—of “devising,” if possible, joint means of help and remedy. What is or may be done within or without the Synod, all depends on the spirit and faithfulness to duty of the Synod itself, and the “several Classes” with whose “spiritual interests and concerns” it has to do.

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<sup>12</sup> For the full text of the report, see James Hart Brumm, ed., *An RCA Reader: Outlining the History of the Reformed Church in America in Seventy-Five Documents*, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America no. 104, James Hart Brumm gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformed Church Press, 2022), 341-346. The three-member committee included a former General Synod president and the senior minister of the Collegiate Church in New York.



*Resolved*, that to increase the interest and effectiveness of the Particular Synods, and to give them more fully the place they were designed to occupy in our denominational system, the “superintendence” (assigned to them in the Constitution) “over the spiritual interests and concerns of the several Classes within their bounds” is of the utmost importance, and should be carried out, not as a matter of routine or formal report, but in the spirit of mutual helpfulness and desire for the spiritual growth and prosperity of each and all; and their attention is hereby earnestly called to the matter, and the devising of means to the end.”<sup>13</sup>

The committee’s report displays not only a sober intimacy with the working realities of classes and synods, but also, by zeroing in on “superintendence,” reveals an implicit understanding of Reformed polity in its nature and ideals. According to Professor Leon van den Broeke, the core of Reformed polity is the dynamic interplay between two New Testament imperatives, *episkopè* and *koinonia*, or “oversight” and “community.”<sup>14</sup> In our Constitution, “oversight” is “superintendence.” The primary task of our assemblies, which are communities of office-bearers, is oversight. The community of the general synod oversees the regional synods, the community of the regional synod oversees the classes, and the community of the classis oversees the congregations. If we compare Reformed polity to other Protestant polities, we can say that Congregational polities are communal, but their assemblies have little responsibility for oversight, while Episcopal polities practice oversight, but they do this through hierarchies, not assemblies. Reformed polity seeks an idealistic middle way that balances the two biblical imperatives, and this dynamic balance is not easy to maintain.

The 1899 report envisions particular synods as assemblies with real and implicitly vulnerable fellowship (*koinonia*) for the purpose of superintendence (*episkopè*). It envisions a spiritual government of “mutual helpfulness” in order to enhance new life, revival, and spirituality. It envisions this as having necessarily to be done by provincial synods because general synods are too large and too broad in scope to provide the space and occasion for active mutual helpfulness among the classes.

The next year, in 1900, the General Synod’s Standing Committee on the State of the Church made further proposals that particular synods should host annual public meetings to hear presentations by representatives of the seminaries and colleges of the denomination’s educational and missionary work, the women’s departments, the Christian Endeavor Societies, and the Brotherhood of Andrew and Philip,<sup>15</sup> as this “would do much to stimulate interest in denominational work.”<sup>16</sup> Here we see what we now call denominational “program,” and how particular synods could support it.

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<sup>13</sup> Brumm, *RCA Reader*, 344-345.

<sup>14</sup> Leon van den Broeke, *Classis in Crisis: Om de Classicale Toekomst* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2009), 78-84.

<sup>15</sup> The Brotherhood of Andrew and Philip was a fraternal evangelical religious organization founded in 1888 by Rufus W. Miller.

<sup>16</sup> Corwin, *Digest*, 490.

Although the next five decades would bring traumatic changes in the world—including World War I (1914-1918) and the dreaded rise of fascism that led to World War II (1939-1945)—the RCA held relatively stable in structure and program. In the 1950s, the RCA enjoyed Protestantism's general prosperity, while in the 1960s the RCA was preoccupied with liturgical change, ecumenical controversies, the Civil Rights movement (1954-1968), and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), not to mention a recasting of the Church Order. At the same time, the particular synods began to develop programs beyond superintendence and church extension. In the 1980s the particular synods of New York and Michigan, for example, began to act like mini-denominations within their bounds, with their own cadres of staff for education and social witness. The overlap and redundancy of responsibilities for program would inevitably need to be addressed.

### **The General Synod Report of 2000: From Superintendence to Program**

In 1996, a classis overture from within the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics requested “a full review of the purpose and responsibilities of regional synods.” The impetus was stress between a classis and a regional synod, especially over funding. The overture triggered an enormous effort that resulted in an extensive report to the General Synod of 2000.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that, while the 1899 report occupied just three committee members for one year, the 2000 report was presented by a nine-member task force that had conducted a four-year consultation with denominational staff and unit directors, regional synod staff and officers, and classis stated clerks. Halfway through its work the task force had to adjust to the new statement on mission and vision for the RCA.

Over the course of the four years, the task force reviewed virtually everything, including the bylaws of every classis and regional synod as well as all the consistorial reports of 1998. The task force developed a chart comparing the respective ministries and needs of each of the four levels of government, as well as a list of the five values that are shared throughout. The task force also noted a “conversational breakdown” between the staff at the various levels of government.

As a result of its thorough homework,

The task force has learned that the specific function of regional synods has been questioned throughout the whole history of their existence. Their presence as a middle judicatory (and the terminal judicatory for cases that arise from discipline imposed by a board of elders) has never been doubted. Beyond that, the regional synods have changed significantly over the life of the RCA. In recent years significant resources of the regional synods have been dedicated to programmatic functions. To some extent, the regional

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<sup>17</sup> For the full report, see the *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 429-437.  
<http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2000MGS-complete.pdf>

synods have initiated such programs; to a large degree, the regional synods have been assigned such roles by the General Synod.<sup>18</sup>

After studying all the bylaws, the task force concluded that the main purpose of the classes was superintendence and supervision. But unlike the 1899 report, superintendence is not mentioned as the main purpose of the regional synods. It is rather program (“ministries”). The report states that even with an emphasis on denominational programs, regional synod programming remains essential, as congregations often find it closer to their needs. But this (and the competition for funds) requires the program staffs of the regional and general synods more intentionally to communicate and, where possible, collaborate, especially when competing for funds. Both levels of staff convened in 1999 and adopted a “Covenant of Response” to pledge their communication and collaboration. And a year later, the task force reported:

In sum, the task force, having conducted reviews of the responsibilities and purposes of the regional synods and classes, affirms the positive roles that regional synods play in the RCA today. Classes and regional synods need to be in constant conversation so that synods do not infringe upon the prerogatives of the several classes or churches within their bounds. As to the relationships between regional synods and the General Synod, the task force notes that what is most needed is regular conversation around strategic planning and a shared sense of vision for the ministry of the RCA. Thus, the task force has chosen not to present to the General Synod a comprehensive “organizational plan with implementation steps and a timeline for deployment of RCA staff” because several conversations have been taking place that have significant potential to lead the RCA in a positive direction.<sup>19</sup>

The report concludes with six recommendations, five of which were adopted. One was a *BCO* amendment requiring regional synods to consult with the classes before working with a consistory (which the Commission on Church Order declined to move forward in 2001). The other four affirm the “Covenant of Response” and direct the General Synod Council and urge the regional synods intentionally to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate, especially on leading ministries, sharing resources, and planning strategy.

### **The General Synod Report of 2007: Restructuring Regional Synods Away**

Despite the results of four years of work and the endorsement of regional synods, only five years later the general secretary, in his report to the General Synod of 2005, again called into question the fourfold structure of congregation, classis, regional synod, and general synod. He argued that the officers and staffs at all levels had tried to carry out the directions of five years earlier,

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<sup>18</sup> *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 432.

<sup>19</sup> *Minutes of General Synod 2000*, 434.

But overall, the structural problems remain and seem clear. We've talked about this often, and at meetings this year with leaders throughout the RCA, including all our regional synod executives, we agreed together on the need for a missiological reflection on our present structures and organization. We don't have answers, nor do we want to see an inordinate focus on internal structures. But as we work and live in response to our mission and vision, the dysfunctions of our present organizational structure and resource allocation become more obvious.<sup>20</sup>

To address this dysfunction, he called for a new study of the same ground, now with a "missional" emphasis. The synod adopted his recommendation:

To instruct the officers of General Synod to initiate a denomination-wide conversation of "missional reflection" on the structure of our present four assemblies, in wide consultation with those from regional synods, classes, and consistories as well as the Commission on Church Order and other bodies; and further, to give attention to "best practices" of emerging cooperation between regional synods and classes in carrying out the task of equipping congregations for mission and ministry; and further, to gather suggestions, ideas, and models of how our present structure and relationship of assemblies might be adapted to more effectively carry out the mission of the church; and further, to share the results of this reflection with the General Synod no later than 2007, and with the church at-large along the way, in order to determine what future steps, if any, might be undertaken.<sup>21</sup>

To address "the structure of our present four assemblies" was in the nature of the case essentially to address the middle two, the classis and the regional synod. It is evident in the general secretary's report that regional synods, unlike classes, were viewed in terms of program and program-delivery, without regard to superintendence as the 1899 report understood it.

A Missional Structures Task Force was appointed, and it reported to the General Synod of 2007.<sup>22</sup> It consisted of eight members plus two staff, including the general secretary. As part of its work, the task force consulted widely, with "pastors and consistories, classes and regional synods, classis clerks, and individual classes or regional synods experimenting with new practices," in order "to know the present reality of the church." And it reported to the General Synod as follows:

After a year and a half of listening, to the church and to God's Spirit and to each other, and in measuring some of the fruit from Our Call, the task force has firmly reached this conclusion: that if the RCA continues in its present

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<sup>20</sup> *Minutes of General Synod 2005*, 41-42. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2005MGS-complete.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> *Minutes of General Synod 2005*, 141.

<sup>22</sup> For the report and its outcome, see *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 88-104. <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf>

missionally-focused direction, the current structure of the Reformed Church in America will not be able to sustain the missional imperatives of God's call upon the Reformed Church in America.<sup>23</sup>

The task force appealed to the purpose of the church as given in the Preamble to the Government in the *Book of Church Order*, as well as the mission and vision statements and Our Call, which the present structure had become unable to fulfill because of "brutal facts" and "brutal trends." The task force report is worth reading as a compelling description and analysis of the challenges facing the church at the time and its frustrations in meeting those challenges.

The task force proposed that in order to approach the "preferred future" of the RCA, the solution would be combining the classes and regional synods into "new middle assemblies, with greater resources than our current classes and with stronger, more direct connections to congregations than our current regional synods," "taking the best of both regional synods and classes." It also proposed that the professional staff of these middle assemblies would be accountable not only within their assemblies but also to the General Synod (which would have to be the General Synod Council staff).

The task force predicted major funding implications, and that "eventual staffing at the middle assembly level might require resources currently lodged at the GSC level; it most certainly will involve some form of mutual accountability of staff and will require a deep collaboration between GSC and middle assembly staff that goes well beyond the current, and growing, number of joint efforts." The task force proposed an "open space" of three years for experimentation toward the new structure, under the supervision of the General Synod Council.

The task force offered six recommendations in order to implement these major changes. They are as follows:

1. Create the "open space."
2. Combine and realign the classes and regional synods as new middle assemblies.
3. Continue the denomination-wide dialogue with data collection.
4. Bring deacons into full voting participation in the assemblies.
5. Have General Synod meet every two years instead of annually.
6. Add a fourth "mark" to the church, that of individual members being missional themselves.

Not one of the recommendations was adopted. The first, second, and fifth were simply defeated. A substitute for the third was adopted after amendments. The fourth was referred to the Commission on Theology. The sixth was substituted by a programmatic incentive for members to be missional.

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<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of General Synod 2007*, 88.

Why this result? General Synod minutes do not by nature include the debate on the floor or the opposing arguments. Apparently, for the majority, the task force either failed to make its case or did not tell the whole story. It could be that the majority did not accept the idea that keeping both classes and regional synods was an impediment to being missional. Or was it rather the case that the majority did not dare to move from maintenance to mission? Did they not want to give up the ancient heirlooms of their polity or the freedom of their local staffs from centralized direction?

### **Observations, Possible Implications, and Questions for Consideration**

While the inner workings that led to the written reports and decisions of the general synod are a matter of speculation, a number of observations, possible implications, and questions arise that may be instructive as we consider the current RCA structure conversations.

Regarding the 2007 task force report, did the task force anticipate the result? How open was the “year and a half of listening”? Were voices that disagreed with the motivating assessment of the general secretary considered in full? If a process has a foregone conclusion among its leadership, that process cannot be as truly open as it desires or professes. That is an important question for all task forces whose memberships are appointed by general synod officers instead of being delegated by the “lower” assemblies themselves.

#### *Observation #1*

Though regional synods have lost their original purpose of superintendence in favor of program, which is redundant to the general synod, there is general resistance to restructuring them away. What the reports of both 2000 and 2007 lack is a deep and objective study of what regional synods offer, apart from program, that makes many in the RCA want to keep them. Is it true anymore that, as 1899 suggests, they offer an important “space” between the national (actually bi-national) and the local assemblies? The Regional Synod of Canada offers the obvious example (and at this moment the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which has no regional synods, is developing a parallel “space” for its Canadian congregations). The Regional Synod of New York provides a cultural space and a pattern of relationships that is very different than the rest of the RCA in both mission and experience. The Regional Synod of the Far West is just as “indigenous” to its local culture as are Albany and Great Lakes. Might these cultural differences be dealt with better in a different way than within the spaces of the regional synods?

#### *Observation #2*

Since the original vision for regional synods was cast in 1899, it seems there has always been difficulty in performing active and regular communal superintendence. If the reports of 2000 and 2007 both see the regional synods as program bodies, without regard to missional superintendence, we might conclude that regional synods do not do this, or at least they do not do it very well. If it is difficult, is it

unlikely? Impossible? Can oversight happen in community, without bishops? (Even episcopal churches find this challenging.) Is the Reformed ideal of the dynamic interplay of *episkopè* and *koinonia* a lost cause? How does a body that is meant to be “conversational” rather than “hierarchical” exert any necessary authority?<sup>24</sup>

### *Observation #3*

Regional synods are the least necessary assembly in the four-level structure, and therefore always open to question, as they have been in the RCA since 1820. There needs to be some assembly for the whole, like a general synod. There need to be classes in order to ordain and install and hold pastors and consistories accountable, as well as to assess money. There need to be classes as our “corporate bishops.” But do we need regional synods as corporate archbishops? That is not merely a joke. It suggests the regional synod’s purpose is only *derived*, indirect, and without any “original” functions. It is the least necessary of our assemblies, and thus always suspect.

### *Observation #4*

As the reports above show, it is easy to blame the regional synods for infringements on the classes, as in 2000, or for being redundant impediments to mission, as in 2007. This has happened again in the last five years, as various reports to General Synod have attributed some large part of the dissent, dysfunction, and division in the RCA to the four-level structure, for which the first solution remains discarding the regional synod. And yet, while regional synods certainly suffer the symptoms of this dysfunction, these reports have not yet demonstrated how the regional synods are a cause of it. Indeed, a similar dissent and division is developing in denominations without our four-level structure, like the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Undoubtedly, there are other observations and lessons to be learned, but with this history, your commission offers the General Synod context for your deliberations. We are an eschatological people, called to the future, not the past, and our history is to be neither a monument nor a prison. The Holy Spirit is always calling us to new visions and new realities. But this same Spirit is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, who turns the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. In that Spirit, we present this work to the glory of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Respectfully submitted,

Corstian Devos  
Katlyn DeVries  
Daniel Meeter

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<sup>24</sup> For this terminology see the Commission on History’s 2007 report, “A Historical Examination,” *op. cit.*

Steven D. Pierce, moderator  
Douglas Shepler  
David Zomer



## Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The General Synod's Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) has eight members, one representing each of the regional synods. Regional synods are required to nominate laypersons and ministers in alternating six-year cycles to ensure that the commission's membership includes at least three laypersons and three ministers. A broad knowledge of and background in the structure, government, and function of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) is required of all members, and legal training and experience is required of lay members. The responsibilities of the CJB are to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it in the RCA's Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 2).

Since the 2022 session of the General Synod, the CJB has not received any complaints, charges, or appeals that required any action on the commission's part. It did receive a communication from Ms. Joanne Lansing, which appeared intended to be an appeal. The commission determined that it was out of order and communicated its determination to Ms. Lansing. Thereafter Ms. Lansing asked the CJB to reconsider its determination. The CJB denied the request, and at the same time clarified its earlier determination by noting and correcting a typographical error in its earlier communication to her.

Communication was received from the Regional Synod of New York regarding the "Brooklyn Classis Appeal" section of the commission's report to the 2022 General Synod. It was discussed, and the commission agreed to place this communication in the commission's archives to be a voice for future commission members to consider should similar scenarios rise again.

The commission also received a communication from the General Synod's Commission on Race and Ethnicity regarding the antiracism policy that it had submitted to the 2022 General Synod. The CJB voted to adopt the policy in the form that appears in RE 22-1 (*Minutes of General Synod 2022*, pp. 235-236) and agreed that any orientation materials for new CJB members should include the text of the policy.

Respectfully submitted,  
Kendra Van Houten, moderator

## 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).

“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” (GSC Ends policy E-5).

### Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2022 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 the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are June Denny, Rolfi Elivo Lopez, Stephen Kim, Riana Shaw Robinson, Young Na, Earl James (secretary), Nathan Pyle (vice moderator), and Kelvin Spooner (moderator). Alina Coipel faithfully serves as 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 a fully multiracial and multicultural 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, General Synods adopted 19 such recommendations. The RCA website recounts that history at [www.rca.org/synod/statements](http://www.rca.org/synod/statements). See the “Racism” section.

For the first time in the history of the RCA, the 2022 General Synod adopted the following antiracism policy (*Minutes of General Synod 2022 [MGS]*, RE 22-1, pp. 235-236):

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).

CORE believes this is a significant and meaningful step forward for the denomination as we seek to become a denomination freed of racism. But, as always with meaningful steps, the temptation is to think we've arrived. We have not. The real work is implementing the antiracism policy into the different bodies and judicatories of the RCA. There are examples of this happening across the denomination. The Dismantling Racism Prayer Group continues to meet and provide a meaningful place of connection and prayer toward realizing our multicultural vision. Hope Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, developed its own antiracism policy using the policy adopted by the 2022 General Synod as a model. North Grand Rapids Classis has unanimously adopted the anti-racism policy as a guide to use in its context going forward. It was CORE's hope that the policy would result in this kind of transformative work.

While there are stories of the antiracism policy helping consistories and classes, we must honestly confess there is much more work needed. CORE examined the 2022 Consistorial Report Form prior to its completion, but what the partial results revealed was that 189 churches reported they had done nothing regarding antiracism training, 11 stated they had done little in regard to antiracism training, and only 2 reported they had done training. If the RCA is to become a multicultural denomination freed of racism, we need more churches to engage the existing policy, develop their own policies, and provide training for their leaders and congregation members in becoming people who are becoming antiracist.

Becoming a denomination freed of racism requires on-the-ground work of classes, consistories, and congregations. Our peculiar polity demands local engagement to realize our denominational goals. If the RCA had many of these “on-the-ground centers” engaged in antiracist work, it would propel the denomination toward our goals surrounding diversity and antiracism as these centers would produce stories, models, and resources for others. Our desire is present—both denominationally and locally. What is lacking are avenues to put our desires into practice.

The recently formed Office of Race Relations and Advocacy was staffed with the hire of Jeremy Simpson as the supervisor of Race Relations and Advocacy. Jeremy is currently part-time and is scheduled to become full-time in October 2023. CORE is excited to partner with Jeremy and believes that the Office of Race Relations and Advocacy will play an important role in helping to mobilize classes, consistories, and congregations.

CORE also celebrates the RCA’s continued commitment to the racial and ethnic councils. This past year, the Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council (NAIM) was reinstated (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-3, p. 238). [Note: the council will formalize its name with the development of its bylaws.] In April 2023, NAIM held a leadership retreat for training, and at that retreat they worked on drafting bylaws for the council. The racial and ethnic councils continue to improve upon our shared efforts to recognize each other, celebrate with one another, and bear witness to the hurts, oppression, and hope that each group carries through a joint worship in August 2022 and a joint racial and ethnic council meeting in January 2023. CORE thanks the denomination for continuing to fund these initiatives and wants to encourage their continuation.

### **CORE’s Goals for 2023**

The 2022 General Synod also passed a recommendation funding three Sankofa journeys and cohorts with the Institute for Healing Racism (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-2, p. 237). The goal was to report back to the 2023 General Synod on the effectiveness of these experiences, but this is a lofty goal. These experiences require significant time and energy to implement. As a result, there have not been any Sankofa journeys or Institute for Healing Racism cohorts yet. However, now that the Office of Race Relations and Advocacy is staffed, CORE has been in communication with Jeremy Simpson about organizing the journeys. Our hope is to see this recommendation fulfilled in 2023 and beyond.

CORE is working to collaborate with other commissions to embed the antiracism policy, its values, and its ethos into the whole of the RCA. We have currently begun this work with the Commission on Christian Worship, Commission on Church Order, and the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. Because the policy was not developed outside of our theological tradition, but is founded upon the Belhar Confession, there is clear opportunity for liturgy, educational materials, and *Book of Church Order* additions to help educate and train RCA members on being antiracist by leaning into this important confession. In the coming months, CORE will continue

to work with the other RCA commissions to increase and amplify the denomination's resources that can move us toward the vision of Revelation 7:9.

One additional goal CORE has for 2023 is to follow up with the church multiplication ministry of the RCA regarding the adopted recommendation of the 2022 General Synod to have new church plants embed the antiracism policy in their contexts (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-4, p. 239).

Finally, CORE extends the warmest thank you to June Denny, who served two full terms on this commission. May God continue to guide her in the next chapter of her ministry.

CORE prays it can be, and will be, a safe space for anyone who feels oppressed, discriminated against, wronged, or mistreated by a brother or sister in Christ because of race, ethnicity, or nationality. CORE is open to hear your story and address it accordingly. Please keep CORE and all ministries of the RCA in your prayers.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Kelvin A. Spooner, moderator

## Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (CoT) met via Zoom several times in September 2022 and for three days in person at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) in January 2023, and also worked in between sessions, on the eight topics that follow.

We wish to express our heartfelt thanks to Elizabeth Brand, director of General Synod operations, for stepping in to support our commission throughout our three-day, in-person meeting; as well as our thanks to Grace Ruiter, writer and former digital content coordinator for the Reformed Church in America (RCA), who supported our commission with attention, worthy advice, and care.

### 1. Breaking with Churches that Support War on Ukraine

General Synod 2022 instructed the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the General Synod Professorate, to “examine whether the conditions surrounding Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine meet the criteria for a declaration of *status confessionis*, a full break in communion, due to the gravity of the breach of faithfulness to the gospel by any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia’s (and Belarus’s) war against Ukraine, for report and recommendation to the 2023 General Synod” (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 2022*, ONB 22-9, pp. 124-125).

After the adoption of ONB 22-9, RCA general secretary Eddy Alemán addressed a portion of this mandate from General Synod verbally at the meeting of the World Council of Churches’ Central Committee on June 15-18, 2022. Afterward, Rev. Alemán worked with the Commission on Christian Unity and others, including Rev. George Montanari, to draft a formal letter to the World Council of Churches addressing motion ONB 22-9. The letter was sent to the World Council of Churches on November 16, 2022, and a response was received from the World Council of Churches’ general secretary Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay on January 13, 2023.

As the Russian Orthodox Church continues to support the war without qualification and provide theological justification, so the CoT strongly encourages the RCA to continue to call out the hypocrisy and disgrace of the Russian Orthodox Church, the illegitimacy of its claims to stand for Christian values, the criminality of commending sacrifice in the course of anti-Ukraine military duty as washing away all sin, and the extreme destruction that results from its identification of the Russian assault on Ukraine as a holy war.

General Synod 2022 asked the CoT to consider whether Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine meets the criteria for a *status confessionis*, a full break in communion with any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia’s (and Belarus’s) war against Ukraine, and to this end, we refer to an excellent article on *status confessionis* from the Encyclopedia of Christianity. The bibliography to this article provides

sources for further study and includes materials to help bodies decide about courses of action.<sup>25</sup>

In summary, *in statu confessionis* is a Latin term for the position of a witness who has been summoned to testify in a court. While the application of this term in the realm of Christian faith has shifted over the centuries, its roots stretch back to the exhortation of Jesus to acknowledge him (more literally, “speak the same as he does”), or agree with Jesus before others (Matthew 10:32 and Luke 12:8). In his letter to Galatians, the apostle Paul accused Peter of denying faith in Christ when Peter pulled back from the table shared by circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Greeks (Galatians 2:11-21). This episode is seen as a precursor that describes the conditions for *status confessionis*. This state is something beyond the moral discernment that Christ calls all followers to, as Christopher Morse puts it succinctly: “Unless one takes a position that everything is God, the question of what is not God and not of God remains unavoidable.”<sup>26</sup>

In the twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first to use the concept of *status confessionis* when he demonstrated how the Nazi government put the German church at risk of denying the gospel when it insisted on separating German Christians who were ethnically Jewish from German Christians who had no Jewish heritage. Bonhoeffer showed that when churches accommodated to political pressure by using race to separate and delegitimize Christians who were ethnically Jewish, they threatened the proclamation of the gospel of salvation by grace.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, churches can find themselves *in statu confessionis* when their words and actions contradict the gospel of grace in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Similar conditions were identified during apartheid in South Africa.

*Status confessionis* reveals that a Christian leader or community proclaimed something to be godly or holy (e.g., Peter’s backing away from Gentile followers of Jesus; the separation of Christians with ethnic Jewish heritage from Christians of Aryan heritage; separate communion tables for Black and White South Africans) when it is, in fact, the exact opposite: a denial of God’s saving power to unite all people in the body of Christ on earth.

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<sup>25</sup> Hinlicky, Paul R., “Status Confessionis,” in *Encyclopedia of Christianity Online*. Consulted online on March 12, 2023. [http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/2211-2685\\_eco\\_SI.75](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/2211-2685_eco_SI.75). First published online: 2011. First print edition: ISBN 9789004169678, 20080512.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Morse, “Chapter 3: Testing the Spirits Today,” *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1994), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer based his concept of *status confessionis* on the 16th century struggles of Lutheran churches pressured by the pope and Roman Emperor Charles V to accept Catholic rituals. See Michael P. DeJonge, “Bonhoeffer, status confessionis, and the Lutheran Tradition,” delivered at the 2017 Bonhoeffer Consultation at Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

The CoT affirms that it is vital for the church to be engaged in the world as a moral witness, and this entails judging both when to condemn, discredit, and break off ties, as well as how best to employ its ministry of reconciliation as a mediator of political conflict in society. This discernment is especially important in the face of the potentially existential political pressure that the Russian Orthodox Church may face. Declaring a body to be *in status confessionis*, in a full break in communion, is one in an array of tools that may be helpful in these horrific circumstances. Your commission stands ready to further explore options along with the chief ecumenical officer and the Commission on Christian Unity.

In conclusion, we note the following:

- It is hard to name a crime that is not a significant and intentional feature of Russia's war effort. In its unprovoked "Special Military Operation," the Russian Federation has systematically driven a massive program of kidnapping, rape, torture, murder, genocide, theft, and destruction of civilian infrastructure. Nuclear devastation has been repeatedly threatened. Entire cities have been obliterated, and over eight million refugees have fled their homeland.<sup>28</sup>
- The Russian Orthodox Church has been complicit with the Putin regime in support of its destruction of the people and country of Ukraine. Church leader Patriarch Kirill has stated that "sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins," and has painted Russia's assault on Ukraine as a holy war.<sup>29</sup>
- The Biden administration formally concluded that Russia has committed "crimes against humanity" during its nearly year-long invasion of Ukraine. U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, a former prosecutor, said at the Munich Security Conference on February 18, 2023: "In the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine we have examined the evidence, we know the legal standards, and there is no doubt: these are crimes against humanity."<sup>30</sup>
- The International Criminal Court in The Hague has indicted the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and children's commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>, updated January 31, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> The Center for European Policy Analysis, <https://cepa.org/article/an-unorthodox-russian-vision-of-heaven-and-hell/>, January 10, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Trevor Hunnicutt, "U.S. declares Russia committed 'crimes against humanity' in Ukraine," Reuters, February 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-declares-russia-committed-crimes-against-humanity-ukraine-2023-02-18/>

<sup>31</sup> Isobel Koshiw, "Putin's alleged war crimes: who are the Ukrainian children being taken by Russia?" *The Guardian*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/17/vladimir-putin-war-crimes-icc-arrest-warrant-ukraine-children>



## 2. Commission Membership

Of all the General Synod commissions, the Commission on Theology has the most complex rules for selecting its members. The commission is concerned about the lack of representation of women among its members and has worked with a representative on the Commission on Nominations and with the Commission on Church Order to consider how we might encourage candidates to submit a profile form who are ordained as ministers of Word and sacrament, but who serve in specialized ministry and not necessarily as pastors of congregations. To that end, we submit the following recommendation:

### **TH 23-1**

**To adopt the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod, *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9a (2022 ed., p. 119), for recommendation to General Synod 2024 for final approval:**

**...The membership shall include two persons from among the Reformed Church seminary faculties, two persons from among the faculties of the Reformed church colleges, three ~~pastors~~ Ministers of Word and Sacrament (at least one of whom serves a local church, when possible), and at least two ~~laypersons~~ people who do not hold the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.**

Reasons:

- The word “pastor” can be ambiguous depending on context. Changing the language to minister of Word and sacrament makes it clearer that this provision is intended to include specialized ministers.
- The word “laypersons” is also ambiguous depending upon context.
- Commissioned pastors fit into the category of those who do not hold the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

## 3. Orientation to the CoT

The commission revised a document originally created by Laird Edman, former CoT moderator, to introduce new members to the work of the CoT and expectations of members. This document continues to be a helpful resource, both for recruiting by the Commission on Nominations and for orientation of new members.

## 4. NRSVUE Translation

RCA communication staff members asked for advice about the new edition of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, called the NRSV Updated Edition or NRSVUE. The CoT provided staff with preliminary advice from RCA scholars and notified the Commission on Christian Worship (CCW) that the *Book of Church Order* includes such questions in its purview. The CCW agreed, and CoT member Steve

Bouma-Prediger agreed to work with the CCW on their study of the NRSVUE, if CCW desires a CoT liaison.

## **5. Election of Moderator**

The commission appointed the Rev. James Brumm to serve as moderator of the Commission on Theology from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024.

## **6. Bible Study Resources for publication on Faithward**

In preparation for responding to the RCA communication department's request for the commission to provide Bible study resources for the website Faithward ([www.faithward.org](http://www.faithward.org)), the commission looked at Faithward and how resources are presented. Commission members agreed to contribute Bible study resources. Each suggestion will include a citation for the source, an introductory paragraph that explains what it's about, who it's geared for, and what's especially helpful about it. To further the RCA's antiracism policy (see item below), the commission agreed whenever possible to focus on resources from and about members of underrepresented groups and especially on sources that embrace antiracism.

## **7. RCA Antiracism Policy**

The commission addressed the request from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) to consider how the CoT will engage with the RCA antiracism policy. When the commission is asked to recommend resources, members have committed to providing resources that include underrepresented groups and resources that are focused on antiracism. Each time the commission meets in person, members pledge to review the policy and ensure that the policy is being used to guide the life and work of the commission. To ensure the antiracism policy remains top-of-mind, the commission plans, twice a year, in between regular commission meetings, to watch a movie or public address on this topic, discuss the experience together, and then adopt a spiritual practice that will help inform commission members and deepen our understanding. The commission will also update the introduction to the CoT's orientation document to include elements of the antiracism policy and how the CoT plans to engage.

## **8. Reviewing "Affirmed and Celebrated"**

During the summer of 2022, CoT members reviewed the commission's previous statements on human sexuality and re-read the paper that was adopted by the Classis of New Brunswick and referred to our commission in 2021.

At the commission's September meeting, members agreed upon an approach to our review. Because the churches and members of the RCA hold a wide range of beliefs about human sexuality, members of our commission reviewed chapters of the paper from their diverse theological perspectives, working in pairs. We chose a framework: Each chapter review would summarize the chapter's main argument and then state affirmations, concerns, and add additional reflections.

In our January meeting, the whole commission discussed each chapter review and summarized the commission's findings. Our goal was to speak with one voice only in areas of full agreement and otherwise to model a process of understanding, clarifying, and differentiating in a climate of respectful curiosity. The result of our discussions follows, in the report titled "Together in Difference: A report on the doctrinal soundness of the paper 'Affirmed and Celebrated,' adopted by the Classis of New Brunswick, in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture."

As our meeting closed, members voiced their concern that no one who took part in our discussions identified as a member of the LGBTQIA community. We felt uncomfortable speaking about people whose lives and histories we only understood in part. We wondered about holding additional discussions; however, we decided that in order to present a complete report to General Synod 2023, additional voices could be welcomed into the conversation by inviting responses from across the church. To this end, we voted to send the following recommendation to General Synod 2023.

**TH 23-2**

**To instruct the general secretary to make the paper "Together in Difference" available to all classes, consistories, and assemblies of the RCA, and to invite them to hold discussions and write responses; and further,**

**To encourage church bodies to respond to the following question: "How do you live together in difference when it comes to questions of human sexuality?" In particular, the commission wishes to collect stories and organizing principles, such as bylaws, that promote unity, purity, and peace among classes, consistories, and assemblies who permit and enable differences in practices and interpretations; and further,**

**To request that such responses be sent via email to the next moderator of the Commission on Theology, Rev. James Hart Brumm, at [jhartbrumm@aol.com](mailto:jhartbrumm@aol.com) with the subject line: Together in Difference, no later than January 1, 2024.**

Reasons:

- Within a Reformed understanding of Scripture, different interpretations of Scripture may support different perspectives about human sexuality, so practicing respectful discussion across differences promotes unity, purity, and peace.
- Living with difference is a struggle for many. Yet numerous bodies within the RCA permit differences in interpretation and practice when it comes to human sexuality and have developed deep experience in navigating these waters over the course of years. The commission encourages them to share their experiences, best practices, and advice, even as we would seek to review their

input with commissions including the Commission on Christian Unity and the Commission on Church Order.

- Theology literally means “God-talk,” and all Christians are encouraged to formulate their perspectives on human sexuality by reflecting on Scripture in community.
- The role of the CoT is to study theological matters arising in the church.

## **TOGETHER IN DIFFERENCE:**

### **A REPORT ON THE DOCTRINAL SOUNDNESS OF THE PAPER “AFFIRMED AND CELEBRATED,” ADOPTED BY THE CLASSIS OF NEW BRUNSWICK, IN THE CONTEXT OF A REFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE.**

In 2021, in response to an overture from the Classis of New Brunswick, the General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Theology to review the paper, “Affirmed and Celebrated,” prepared by a committee of and adopted by the Classis of New Brunswick, with an eye as to the paper’s doctrinal soundness in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture, and to report on its findings to the 2023 General Synod (*MGS 2021*, pp. 112-113, ONB 21-2).

Your commission studied and discussed the “Affirmed and Celebrated”<sup>32</sup> paper at length and we submit this report in fulfillment of General Synod’s directive. We seek to emphasize the specific instructions given to review the paper, “with an eye as to the doctrinal soundness in the context of a Reformed understanding of Scripture.” Therefore, in this report, your commission is not seeking to speak to the final conclusions of the paper, but rather to the theological soundness of its understanding and use of Scripture.

It should also be noted that your commission was certainly not in unanimous agreement on the conclusions of the paper nor the various points. Yet, even with this lack of unanimity, we sought to find a way to engage with this paper in a significant and meaningful way. It is our desire that this report might help to serve as a model for the church as we gather in ministry across differences.

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<sup>32</sup> Rev. David Groeneveld (chair), “Affirmed and Celebrated, A Reformed Theology of Inclusion: Report of the Ad Hoc Theology Committee of the Classis of New Brunswick in the Reformed Church in America, 2019.” As noted in *MGS 2021*, p. 112, the paper “Affirmed and Celebrated” was made available as an appendix to the workbook for the 2021 General Synod. As indicated in the reasons for Overture 2, a full copy of the paper may be available from the Classis of New Brunswick or the General Synod’s Commission on Theology. Accessed on March 5, 2023, <https://www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Appendix-Affirmed-and-Celebrated-2019.pdf>.

## About Our Method

Because the churches and members of the RCA hold a wide range of beliefs about human sexuality, members of our commission reviewed chapters of the paper from their diverse theological perspectives, working in pairs. We chose a framework: Each review would summarize the chapter's main argument, state affirmations and concerns, and add reflections. Then the whole commission met in person for three days to discuss each chapter review and summarize its findings. Our goal was to speak with one voice only in areas of full agreement and otherwise to model a process of understanding, clarifying, and differentiating in a climate of respectful curiosity.

## Goal of the Original Paper

To begin, we note that "Affirmed and Celebrated," henceforth referred to as "the paper," begins with an acknowledgement of the differences of view within the church, and that churches and classes must fulfill their responsibilities for discernment in their own context about what life in the church will look like for our LGBTQ siblings (p. 4). Thus, the classis never intended this paper to be adopted by the General Synod and to become a synodical *ex cathedra* declaration for the entire Reformed Church. The classis explains that their work had been "fueled by [their] faithful response to repeated ecclesial litigation in the Reformed Church in America against [their] classis and [their] allies in the denomination" (p. 50). Therefore, the paper is a plea to allow our ecclesiology to work by encouraging the local bodies of the church to further engage in theological reflection.

The following sections offer affirmations, concerns, and concluding reflections pertaining to each chapter.

## Reformed Understanding of Scripture

The first major movement of the paper in chapter 2 is to articulate the foundational understanding of Scripture on which the paper will proceed.

### *Affirmations*

There are many things in chapter 2 that your commission affirms. We affirm the universality of revelation. Revelation is always an action of God; it is never a natural course of the cosmos. However, we cannot limit God's self-revelation to be contained only in the words found in the Scriptures. Which is not to say that there are other things that are equal to Scripture, but, as John Calvin notes, "wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some

sparks of his glory.”<sup>33</sup> This is also reflected in the Belgic Confession in the first way in which we know God as the “universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book.”<sup>34</sup>

Regarding the interpretation of Scripture, chapter 2 makes four main points: the foundational and central importance of the Holy Spirit to guide our interpretations; the importance of looking to the historical, cultural, and literary contexts; the importance of taking the whole witness of Scripture into view; and the importance of communal discernment. The Spirit is the one who illumines the Scriptures to us by which means God can speak to us. The way in which God reveals Godself, however, is not immediate, but rather through history. As Christians in the Reformed tradition, we affirm that God worked in and with the writers and the particularities of the respective audiences. To faithfully understand the Scriptures, we must also seek to view them in the context in which God has chosen to reveal Godself in this way. And we believe that the Spirit works not only in the interpretation of Scripture but also in the inspiration of the various texts through the centuries. As such, we must consider the entire arc of the Scriptural witness in our understanding. Finally, your commission affirms the importance of discernment in community. Private interpretations of Scripture come with great risks, and this is why the Reformed *gather* to seek the leading of God in making decisions. We trust that the Spirit speaks most clearly within the gathered community. This is not to say that individuals do not read and seek to understand Scripture; however, the individual and the communal always seek to reinforce one another.

### Concerns

Along with these affirmations, your commission also has some concerns. Sections 1–4 of chapter 2 address revelation and the nature of revelation. These could use additional clarity and specificity, especially in the relationship between general and special revelation. The categories of general and special revelation are artificial, imposed by theologians to make a point, rather than something that grows out of the biblical witness itself. Nevertheless, these categories are used in the Belgic Confession of Faith and by influential theologians in the Reformed tradition. The paper notes that “God also communicates through special revelation.”<sup>35</sup> While not inaccurate, this may carry the connotation that the Scriptures are equal to “stars hanging in the sky, the towering Mountains and flowing streams”<sup>36</sup> as well as “science, culture, art, literature, the movements of history, and personal experience.” Not only does the Belgic Confession confess that “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word,”<sup>37</sup> but the lack of this affirmation is problematic from a historical perspective. It was, essentially, the German Christian movement that embraced national socialism as the result of Divine Providence

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<sup>33</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.5.1.

<sup>34</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 2

<sup>35</sup> “Affirmed and Celebrated,” 2.3.

<sup>36</sup> “Affirmed and Celebrated,” 2.2.

<sup>37</sup> Belgic, Art. 2.

shown in the movements of history.<sup>38</sup> Or we can look to national history in the United States of America and the idea of manifest destiny that drove the U.S. to colonize and displace native populations through the entire width of the continent because it was evident, to them, that God desired this. This is not to say that God cannot reveal God's purposes in the areas identified in the paper, but a distinction must be made between this kind of a general/universal revelation and a special/particular revelation. Special/particular revelation needs to carry more weight than the things that surround us. Truly, "we live by the revelation of God to Israel and in Christ. This is for us the revelation, the self-disclosure of God. What we know about other revelations can only confirm our conviction that here the deepest word has been spoken."<sup>39</sup> And at the same time, we cannot ignore the advancements in understanding that we have gained. For instance, we no longer believe demons live in the water or that the sky is a solid dome holding back the water in the sky. We understand that the earth does in fact revolve around the sun as one of many other planets. Nevertheless, these corrections do not require that we jettison the Scriptures. The difficult task of loving God with our hearts and minds in the modern world is that it is neither faithful for us to ignore science nor to ignore the Scriptures. We are called to hold together advances in human understanding and the enduring self-revelation of God.

### *Concluding Reflection*

In the final analysis, despite the weak points noted above, this chapter presents a rich doctrine of Scripture and honors Scripture for what it is and what it claims about itself without either relativizing Scripture or eternalizing it in some idolatrous manner. While additional clarity could be given specific to the use of the term "revelation," the primacy of Jesus Christ as the Word of God, and the Scriptures as the Word of God in a way that other forms of divine self-revelation are not, the essence of what is stated about Scripture and its interpretation is, overall, consistent with the Reformed tradition.

### **Morality, Theology, and Scripture**

Three terms are important in chapter 3: covenant, culture, and community. The paper quotes from "Church and Scripture," *Church Speaks, Vol. II*, to state that the Scriptures do not speak of moral rules for all times and places, but that people are to live out their lives in Christ in concert with the particular time and place in which they live. The authors recognize that not all Christian communities would agree with their results. "God's call to moral life comes to individuals and communities living in specific cultural contexts, therefore context shapes our moral decisions" (p. 11), as guided by the community's Reformed interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, the

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<sup>38</sup> See Karel Blei, *Karl Barth: Theologian in the Tempest of Time*, trans. Allan J. Janssen (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2021), 57–63.

<sup>39</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, Revised. Trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 82.

authors include personal experiences of people in the churches as a component of their affirmation that LGBTQ people are not broken nor inherently sinful.

### *Affirmations*

The argument of chapter 3 is consistent with a Reformed understanding of Scripture and Reformed theology: “Moral discernment is the process of seeking God’s revelation and guidance as to what, given our shifting cultural context, is right and good for the life to which we have been called.”<sup>40</sup> This leads us into the principle that Scripture’s authority is not rule-based but in guiding principles given through the work of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit moves in community, in discussion among Christians who have honest disagreements about an issue, seeking to come to common understandings. Some specific moral rules found in the Bible—such as 1 Corinthians 8, which essentially says idols have no power, and therefore meat sacrificed to idols may be eaten unless it makes one’s neighbor uncomfortable—may be authoritative as examples or illustrations rather than prescriptions. Further, an individual cannot decide the proper interpretation of a scriptural passage and expect to apply it to everyone else.

### *Concerns*

Some commission members felt there is a danger that culture is being given too much sway in this chapter. It isn’t that culture is unimportant, or that all moral rules are absolute, but there seems to be an overarching de-emphasis on moral rules in favor of an emphasis on cultural context. Moral descriptions are also dependent on what Scripture says, and the Bible should also shape our moral decisions. Sometimes, what makes our decision moral is a direct correspondence to specific moral rules found in a biblical text. When the paper says, “we have felt and seen the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of LGBTQ people...” it is in danger of using the Holy Spirit as an excuse for moral relativism.

### *Concluding Reflection*

Chapter 3 says that Scripture is authoritative in terms of ethical principles that were used in explaining their cultural context, but the paper doesn’t give us examples of those principles in chapter 3. That creates a disconnect that weakens the argument. The flow of the chapter reviews routine Reformed points of ethical life, and then, in the final section, seems to set these all aside.

## **Theological Account of the Classical Position**

Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapter to further the argument of the paper. This chapter argues that disagreement among Reformed Christians about same-sex relationships arises not only from differences in biblical interpretation but also from different beliefs about how God’s authority is upheld in matters of personal identity.

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<sup>40</sup> “Affirmed and Celebrated,” p. 12.



Two positions comprise the central argument of this chapter. First, chapter 4 argues that personal identity, including sexual and gender identity, is revealed in an intimate relationship between a person and God; it is not determined by the authority of the church. Second, chapter 4 argues the position that Christ's ethical principles for holy living are the basis for Christian sexual ethics today.

### *Affirmations*

Your commission affirms several components of chapter 4. First is the acknowledgement that all people are made in God's image and thus should be treated with respect and care. This is not something that should be debatable, regardless of how one finally concludes the exact role of LGBTQ people in the church. Your commission affirms that personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship with God. Your commission affirms that there is a distinction between ethical principles and ethical rules. For instance, levirate marriage (from the Latin word *levir*, "brother-in-law") designates the duty of a man to marry the sonless widow of his deceased brother, in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, where the brother-in-law lived in an undivided inheritance with the deceased husband of the widow. At the time the Scripture was written, this was certainly an ethical rule, though we do not understand this to be binding into today. Furthermore, the Bible does not speak to many sexual injustices and abuses that we experience today. The Bible is limited in addressing every modern sexual or ethical dilemma. Rather, Christ's ethical principles for holy living should be the basis for Christian sexual ethics today: justice, mercy, forgiveness, respect, mutuality. Your commission also affirms that we reflect God's love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability.

### *Concerns*

Chapter 4 speaks to the proponents who restrict marriage to heterosexual relationships and identifies this position as "the RCA's position." However, this cannot be said to be the position of the RCA because, among other things, this is not a matter of discipline in the RCA according to the *Book of Church Order*.

Your commission thinks that clarity is needed in the statement, "personal identity is revealed in an intimate relationship with God" since this is different from stating that "personal identity is determined by God." We recommend further study around the claim that the "Bible affirms that God has primary authority over gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the paper does not address what is commanded, what is prohibited, and why.

While chapter 4 cites David Myers and Letha Scanzoni to explain that research indicates that lesbian, bisexual, and gay orientations are most likely not matters of pathology, choice, or rearing, we are also concerned that this paper does not address

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<sup>41</sup> "Affirmed and Celebrated," 4.1

the fact that biological roots of sexual orientation revolve around questions of science that remain contested:

- a. Brain Research: Some parts of gay men's brains look more like those same parts in straight women than in straight men; and in lesbian women, those brain regions look more like those of straight men than like those of straight women.
- b. Body Research: Research has shown differences between gay people and straight people regarding these kinds of measurements as well, suggesting again that gay people might have been exposed to hormone levels different than straight people at a critical period of development in the womb.

Chapter 4 makes the claim that "when two people cultivate these qualities with one another, they become sacramental presences to one another."<sup>42</sup> While we understand that "sacrament" and "sacramental" are not necessarily the same thing, the term introduces confusion because in our tradition we use the word "sacrament" in a more particular and more limited way. And since marriage is not a sacrament in the Reformed tradition, the use of this term is confusing, at best.

There are also claims that are asserted without evidence and which are unproven:

*Imago Dei* means the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God... God is male, female, transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer...we must acknowledge that God's plan for each of us is unlike God's plan for any other person.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, this section raises several unnecessary issues.

### *Concluding Reflection*

We believe there could be more discussion of the relational aspect of same-sex relations, including male-male rape, which is condemned in Genesis 19, and problems with power differentials, as when people in positions of power, including clergy and supervisors, pressure people with more limited power in the relationship, such as congregants and subordinates, into unwanted sexual relations. Questions such as what is moral and how it is differentiated from what is cultural in Leviticus 18-20 could be considered; for example, male-male sex that is called abomination because it is connected to idolatry of ritual cult prostitution. The paper might also explore the definition and nature of "natural" and "unnatural," as it is critical to obtaining an understanding of the cultural context of the texts, e.g., long hair in 1 Corinthians 11:14. Finally, since the term "homosexuality" did not appear in Bible translations until mid-twentieth century, further discussion of the root terms used in the Bible (*arsenokaitai*, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11) must be understood in light of cultural context. The term translated "practicing homosexuals" refers to adult males who indulged in

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<sup>42</sup> "Affirmed and Celebrated," 4.2.c.

<sup>43</sup> "Affirmed and Celebrated," p. 16.

homosexual practices with boys, which Reformed Christians today understand as contrary to Christ's ethical principles for holy living.

### **The Whole of Scripture Supports the Classical Position**

The central argument of chapter 5 seeks to assert that Scripture, taken as a whole, with a focus on ethical principles, supports the position of the Classis of New Brunswick. Again, the goal of the commission's work was not to determine whether we agree with the ultimate position that the paper arrives at, but rather, to examine the paper's use and understanding of Scripture. As a result, the content of this chapter becomes more contentious, but your commission will strive to remain focused on its direction.

#### *Affirmations*

We affirm several aspects of chapter 5. First, chapter 5 affirms that the *imago Dei* refers to more than procreation. That is, human beings are not partial bearers of the *imago Dei* who only find the fullness of the *imago Dei* in the procreative act. Truly, all people have been created in the image of God, whether they find themselves in a marital union or not. The chapter affirms that the Reformed tradition today does not embrace complementarianism, which is the belief that God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function, designating the role of male headship or leadership in both home and church.<sup>44</sup>

While all people are created equally in the image of God, and are all equally bearers of the *imago Dei*, we affirm that we are also created to be social. In the second creation narrative we read God reflecting on the creation of Adam: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). And there are different types of sociality, of which intimacy is one form, and the paper rightly points out that most biblical descriptions of intimacy do not deal solely with sexual activity. We also affirm the strong and clear statement, "A same-sex couple, when encouraged and supported in a lifelong commitment, can become an 'extraordinary force' for good in God's world."<sup>45</sup>

Finally, we affirm the chapter's view of the understanding of the Bible as dynamic. That is, God remains faithful even amid our changing encounters with God's Word throughout history.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> General Synod affirmed the finding that Holy Scripture does not bar women from Ordination in "Office of the Stated Clerk of the Reformed Church in America, Report on the Ordination of Women, Submitted to Consistories for Study and Report in June 1957."

<sup>45</sup> "Affirmed and Celebrated," p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 148.

## *Concerns*

Your commission also has several concerns. While the New Testament is central for Christians in that it most clearly bears witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, chapter 5 too quickly claims that Old Testament texts are “not determinative.”<sup>47</sup> Related to this, we are concerned by the claim of this chapter that “to reach back to an ancient text that has been corrected by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is theologically irresponsible.”<sup>48</sup> This is dangerously close to supersession: The New Testament doesn’t supersede more ancient texts, but rather Jesus Christ fulfills the ancient law. In this, the New Testament is yet a further unfolding rather than a replacement of Hebrew Scripture.

While we affirm that the Reformed tradition doesn’t teach complementarianism and that the *imago Dei* is not dependent on procreation, and while we fully affirm the importance of the unitive end of marriage, we cannot exclude the procreative end. Of course, there are different ways in which the procreative end can be understood. After all, there are heterosexual marriages that do not produce children and it is erroneous to claim that these marriages are only partial. Finally, while this section is about how the whole of Scripture supports the classical position, it does not address the Levitical or Pauline texts that refer to homosexuality. It would be helpful for the paper to address how these texts fit into the theme that the paper presents.

## *Concluding Reflection*

Clearly, we need to be careful about how we grow and alter our means of interpretation to avoid slipping into heresy. What does it mean to be continually re-evaluating our traditions of biblical interpretation? How can that be comforting? What is disconcerting or problematic about that?

## **Ethical Critique of the RCA Position**

The central argument of chapter 6 is that the RCA errs gravely by preventing its churches and ministers from celebrating same-sex marriages and by disciplining same-sex loving people. The paper contends that the RCA fails to consider whether these are unjust, cause harm, and deny the principle of justification by faith.

## *Affirmations*

We affirm the recognition that Jesus is silent about sexual orientation. Indeed, the concept of sexual orientation is a modern concept, and we do not want to uncritically project a modern concept onto an ancient text. We also affirm the chapter’s assertion that if a precept is just, it should apply to all people equally. In this vein, we affirm the assertion that celibacy is not to be compelled by church or society but instead celibacy is understood to be a gift from God. The paper

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<sup>47</sup> “Affirmed and Celebrated,” p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> “Affirmed and Celebrated,” p. 19.

acknowledges that the stories of faithful LGBTQ Christians are often a powerful prompt for people to reconsider their less than affirming views on LGBTQ sexuality. One topic that comes to the forefront of our discussions about human sexuality is discipline. The paper doesn't dismiss discipline, but rather, opposes discipline that does not produce further growth in the fruit of the spirit. Finally, this paper includes a powerful summary from the Classis Grand Rapids East of the Christian Reformed Church in North America of the ways in which the church hurts faithful LGBTQ people and their allies. Regardless of one's conclusion on the rightness of same-sex marriage, these must be given serious and careful attention.

### *Concerns*

We are concerned with the questionable use of Pauline theology. For example, in what sense is the cross of Christ an ethical rule? Related to this, the paper asserts that "we must blind ourselves to the requirements of law and tradition. ... Blindly we follow Jesus."<sup>49</sup> Do we blind ourselves to law and tradition? Or are we to reject them, or at least their legalistic forms? Similarly, do we blindly follow Jesus? Or do we follow Jesus with our eyes wide open, "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2)? Finally, the paper is unclear about whether it is speaking of ethical rules or principles. Language earlier in the paper makes a distinction between moral rules and ethical principles, and referring to ethical rules mixes the terminology.

### *Concluding Reflection*

The focus on theological and biblical issues of ecclesiastical discipline that results in damage to the psychological well-being of the people of God is notable. To suggest to the denomination that it must consider the benefits and difficulties of such ecclesiastical discipline and neglect significant injury is further commendable. However, the notion of apologizing and reconciliation depends on reparation and reparative justice that is not clearly fleshed out in the document. An additional concern is the ethic around the ethical rule and moral principles of theological issues such as the cross of Christ.

### **Texts Traditionally Used to Condemn Homosexuality**

Chapter 7 discusses some biblical texts that traditionally have been used to condemn homosexual conduct. For each passage, the chapter offers two perspectives. The first perspective is one that argues all homosexual activities are contrary to Scripture and to be condemned. The second is the perspective of the authors of the paper. The second perspective doesn't rely on individual verses but instead emphasizes a framework that claims to see an ever-widening circle of love as part of God's plan for salvation. In particular, the second viewpoint emphasizes that the cultural context of the biblical passages needs to play an important role in interpretation. The authors point out that the RCA prohibited the ordination of women for much of its history

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<sup>49</sup> "Affirmed and Celebrated," p. 28.

but came to recognize that the scriptural passages to support the view needed to be examined considering the culture of the early church. Several passages from the Old Testament that have been used to condemn homosexuality are examined from the point of view of Perspective One versus Perspective Two.

### *Affirmations*

Chapter 7 relies on the document, “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal,” a report of the Commission on Theology to General Synod of 1978, found in *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America, 1954-1984*, for most of the statements that reflect Perspective One. Therefore, the paper’s authors are not setting up extreme views to represent the first perspective. In several of the biblical passages, they point out that the focus is not homosexuality, but violence or cultic activities. A key example is Genesis 19 about Sodom and its destruction. The men of Sodom are violent, failing to respond with traditional hospitality to strangers by seeking to rape the men (angels) who reside with Lot. Perspective Two notes that later prophets affirm this passage as focusing on inhospitality as the sin of Sodom. Along with Genesis 19, Judges 19 is mentioned, in which the men of Gibeah destroy a woman in a way that is similar to the one in which the men of Sodom threaten the visitors from God.<sup>50</sup> We affirm that the Genesis 19 passage cannot be used to justify a theological position that condemns mutually supportive same-sex relationships. We affirm that Genesis 19 and Judges 19 condemn the use of sexuality to harm and destroy any person.

Several passages that condemn temple prostitution are dealt with briefly. Again, the focus is not homosexuality because female temple prostitution (presumably, a distorted form of heterosexuality) is also condemned.

### *Concerns*

The Levitical and Romans texts are the most challenging because many questions about them remain. First, is something to be rejected simply because it is part of the Holiness code? Or are we to compare regulations against the Decalogue to seek to understand their enduring value? It is true that much of Old Testament law is set aside in our Reformed Christian faith. And other parts (such as the Decalogue or “Ten Commandments”) are not. We must be careful when trying to carefully parse out the distinction between the two lest we insist on something that ought to be set aside or set aside something that ought to be maintained. We must have a clear methodology in doing this rather than what feels right to any one of us. Indeed, the 1978 Commission on Theology report that identifies the Levitical passages with cultic prostitution also notes that “examination of the Leviticus texts in their contexts

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<sup>50</sup> God does not destroy Gibeah, but the aftermath of the story involves the almost destruction of the Tribe of Benjamin and a solution for the Benjamite men to find wives that would not meet modern sensibilities. See Judges 21:16-25.

indicates, however, that they cannot be dismissed solely as the expression of a cultic bias which no longer has relevance” (p. 246).

For the Romans passage, the referent of “those who suppress truth” is not entirely clear. The paper asserts that “historians” (apparently as a group) affirm a specific and narrower referent. However, the source cited is a single theologian and historian, Neil Elliot, *Arrogance of Nations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Indeed, literary evidence within the text itself does not identify that the sole (or even primary) referent was the Roman emperor and the elements of empire that operationalize the power of empire. Related to this, it would have been helpful for chapter 5 to have addressed how to identify ancient mores/cultural traditions that are no longer valid. The chapter identifies some specific ones but doesn’t explain how to make that determination. This is a hermeneutical question: on what basis do we decide what is central and enduring, and what is time-bound?

### *Concluding Reflection*

The basic argument of the section is that the ancient world did not know of in-born sexual orientation or think of homosexual couples as involved in loving and consenting relationships. We cannot make ethical decisions today based on outmoded models of human nature that were prevalent thousands of years in the past. Your commission emphasizes that the ancient Mediterranean world was more diverse than indicated in the paper. Analysis of these texts and their historical context is not as easy as just reading the words on the page, nor just dismissing them as cultural references.

We might also ask what “natural” and “unnatural,” in terms of sexual relationships, mean today. That is, does “natural” categorically mean heterosexual, male-female, relationships in all cases? Does “unnatural” refer to a heterosexual person who engages in homosexual behavior? Now that science acknowledges a greater range of inborn sexuality than heterosexuality, for a person who is homosexual, wouldn’t it be unnatural for them to engage in heterosexual behavior?

### **Overall Conclusions**

Your commission affirms that two or more positions or perspectives can both be consistent with a Reformed understanding of Scripture and yet arrive at different conclusions. And we confess that this affirmation has caused unease among our commission members, especially those who wish to proclaim a monolithic theology of human sexuality and prescriptive moral guidance. These members felt that the report reflects well on the sound and unsound aspects of the original paper, yet by not articulating an alternate view to the one expounded in the original “Affirmed and Celebrated” paper, they are concerned the commission’s report could damage individual churches. For this reason, the commission urgently recommends not only that church bodies read and comment on this report but that they also share their experience with how they manage to live together in difference when it comes to human sexuality.

The commission has determined that any attempt to provide alternative perspectives would fall outside General Synod's instruction as well as our time restrictions. And in keeping with requests from concerned members, we list below several sources of alternative points of view that have been shared across the RCA.

The commission notes that, because of serious flaws that can continue to cause harm, the following papers are no longer available online as stand-alone files, but only within the *Minutes of General Synod*:

- RCA, "Homosexuality: Seeking the Guidance of the Church"
- RCA, the 1978 General Synod Report of the Theological Commission: "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal"
- RCA, 1979 General Synod Report of the Commission on Theology: "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual"

General Synod 2016 adopted the following recommendation that removed those papers as stand-alone files from the RCA's online presence:

R 16-44

To direct the General Synod Council to remove all statements on the website supporting the use of reorientation/reparative therapy and to declare that the RCA does not support the use of reorientation/reparative therapy [that is, a kind of pseudo-therapy, now firmly discredited by all major psychological authorities, that sought to change people with homosexual orientations into well-adjusted heterosexuals] but does affirm the power of the Holy Spirit to transform all lives. (ADOPTED) (explanation added)<sup>51</sup>

With the passing of time, more disturbing and false statements can be recognized in those earlier papers, including, in the 1978 paper, a reference to people with restricted mental capacities as reflecting fallen nature.

People who are searching for alternatives to the views expressed in "Affirmed and Celebrated" may wish to review the Great Lakes Catechism in the Appendix to the *Minutes of General Synod 2018*.<sup>52</sup> But we can only recommend that resource with the proviso that General Synod 2018 commended that paper to the CoT: "for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry" (*MGS 2018*, p. 148).

However, the CoT found such serious flaws in the reasoning and use of the Bible in the Great Lakes Catechism that even though the CoT recommended the document as a teaching tool, General Synod 2018 disagreed with the CoT's recommendation and failed to assert that this document had any use at all. So, along with that

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<sup>51</sup> *MGS 2016*, p. 233, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2016MGS-Complete.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> *MGS 2018*, pp. 156-173, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2018MGS-Complete.pdf>



document, one needs to also consider the CoT's report on commendations and limitations of the Great Lakes Catechism, "Of Catechisms and Teaching Tools: The Response of the Commission on Theology to the 'Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality.'" Readers will note that the 2019 report employs the same overall approach as the current report, "Together in Difference," as this commission has continued with the listing of affirmations and concerns.<sup>53</sup>

To write a definitive theology of human sexuality is a wonderful goal. Yet so many flawed attempts show that this is an overwhelming project, and such is not the instruction from General Synod 2022 nor the goal of this commission's current endeavor. While much more could be said about this "Affirmed and Celebrated" paper that has been adopted by the Classis of New Brunswick, your commission hopes that this review will be helpful in further analysis. We encourage the Classis of New Brunswick to consider our suggestions. And we encourage others to take our affirmations and concerns into account when considering how to engage with our LGBTQ siblings in the church.

Respectfully submitted,  
Elizabeth Estes, moderator

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<sup>53</sup> *MGS 2019*, pp. 290-293, <http://images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2019MGS-Complete.pdf>

# **Report of the Commission for Women**

## **Our Identity**

The Commission for Women seeks to understand the life of women within the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and is committed to the support and advocacy for the full inclusion and participation of women within all contexts of church life. The Commission for Women is committed to raising awareness, to providing opportunities for women in the church, and to providing information so that women can participate in the leadership and life of the church.

## **Celebrating Our Past: Five Decades**

The RCA is celebrating a rich history of encouraging, equipping, and empowering women leaders serving in the ordained offices of elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament for five decades. The significant anniversaries planning team is a collaborative effort between Women's Transformation and Leadership, the Commission for Women, and the Commission on History. Inclusive celebrations at General Synod 2023 will incorporate a celebratory dinner, sharing stories, sharing of the gifts, prayer, blessings, music, art, and other activities.

We also celebrate the fifth year anniversary of the #WeAreSpeaking statement ([www.rca.org/we-are-speaking](http://www.rca.org/we-are-speaking)), which calls for an end to harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women and girls. The Commission for Women has collaborated with the Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership to increase awareness of the anniversary. The #WeAreSpeaking statement has been relaunched so that people and churches who signed the original statement in 2018 have the opportunity to recommit their stance to be a We Are Speaking church. The commission is also committed to encouraging individuals and congregations to sign for the first time. Many related resources are available on Faithward ([www.faithward.org/addressingabuse](http://www.faithward.org/addressingabuse)).

We celebrate the rich, equitable worship that was experienced at General Synod 2022. Plenary was filled with multiple ethnicities and voices leading us into the throne room of God, greeting the Lord of the day as we raised our voices in praise and worship.

We are celebrating that Judy Nelson will be the fifth woman serving as RCA General Synod president in 2024, joining Beth Marcus, Carol Mutch, Carol Bechtel, and Lisa Vander Wal.

We celebrate God's faithfulness of the past, and we anticipate God's faithfulness in the future with a kickoff celebration on the seventh annual Women's Story Day 2023, which took place on March 18, 2023. The Reformed Church Center, working with the RCA Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership, kicked off the RCA's celebration of half a century of ordained women with "Women's Stories Day 2023: These Are Ministries, Too!" There was a time of devotions, a time for stories of the

work of women elders and deacons around the RCA, a time for sharing, and the 2023 Hazel B. Gnade Lectures in RCA Women's Studies, giving context to this change and its special impact on Black churches.

And there is our recurring Women in Ministry Sunday, which historically falls on the third Sunday in May for churches in the Reformed Church in America. Women in Ministry Sunday is an opportunity to celebrate the way God has gifted and called women throughout history and in your congregation. There are many creative opportunities for celebrating Women in Ministry Sunday with your congregation, including many creative resources for worship available for planning a Women in Ministry Sunday service. These can be found on the Faithward website at [www.faithward.org/wims](http://www.faithward.org/wims).

### **Remaining Work: Our Hope for the Future**

There is much work to be done. We take the baton and are dedicated to the good work to which the Commission for Women has been called: equitable participation in the life and leadership of the church. We are grateful that the Holy Spirit is active and alive, committing to the good work that is put before us.

We pray that congregations in the RCA have representation of women in the ordained roles of elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament, as well as other leadership roles.

Many actions have been taken by General Synod over the years, and we see that implementation has not always happened. We continue to work with the Office of Women's Transformation and Leadership to identify and remedy these gaps.

We would call particular attention to the isolation of early office-holding women (ministers of Word and sacrament, deacons, elders). The 2017 action in support of all seminarians is a reminder of the need for focused attention (*Minutes of General Synod 2017*, R 17-58, p. 321).

We realize that some may view leadership roles differently; however, we pray that we might be able to come together in hospitable peace. Quoting Rev. Liz Testa in the article "How to Practice Biblical Equity-Based Hospitality," published on Faithward, "hospitality is about embracing each person with the hospitality that they need to participate fully. By honoring our differences, we can draw nearer to the unity in Christ that God envisions for us."

We graciously invite congregations to take a learning step so that we might embody Paul's encouragement to the church in Corinth by identifying and celebrating the varieties of gifts, services, and activities to the God who activates all of them in everyone for the common good of Christ's body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

One possible resource is the Building God's Church Together Bible study, which is described on Faithward as follows: "God calls both men and women to serve in the

church. Building God's Church Together is designed to help congregations and leaders create thriving ministry environments where both women and men are encouraged to embrace their gifts and develop healthy, flourishing ministry partnerships." Building God's Church Together can be found on Faithward at [www.faithward.org/building-gods-church-together](http://www.faithward.org/building-gods-church-together).

While we look to the future with hope, we also recognize the ongoing painful stories of abuse, mistreatment, and apathy within our own local communities. Given this reality, we recognize that the skills of curiosity, listening, and patient engagement are not always present in our assemblies. We would call attention to the difficult yet fruitful challenge of having learning conversations and engaging in productive dialogue.

### **Commission Meetings**

The Commission for Women has met virtually a number of times since submission of its written report to the 2022 General Synod: April 27, 2022; October 10, 2022; and November 4, 2022. The commission also held a hybrid meeting on the beautiful campus of New Brunswick Theological Seminary from February 27 to March 1, 2023.

The Commission for Women is deeply grateful for the dedicated and faithful service of Mornier Rich as our GSC staff liaison and for our collaboration with Women's Transformation and Leadership through Rev. Liz Testa.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Debra Rensink, moderator

## Report of the Professorate

Recognizing the 239-year relationship of the General Synod professors to the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the professorate welcomes the opportunity to update the General Synod on the status of our ministry of teaching within the RCA, and our ministry to represent the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry.

### Current Members of the General Synod Professorate

Rev. Dr. Chad Pierce, moderator  
Rev. Dr. Carol Bechtel  
Rev. Dr. Jaeseung Cha  
Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary

### Activities and Involvement

Members of the professorate were involved in a number of denominational activities and conversations over the past year.

#### *Commission on Theology*

General Synod 2022 instructed the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the General Synod Professorate, to “examine whether the conditions surrounding Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine meet the criteria for a declaration of *status confessionis*, a full break in communion, due to the gravity of the breach of faithfulness to the gospel by any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia’s (and Belarus’s) war against Ukraine” (*Minutes of General Synod 2022*, ONB 22-9, pp. 111-112).

The General Synod Professorate examined the matter of *status confessionis*, or a full break in communion with any Reformed or Lutheran communion supporting Russia’s (and Belarus’s) war against Ukraine. To this end, we recommended to the Commission on Theology an excellent article on *status confessionis* from the Encyclopedia of Christianity, which, in summary, stated that churches can find themselves in *status confessionis* when their words and actions contradict the gospel of grace in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We recommended that the Commission on Theology stand ready to further explore *status confessionis* and other options along with the chief ecumenical officer and the Commission on Christian Unity.

#### *Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team*

The professorate is represented on the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team (CPAT) by Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary, who participated in the team’s January meeting in Orlando, Florida.

### *Pastoral Formation Oversight Board*

The General Synod professors were represented and participated in all the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) meetings. Some of the topics PFOB covered this year included (for more information, refer to the report of the PFOB):

- Implications of the Certificate of Readiness for Examination if the *Book of Church Order* changes proposed by PFOB last year and adopted by General Synod 2022 receive approval from two-thirds of the classes and a subsequent declarative vote from General Synod 2023. This includes communication to students currently under care as well as communication to classis stated clerks.
- The amount and division of the theological education assessment.
- Coursework between the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary.
- How to handle the CPE (clinical pastoral education) requirement for MFCA candidates.
- Continuing education for pastors.
- The current state of commissioned pastor education in the RCA.

General Synod professor Rev. Dr. Chad Pierce was assigned to a PFOB sub-team that will discuss the current *Book of Church Order* definition of a commissioned pastor and consider a potential office of commissioned pastor.

### **General Synod Professor News**

We celebrate the promotion of Dr. Jaeseung Cha to full professor at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

We are eager for new colleagues to join us, and we look forward to resuming the regular rhythm of our life together that we enjoyed before the pandemic. All the members of the professorate are very busy as individuals serving in our various capacities with and for the RCA.

## Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The 2018 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) acted “to constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board ... to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future” (*Minutes of General Synod 2018*, RF 18-1, p. 86). As part of that same action, the 2018 General Synod described one of the purposes of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) as “serv[ing] the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs.”

### The Future of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

As noted in its 2019, 2021, and 2022 reports to General Synod, the PFOB has been discussing potential changes both to the nature of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) and to the process by which it is granted to qualified candidates. Problems that have arisen with the current nature and process of the CFM include, but are not limited to, what defines a candidate as “fit,” inconsistencies among the three agents in granting the certificate, and the reality that, given that the nature of theological education today often includes more online learning, a feeling from some that the educational institutions might not be in the best position to determine fitness.

The PFOB, therefore, brought a proposal to the 2022 General Synod to change the scope and nature of the CFM. This proposal consisted of changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that would both rename the CFM as the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE) and also implement that change, defining the roles of the classis and the theological agents in the ordination process more clearly. The proposed changes were approved by the 2022 General Synod and sent to the classes for approval. If they receive approval from at least two thirds of classes, those amendments will be before this General Synod for a final declarative vote. The recommendations adopted by the 2022 General Synod can be found in TE 22-1 and TE 22-2 on pages 253-264 of the *Minutes of General Synod 2022*.

The PFOB’s meetings this year have included extended discussions about implementation of the above-mentioned *BCO* amendments, if approved by the classes and ratified by this General Synod. This includes:

- *Course offerings* – Since the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) will no longer be able to offer courses needed for students enrolled in non-RCA seminaries, both Western Theological Seminary (WTS) and New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) are preparing to offer needed courses for MFCA students. If the *BCO* changes relating to the CRE are approved,

beginning this fall, the MFCA will be directing students to WTS and NBTS for classes.

- *Communication between agents* – If the *BCO* changes relating to the CRE are approved, transcripts would be the formal communication from the MFCA, NBTS, or WTS to the classes. Each institution has appointed liaisons to whom classes and candidates may reach out for questions (for NBTS, this is James Brumm and Faye Taylor; for WTS, Tim Basselin; for the MFCA, Dave Schutt).
- *Communication to students currently under care* – This is critically important for all students, but especially for the MFCA students because this will be a significant shift for them.
- *Communication to clerks* – The classis clerk is a key figure in helping transition this major change. The PFOB is working to connect with the clerks to facilitate mutual communication.
- *Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) requirements* – The three agents are currently working on how to handle the CPE requirement for the MFCA candidates.

Implementation of the above is dependent upon classes' approval of the *BCO* changes in TE 22-1 and TE 22-2 and a subsequent declarative vote by this General Synod. The PFOB also spent some time deliberating about next steps if the changes are not approved.

### **Theological Education Funding**

The PFOB submitted a recommendation to the General Synod Council (GSC) regarding the amount of the theological education assessment.

In the past, the theological education assessment was distributed to each agent based on the number of students that the MFCA, WTS, and NBTS had that were formally enrolled in the CFM process. Several major factors impacted our discussion this year.

- The CFM may transform into the CRE (Certificate of Readiness for Examination)
- WTS received approval from the General Synod last year to change its status from being an RCA seminary to being an independent but officially related institution.
- Both WTS and NBTS are taking over responsibilities for forming students previously handled by the MFCA.
- The MFCA has decreased staff, decreased finances, and decreased enrollment.
- General Synod finances are being moved from a per communicant member basis to a covenant shares model based on income.

The PFOB felt that now was a good time to rethink the distribution of the theological education assessment. The PFOB discussed the distribution extensively at our January 24-25 meeting. Micah McCreary, the president of NBTS; Felix Theonugraha, the president of WTS; and Dave Schutt, the interim director of the MFCA, were



present. It was a challenging discussion, but in the end, it was unanimously agreed that the assessment should be divided equally between the three agents.

In 2023, the theological education assessment is projected to collect revenue of \$437,000, which the PFOB designated as follows:

- \$20,000 for collaborative work (PFOB and the General Synod professorate)
- The remaining amount was divided among the three theological agents:
  - \$134,000 to the MFCA
  - \$157,000 to WTS
  - \$126,000 to NBTS

The division among the theological agents was based on the following formula as determined by the PFOB: 80 percent of the amount was split evenly, and the remaining 20 percent was distributed based on the number of students at each agency that are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Recognizing the RCA's reduced income, the PFOB is requesting \$415,000 for 2024 (reducing the overall amount to be collected from the theological education assessment by \$22,000, a 5 percent decrease over the estimated theological assessment revenue for 2023). The PFOB will distribute the \$415,000 as follows:

- \$15,000 for collaborative work (PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents)
- The remaining amount will be distributed equally among the three theological agents, one third to each agent

The PFOB affirms that all three agents play critical roles in developing leaders for the RCA and furthering the vision of the restructuring team: "the central outcome that we believe God is calling the RCA to produce is 'making disciples who grow disciples'" (from the restructuring team's February 2023 update published on the RCA website).

As requested by the GSC's finance department, the PFOB's request to the GSC was for a flat dollar amount. The finance department has figured that dollar amount into the overall covenant share percentage that the General Synod will approve (see the report of the Office of Finance, pp. 46-58).

### **Commissioned Pastor Education in the RCA**

A key component in the central outcome of disciple making that the restructuring team is focusing on is commissioned pastors. This growing and evolving stream of pastoral leadership is part of the charge of the PFOB; significant time was spent addressing the potentials for growth and the challenges in supporting the many commissioned pastors in the RCA. The PFOB's January meeting included input from PFOB member and commissioned pastor Carol Mutch (who also serves on the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team [CPAT]), Jim Lankheet (educator and trainer of

commissioned pastors), and Heather Dood (a commissioned pastor serving as pastor of Grace Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan).

### *Commissioned Pastor Education*

In the RCA, commissioned pastors are supervised, educated, and commissioned at the classis level. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are several different strands of commissioned pastor education and development within the RCA. There are also numerous trainers and training resources (CPAT, Corum Deo, etc.), within the RCA. An increasing number of Hispanic pastors from the Global South or who have recently moved to the U.S. are also being trained as commissioned pastors in the RCA. In the Global South, seminary and an MDiv degree is not standard pastor training in the way that it historically has been in North America or in Europe. Diverse cultures raise up leaders in different ways.

In light of these factors, the PFOB is considering (and inviting comment and input on) the following items:

- How can we make information on different training resources and methods readily available to various commissioned pastor trainers and classes? A revitalized website or webpages for commissioned pastors could be one option.
- Is there a way to bring some form of uniformity or core competencies to the commissioned pastor training process, recognizing that the classis is the assembly that holds authority and responsibility over commissioned pastor training, not the General Synod or the PFOB?
- Is there a way to create a more seamless process for commissioned pastors who wish to continue their education by getting an MDiv? An example would be taking into account and providing credit for previous learning and experience. This could include the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) process.

### *Marginalization of Commissioned Pastors*

During our discussion concerning commissioned pastors, one theme became clear—while commissioned pastors are in many cases given the same responsibilities as ministers of Word and sacrament (depending on the role in which they are serving), they are often treated as second-class pastors within the denomination. This became clear not only during our PFOB meeting, but it was also related to us as an ongoing concern from the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team. Commissioned pastors will be a significant part of the RCA's future and growth; it seems wise to find a way to empower, support, and develop commissioned pastors within our denomination.

The PFOB is currently discussing the following items, and we invite comment and input from the denomination:

- According to the *BCO*, commissioned pastors hold the office of elder. This limits their participation in our various assemblies. At this juncture in the life of the RCA and the restructuring process, we need the voices of commissioned

pastors at all of our various tables and discussions. Is it time to revisit this designation as elder?

- Can we bring a set of core educational and training competencies to commissioned pastor formation in order to strengthen this discipleship-making process? If a uniform core can be established, could we consider making the commissioned pastor credential transferable between classes? This would facilitate church planting and overall growth in the RCA.

The PFOB has set up two sub-teams to consider the above questions. One sub-team will meet to discuss questions of office and the *BCO* definition of a commissioned pastor. The second sub-team will convene to discuss denominational coordination and certification.

### **Final Thoughts**

Future agenda items for the PFOB include:

- Review of the eight standards for ministry in light of the vision and focus discerned by the restructuring team
- How to incentivize continuing education for pastors in order to facilitate a revitalized leadership cadre
- MFCA funding: we are currently in deficit spending and need to address this issue

The PFOB is grateful for the hard work of the MFCA interim executive director Dave Schutt and his staff. We are also deeply appreciative of the investment of time and effort of Dr. Micah McCreary (NBTS) and Dr. Felix Theonugraha (WTS). The leaders of all three of our agents are deeply invested in the work of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board. We also appreciate the hard work of the General Synod Council staff, including our general secretary, as they resource and support this work,

Trying to anticipate the future is difficult in times of change and flux, and trying to form leaders for a future that is not yet clear is daunting. However, change also brings an opportunity for new vision and direction to emerge. The 2018 General Synod formed the PFOB to “....coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future” (*MGS 2018*, RF 18-1, p. 86). We see the stirrings of the Spirit around discipleship and discipleship making and know that pastoral formation will be crucial. We hope to assist the General Synod, GSC, GSC staff, and the RCA as a whole as we move together into the mission God has planned for the RCA.

Respectfully submitted,  
Daniel Gillett  
Vice-moderator, PFOB

## Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

General Synod, for years, has exercised oversight of ministerial formation through its agents: Western Theological Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA). Like the two seminaries, the MFCA has possessed a deep commitment to developing faithful, educated, and Reformed leaders. Its purpose is the preparation of men and women for the ministries of Christ and his church, most specifically those called to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

From its inception 24 years ago, the MFCA has been tasked with and has embraced a mandate to expand opportunities for Reformed Church in America (RCA) ordination to groups not previously served. This is clearly stated in the MFCA Board of Trustees' mission statement:

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) exists to strengthen the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry to specific groups of candidates and working cooperatively with partners inside and outside the RCA to broaden opportunities for diverse ministerial formation.

Given the authority delegated to it by General Synod, the MFCA board, its certification committee members, and its staff continue to accomplish this mission by:

- Awarding the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to RCA candidates who are graduating from non-RCA seminaries via Reformed Candidates Supervision and Care (RCSC) or pursuing an approved alternate route (AAR);
- Through the certification committee and staff, evaluating the progress of candidates and their continuation in and completion of the process leading to the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, as their achievements dictate;
- Periodically ensuring that the RCA Standards for Preparation for Ministry are upheld in the oversight of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and are reviewed, with recommendations made to the appropriate RCA body if the MFCA board believes changes would be appropriate;
- Providing graduate-level courses designed to meet the standards for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry;
- Collaborating with and providing counsel to congregations and classes in the care and nurture of candidates for the ministry who are seeking the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry through the MFCA; and
- Interpreting and advocating for the work of the MFCA to the larger church.

As of March 2023, there were 42 candidates enrolled in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process; 5 of these candidates (12 percent) are pursuing the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry through the Approved Alternate Route (AAR), which did not exist until the MFCA was officially established in 1999.

Over 33 percent (33.3 percent) of the MFCA's candidates are female; of these, 2 are enrolled in the AAR, and 12 are enrolled in the RCSC.

Forty-three percent (42.9 percent) of the total number of MFCA candidates represent racial and ethnic minorities.

### **How the MFCA Board Operates**

By permission and approval of the General Synod Council (GSC), the MFCA Board of Trustees operates under Policy Governance. In accordance with the tenets of Policy Governance, the board intentionally focuses on visioning and policy development. It sets clear goals for the agency by delegating the means of achieving them to the executive director and staff, subject only to explicit executive limitations. The board stays abreast of the MFCA program through the monitoring reports of the director.

### **Budgets and Finances**

The MFCA staff have continued to operate at a reduced budget.

The staff, board, and certification committee utilize Zoom, which reduces if not eliminates the cost of travel in the budget.

This past year, all MFCA courses were offered via distance learning, which reduces the cost of in-person intensive courses. The MFCA staff have been meeting with New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary, and beginning this fall, MFCA candidates will likely be directed to take the RCA core courses at one of the two seminaries, which will help further reduce the MFCA budget.

In January 2022, the GSC's chief financial officer requested that the MFCA staff consider the option of working remotely in order to eliminate the cost of office space from the budget. This transition is complete, and the staff now operates remotely.

The MFCA operates under the leadership of a part-time interim executive director, Rev. David Schutt. The MFCA staff met in-person once, but all other staff meetings were conducted via Zoom communication for the year 2022. The MFCA staff also utilize Zoom to meet one-on-one with candidates for care and direction.

### **Certificates of Fitness Awarded**

The Board of Trustees awarded ten Certificates of Fitness for Ministry since the last reporting in June 2022, all ten through the RCSC process.

#### *Reformed Candidates Supervision and Care (RCSC)*

Eric Burrows-Stone	Classis of the City
Nicole Contreras	Classis of Greater Palisades
Zachariah Alexander DeWitt	Classis of Minnesota
Gent Richard Grush	Classis of the City

Grant William Hoekstra	Classis of Minnesota
Joshua Caleb Jalandoon	Classis of the City
Shang Kang	Classis of British Columbia
Anna Lynn Langholz	Classis of Holland
Shelly-Ann Nathalee Richmond	Classis of Brooklyn
Ciro W. Romero	Classis of Greater Palisades

## Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Recognizing New Brunswick Theological Seminary's 239-year relationship with the Reformed Church in America, the seminary welcomes the opportunity to update the General Synod on the status of our institution and our partnership with the denomination.

### New Branding and Strategic Planning Process

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) began work on a new strategic plan in July 2022. We began by clarifying our positioning and personality as a seminary. That is, we initially focused on the *who*, *how*, and *what* of being NBTS. We surveyed individual members and groups of our stakeholders around our guiding values and principles. We then developed statements of our purpose, identity, values, vision, and mission. Feedback and listening sessions were held with our constituents, and the resulting drafts were shared with faculty, staff, students, and alumni and were approved by the Board of Trustees as a living document at the February 2023 board meeting.

Built upon and arising from this new articulation of our vision, values, and mission, our new strategic plan is in the process of discernment and formation. Now, in this report to the General Synod, NBTS presents the results of our new branding.

#### *NBTS's New Brand System*

NBTS: The First Seminary of the Reformed Church in America

#### Purpose Statement (from the NBTS Bylaws)

Called in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, New Brunswick Theological Seminary participates in God's own laboring to fulfill God's reign on earth.

Rooted in the Reformed tradition and centered in its trust in God's sovereignty and grace, the Seminary is an inter-cultural, ecumenical school of Christian faith, learning, and scholarship committed to its metro-urban and global contexts.

Our purpose is to educate persons and strengthen communities for transformational, public ministries in church and society. We fulfill this mission through creative, contextual, and critical engagement with texts, traditions, and practices.

#### Identity

We are a multi-ethnic, intergenerational, ecumenical theological institution of higher education that instills creative, contextual, and critical thinking and a passion for justice that reflects God's transforming love in Jesus Christ.

## Values

We value...

Faith and community that welcomes diverse perspectives, where all have a seat at the table and all voices are heard; the breadth and depth of this inclusive conversation contribute to all growth and understanding.

A supportive environment where the person, the journey, and the call to ministry in each unique context are nurtured and affirmed in community.

Academic engagement that instills creative, contextual, and critical thinking and a passion for justice.

## Vision Statement

We envision empowered leaders, ministries, and communities who actively pursue, promote, and engage in the work of justice, reconciliation, and unity, affirming the equality of all God's people.

We envision a community of graduates who bear witness to God's light in the world, where all lives are dignified and all voices are heard, and all are included to share in God's bountiful love.

We envision spiritual communities who embody grace and love, rooted in critical, creative, contextual thinking and leadership that inspires others to live fruitful and faithful lives.

We envision a world where hearts are renewed, justice is established, and faith is restored.

## Mission Statement

Our mission, rooted in God's grace, is to empower people and communities...

to explore their calling and live into their futures by providing a place of connection and spiritual formation;

to bring a curiosity, openness, creativity, and logic to the critical examination of text and context; and

to act with fairness and integrity through analyzing systems of power and privilege.

## Motto

Think Critically, Act Justly, Lead Faithfully



## **Administration**

This year, NBTS restructured its administration and added a new, much-needed position.

- We are pleased that the Rev. Dr. Neal Presa has joined us as vice president of student affairs and vocational outreach. Dr. Presa also serves on the Administrative Council and has joined the faculty as associate professor of preaching and worship.
- Ms. Amanda Bruehl has been promoted to vice president of operations.
- This summer our chief financial officer, Ken Termott, retired after 12 years of service.

## **Advancement**

NBTS hosted its Inaugural Biennial Gala on Thursday, May 18, during commencement week. The event honored our distinguished alumni as well as church and community leaders who are committed to the preservation and continuation of NBTS's mission to train and equip leaders to think critically, act justly, and lead faithfully. The alumni awards, typically presented at the baccalaureate service, took place during the gala to add to the festiveness of the occasion.

## **Finances**

The seminary ended the 2021-2022 fiscal year with a surplus of \$41,000, with expenditures of \$3,763,123 and revenues of \$3,804,132. This year, the seminary is currently behind budget forecasts, primarily due to less-than-expected tuition and fee revenue from our master's degree programs. We have put measures in place that we anticipate will rectify this. To view NBTS's 2022 annual report, see [https://nbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NBTS\\_2022\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://nbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NBTS_2022_Annual_Report.pdf).

## **Admissions and Recruitment (Vocational Outreach)**

Dr. Neal Presa has assumed his new role as vice president of student affairs and vocational outreach and, in collaboration with an admissions and recruitment strategy working group, has developed a comprehensive plan for recruitment and outreach for NBTS for the next two years. A recommendation from the working group was that "vocational outreach" is a more comprehensive and theological term than "admissions." Dr. Presa has set ambitious and thoughtful long- and short-term strategies for recruitment.

## **Academics**

NBTS is extremely excited to announce the promotion to full professor of Dr. Jaeseung Cha, RCA General Synod professor. At the board meeting to discuss and take this action, the board celebrated his groundbreaking scholarship on Christology and atonement and expressed unanimous support for Dr. Cha's promotion. Dr. Cha joins vice president and dean Beth Tanner as the second full professor currently on faculty at NBTS.

NBTS successfully launched two new critical systems: a student information system (Campus Café) and a learning management system (D2L Brightspace). These systems greatly improve both the student experience and efficacy of our pedagogical offerings. We are also innovating in the use of technology to deliver best-in-class online and hybrid learning experiences. This past summer, NBTS launched our new recording studio, and we are currently developing a state-of-the-art hybrid classroom prototype.

### **Denominational Service and Support**

As NBTS moved back to in-person and hybrid events, the seminary was able to host several General Synod commission meetings this year, including the Commission on History, the Commission on Theology, and the Commission for Women. On March 4, 2023, NBTS hosted an RCA restructuring team roundtable discussion in the Sage Library.

After a four-year break (as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), a group from NBTS was able to return to the Al Amana Centre in Oman, an RCA Global Mission partner. The trip was a wonderful experience where students, faculty, and alumni learned about and participated in interfaith dialogue. We look forward to continuing to develop this opportunity for our students in the coming years.

The Reformed Church Center continues to provide valuable free programming for a wide audience, including scholars, RCA members, and everyone interested in the Reformed tradition. Reformed Church Center events this year included:

- RCA General Synod 2022 Recap
- Black and Reformed Theology
- Confession Then and Now: Thinking with Belhar in North America
- Creation Care as Eschatology
- RCA International Church Planting
- Land Acknowledgment, Truth, and Reconciliation: A Place to Begin
- Slavery and Social Power in the Dutch Reformed Church
- Women's Stories Day 2023
- Redeeming Confession in Reformed Worship

See past videos and find out about upcoming events at [www.nbts.edu/RCC-events](http://www.nbts.edu/RCC-events).

We continue to see an increase in the number of RCA students at NBTS in all of our programs. Since 2017, NBTS has had an increase from six RCA students to 36 RCA students—that is an increase of 600 percent over 6 years. We are excited to see this number continue to grow as we build connections with RCA colleges, classes, and churches.

The seminary's president, Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary, has been especially honored to be involved in several important RCA teams and committees over this last year. He has invested a significant amount of time and energy over the last year as a member

of the RCA restructuring team. It has been a blessing to get to know the other team members and envision where God may be leading the RCA in the future. He also serves as a member of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board, the Commissioned Pastors Advisory Team, the Commission on Theology, and as a General Synod professor for the RCA. He feels privileged to serve his denomination in these ways.

## **Governance**

### *Proposed NBTS Constitution and Bylaws Changes*

The following proposed changes to NBTS's Constitution and Bylaws were approved by the NBTS Board of Trustees at its February meeting. The changes are now submitted to the General Synod for its approval.

#### **TE 23-1**

**To approve the following amendments to the Constitution and Bylaws of New Brunswick Theological Seminary:**

##### ***Article II. Section 1.***

**Rooted in the Reformed tradition and centered in its trust ~~of~~in God's sovereignty and grace, the Seminary is an inter-cultural, ecumenical school of Christian faith, learning, and scholarship committed to its metro-urban and global contexts.**

**Our ~~mission~~purpose is to educate persons and strengthen communities for transformational, public ministries in church and society. We fulfill this ~~mission~~ through creative, contextual, and critical engagement with texts, traditions, and practices.**

##### ***Article V. Section 5.***

**Each trustee will be asked to read and sign annually a Declaration for Board Members of New Brunswick Theological Seminary ~~at a commissioning service to be held at the fall meeting of the Board~~. This Declaration will include a statement of commitment to faithful participation in the work of the Board.**

##### ***Article VII. Section 1.***

**The Board of Trustees shall meet at least three times a year. The annual meeting shall be in the spring. The date, time, and place of meetings shall be determined by the Officers. Written notice of each stated meeting shall be ~~mailed~~sent at least thirty days prior to the date of the meeting.**

##### ***Article VII. Section 7.***

**The agenda shall be ~~mailed~~sent to the trustees at least ten days prior to the meeting of the Board of Trustees.**

***Article XIII. Section 3.***

**Standing committees shall meet at or before each regularly scheduled Board of Trustees meeting, and at other times as necessary, to fulfill assigned responsibilities and to prepare and submit reports and recommendations to the Board of Trustees.**

***Article XV Section 4.***

**A quorum of the Administrative Council must include the President and/or the Dean of the Seminary and a majority of its members. The Administrative Council shall fix the time and the place of its meetings, maintaining a record of its proceedings. This record, which shall be distributed open at all times to the Faculty Council and to the Board of Trustees.**

***Article XVIII Section 1.***

**To the full extent authorized and permitted by law, the Corporation shall indemnify any person made, or threatened to be made, a party to any civil or criminal action or proceeding by reason of fact that the person, is or was a Trustee, officer, faculty member, administrator, or employee of the Corporation and was acting within the scope of his/her Corporation responsibilities and duties. The foregoing shall not obligate the Corporation to purchase officers' and directors' liability insurance, but should applicable law permit, the Corporation shall purchase such insurance if when authorized and approved by the Board of Trustees.**

***Article XXII. Section 1.***

**When this Constitution and Bylaws ~~shall have~~ has been approved by a majority vote of the Board of Trustees and a majority vote of the General Synod, it shall supersede all previous documents controlling the affairs of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, excepting the Articles of Incorporation as amended.**

**In Conclusion**

As the day-to-day work of the seminary continues, we are thankful for the governance and support of our Board of Trustees, particularly our board moderator, elder Russell Paarlberg. We are proud of our educational ministry to the church via our Reformed Church Center, and the global mission-focused work of the Underwood Center. We are also deeply grateful for the relationships with our alumni and students, and the commitment to sound theological and biblical eradication of systems of unjust power and unjust privilege. Additionally, we could not be a school of the prophets without the world-class education provided by our faculty and staff. And none of this would be possible without our partnership with the Reformed Church in America.

Finally, we solicit your prayers and support as we continue to remain rooted in the Reformed tradition empowering God's people and God's communities to explore their calling and live into their futures by providing a place of connection and spiritual formation; to bring a curiosity, openness, creativity, and logic to the critical examination of text and context; and to act with fairness and integrity through analyzing systems of power and privilege.

# **Report of Western Theological Seminary**

## **Mission Statement**

By God's grace, Western Theological Seminary forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God's ongoing redemptive work in the world.

## **Overview**

The 2022-2023 academic year was a banner year for Western Theological Seminary. By the grace of God, 433 students were enrolled across all degree programs for the fall semester. This represents a 29 percent increase in head count and a 50 percent growth in full-time equivalents since fall 2019. Our tuition revenue projection has also grown 40 percent since the 2019-2020 school year. One hundred and twenty-five students are enrolled in our Spanish-speaking programs, including 20 students in our newly launched Master of Arts in Christian Studies, which can be completed entirely in Spanish. Nearly 120 students were enrolled in our doctor of ministry program, and more than 120 additional students were enrolled in the master of divinity program. Students in these programs are either pastors or students who sense a call to the pastorate and ordained ministry. We give thanks to God for the privilege of educating these women and men who have been called by God to serve the church!

Western is also in the midst of change. Over the last two years, we have welcomed eight new faculty members. Dr. Wesley Hill (New Testament), Dr. David Escobar Arcay (theology), Dr. Winn Collier (ministry), Dr. Tim Basselin (ministry), Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst (mission), Dr. Madison Pierce (New Testament), Dr. Keith Starkenberg (theology), and Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas (theology) bring new energy and new excitement to the life and work of the seminary.

We have also added to our "senior" faculty. We continue to enjoy the wisdom and experience of Dr. Carol Bechtel (Old Testament), General Synod professor, and Dr. David Stubbs (theology), who are our longest tenured faculty. We have also added Dr. Sue Rozeboom (worship), Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline (theology), and Dr. David Komline (church history) to the ranks of our full professors.

## **New Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling**

Western has continued to make considerable progress toward its goal of launching a new MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling in fall 2024. Western Theological Seminary's MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling is rooted in the foundational realities that we are created in and for relationship, as image-bearers of the Trinitarian God and ambassadors of God's shalom in a broken world. We will equip women and men to be wise, competent, and hopeful practitioners, attuned to their own selves and stories and anchored in God's story of redemption and restoration. Our relationally oriented and trauma-informed program will offer the most contemporary, research-based training while, at the same time, remaining deeply rooted in a longstanding Christian soul care tradition. Students will be equipped to

serve in a variety of counseling settings with a diverse array of clients of varying backgrounds or faiths. Students will be invited into a rich cohort experience at Western Theological Seminary within a community that pauses daily for prayer and worship and celebrates communion every Friday.

While the first cohort will begin in fall 2024, Western will soon begin offering courses as continuing education offerings for pastors, alumni, and prospective students. Registration is open!

We are also overjoyed that we have successfully recruited Dr. Elizabeth Pennock to serve as associate professor of counseling and director of the Master of Arts in Mental Health Counseling program beginning in the 2023-2024 school year.

Dr. Pennock brings exceptional experience to this position. She is currently serving as a faculty member and the director of a comparable program at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. In this role, she oversees the compliance of the program with the accreditation standards of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.

Dr. Pennock's areas of expertise include trauma and trauma-informed care, counselor education and supervision, and spirituality and counseling. The dissertation she completed for her PhD in counselor education was titled, "Trauma-Informed Clergy: An Investigation of Factors Predicting the Trauma-Related Attitudes and Beliefs of Christian Clergy in Florida" (University of Central Florida). She has specialized training in trauma therapy that informs her research and teaching as well as her practice of counseling.

Dr. Pennock spent seven years doing mission work and church planting in Eastern Europe before pursuing her career in counseling, and her own experience in ministry and of walking alongside others in ministry directly shapes her sense of calling to this work. After completing her master's in counseling, alongside running a private practice, she spent six years working for a missions organization, providing counseling and crisis care for more than 1,000 employees as they engaged in ministry all over the world, assisting in the psychological assessments of applicants to help assess their readiness for ministry, and training staff members in things like spiritual and emotional formation and cultural adjustment.

Dr. Pennock comes to this role with a deep commitment to Christ and the church and with a significant sense of being called to develop this new program at Western Theological Seminary. We are tremendously grateful that God opened the way for her to join us to provide leadership to this endeavor alongside current faculty member Dr. Chuck DeGroat.

### **\$1.15 Million Grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc.**

In March 2022, Western Theological Seminary was selected to be the recipient of a \$1.15 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc. as a part of their Nurturing Children Through Worship initiative, an initiative that "is designed to help theological schools

strengthen and sustain their capacities to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches.” The proposal is titled “Nurturing Children with Disabilities,” and it involves researching, putting into practice, and publishing the results of practices involved in the spiritual formation of children and persons with disabilities, practices that involve horses, nature, and art. Dr. Ben Conner will provide leadership to the grant.

## **Other Seminary News**

The Hispanic Ministry Program continues to enroll certificate and MA students throughout the country. Our first Hispanic Summer Institute will be held online this May, featuring courses offered in Spanish by our faculty members Dr. David Escobar and Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas. Through this program, students from Western Theological Seminary (WTS) and other Association of Theological Schools–accredited schools are able to take one-week intensive courses. As we pilot the Institute this summer, all courses will be online; we will be working toward in-person courses in summer 2024. You can learn more about this summer’s offerings in this video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnUYMviiGvs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnUYMviiGvs).

Our doctor of ministry program, under the interim leadership of Dr. Chuck DeGroat, is currently offering nine cohorts. Two additional cohorts are launching this spring: “Hungering for God: Pastor as Spiritual Guide” with Tom Schwanda and “Performing the Bible” with Karen and Jeff Barker. Plans are in process for more cohorts to launch next year.

The Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination’s two DMin cohorts continue to be formative for those involved. Kingfisher Society groups (circles of friendship and soul care for pastors) are launching. The Peterson Center welcomed musician duo Poor Bishop Hooper to lead a “Golgotha Experience” during the Lenten season. Author Sophronia Scott will offer a public reading from her recent works on April 25. The Peterson Center is joining with The Porter’s Gate to set *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, to music. Songwriters will gather to write and record songs from Peterson’s translation, which can then be adapted for use in local church settings. The Doxology Conference will be held October 2-4, 2023; we anticipate another significant gathering of pastors, artists, and Christians who are looking to attend to God’s hopeful presence in their lives and in the world.

## **Strategic Plan**

The seminary intentionally engaged in a strategic plan process that culminated in May 2022 when the Board of Trustees approved a strategic plan that will guide the focus of the seminary through 2025. The four themes of the strategic plan are as follows:

1. By June 2025, WTS will have developed and launched new degree programs and initiatives that equip students and churches to faithfully and innovatively engage the cultural and ecclesial challenges of ministry and leadership in our time.



2. By June 2025, WTS will be a vibrant learning community marked by the intentional integration of rigorous theological education with holistic spiritual formation.
3. By June 2025, WTS will increase its capacity and capability to support and sustain programs through investment in technology, institutional processes, and endowment for student scholarships, academic chairs, and institutional operations.
4. By June 2025, WTS will have solidified its commitment to a biblically rooted vision of racial-ethnic diversity and to practices of reconciliation and will have grown its institutional capacity for intercultural competency.

In October 2022, the Board of Trustees approved the launch of a new capital campaign focusing on degrees in mental health counseling, increasing availability of scholarships for students, and bolstering the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, the Center for Disability and Ministry, and the Hispanic Ministry Program. As soon as the capital campaign launched, a donor couple committed a \$1.75 million challenge grant toward the counseling program. Several months later, another donor couple committed a \$1 million challenge grant to fund the Hispanic Ministry Program. By God's grace, we are on track to complete this capital campaign within the expected timeframe.

### **Founders' Day**

In April 2023, WTS hosted the second Founders' Day lecture in the seminary's history. The lecture is designed to reflect on specific time periods in the course of the institution's history, in order to draw wisdom for the present and strength for the future. This year's Founders' Day lecture was given by Dr. Dennis Voskuil, president emeritus, and focused on the origin story of Western Theological Seminary.

### **Faculty News**

Below please find a non-exhaustive sampling of faculty engagement and activities with the church and with the academy throughout the course of the year.

- **Dr. Carol Bechtel** is celebrating the publication of "Upstairs, Downstairs: Hermeneutical Insights Based on the Structure of Job's Prologue" in *A Sage in New Haven: Essays on the Prophets, the Writings, and the Ancient World in Honor of Robert R. Wilson* (Zaphon: Ägypten und Altes Testament Series), which came out in February. She presented on "Sabbath" to an ecumenical gathering of women in Manistee, Michigan, on March 15. She is looking forward to preaching at First Presbyterian Church in Mishawaka, Indiana, on April 16 and presenting for the Lake Michigan Presbyterian Women at their gathering in Holland, Michigan, on April 22.

- **Dr. Todd Billings** recently published a new book chapter, “Reformed Catholicity,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 330-351. He also published, “Recovering the ‘Art of Dying’ for Lifelong Discipleship,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 1:3 (Fall 2022), pp. 7-12. Two of Dr. Billings’s articles made Faithward’s “Most Loved Resources of 2022” list, including a resource article, “Amazing Asian, Latin American, and Black Theologians Who Write About Reformed Theology” ([www.faithward.org/amazing-asian-latin-american-and-black-theologians-who-write-about-reformed-theology](http://www.faithward.org/amazing-asian-latin-american-and-black-theologians-who-write-about-reformed-theology)), and a three-part video series for small group discussion on understanding the Bible ([www.faithward.org/understanding-the-bible](http://www.faithward.org/understanding-the-bible)). The video series was also highlighted on the World Council of Reformed Churches blog on January 6. Finally, in October 2022, A Kernel of Wheat Christian Ministries published a beautiful Chinese edition and translation of *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*.
- **Dr. Chuck DeGroat** had the opportunity to speak and lead retreats for The Spiritual Formation Society of Arizona and Redeemer Counseling Center in Orlando, Florida. He is also under contract for and in the process of finishing his next book, tentatively called *What Happens Within*, a book that explores how trauma wounds us and how we heal, through the lens of the three questions God asks in Genesis 3.
- **Dr. David Komline** has finished editing volume three of *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America* and has turned it in to James Brumm, editor of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. He also has a forthcoming article in the *Calvin Theological Journal*, “Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed: The Theological Vision of I. John Hesselink,” based on his Founders’ Day lecture at WTS last year. In addition, he is working on the manuscript for a book tentatively titled *Confessional Kin: A History of the Reformed Communities in the United States*.
- **Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline** has entered a phase of her sabbatical where smaller research projects have been completed and she is focusing single-mindedly on her book. On February 8, she delivered a lecture in the Humboldt Lecture Series at the University of Tübingen on “The Idea of the New in Early Christian Thought.” The manuscript for this lecture provided a first draft of the opening chapter to her book. She was also featured as a “Fellow in Focus” by the university’s College of Fellows in the same month. Reviews of Han-luen’s first book, *Augustine on the Will*, continue to appear, including a 12-page essay in *The Journal of Theological Studies* that was published online in late February. She will be cheering on (from afar) the cohort of Iranian students who began a course of study developed in collaboration with Western Theological Seminary on March 1!
- In February, **Dr. Suzanne McDonald** preached and led adult education sessions on “Dealing Faithfully with Dementia” and “Creation Care: Why

Should Christians Care?” at various churches. In early March, she gave one of the keynote presentations at the Theology Matters conference and also offered adult education sessions on dementia to another church in West Michigan. In April, she will be preaching and leading an adult education series on a biblical understanding of prophecy, and she will be at Taylor University in Indiana on April 19 to preach in chapel, speak to several classes, and hold a seminar with some of Taylor University’s honors students on themes related to creation care as part of the campus’s reflections on Earth Day.

- **Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst** has recently led and been involved in several teaching and writing opportunities. She served as the keynote speaker at a conference on creation care and the church with leadership of Compassion International from across Latin America in Guatemala City, Guatemala, on January 24-25. She presented as part of the “On New Creation” module of the Institute of the Americas for Transformation and Reconciliation (an initiative that is a partnership of Duke Divinity School) on January 25. She continued work with the editorial team of “The Migration Bible” and produced an article on “Climate Change and Migration.”
- In late fall 2022, **Dr. Madison Pierce** joined *The Two Cities* podcast ([www.thetwocities.com](http://www.thetwocities.com)) and has been hosting conversations with leaders in the church and academy. Recently, the podcast has been hosting a series of conversations on disability—a future episode will feature Ben and Melissa Conner as well as the Friendship House!
- **Dr. Travis West** co-authored a curriculum entitled *Hebrew for Regular People* that was published by GlossaHouse. *Hebrew for Regular People* is an eight-week curriculum for congregations by Travis West and Hannah Stevens that translates some of the most innovative aspects of WTS’s Hebrew class into an accessible format for lay (“regular”) people. Volume 3 of the RCA’s *She Is Called Women of the Bible Study Series* was published in early November 2022. Travis is a co-editor of each of the three volumes, along with WTS grad Rev. April Fiet. Travis also contributed a study to this third volume, titled “Naomi: Resilient Hope in a World of Grief.”

## **Staff Retirement**

Jill English, director of admissions, concluded 17 years of faithful and dedicated service to Western Theological Seminary on June 2, 2023. We will sorely miss our faithful colleague.

## **Report of Central College**

Central College of Pella, Iowa, is a private, four-year liberal arts college. Central is known for its academic rigor, leadership formation, and for cultivating diversity of thought and culture through the arts and sciences, professional fields of study, and experiential learning.

For more than 100 years, Central has valued its covenant with the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Central's connection with the RCA is invaluable to students learning to live out their faith through service to God and humanity. RCA members serve on Central's board of trustees, and Reformed churches support students through Central's Journey Scholarship Fund. RCA students also can receive the Heritage Award. Many Central graduates go on to serve as leaders in RCA congregations worldwide.

Central's mission integrates career preparation with developing values essential to responsible citizenship. Central empowers graduates to serve in local, national, and international communities. A Central education prepares students for civic responsibility, to "learn to do right [and to] seek justice" (Isaiah 1:17). Through activities, courses, service opportunities and Central's relationship with the RCA, students learn to take their place in the world as justice seekers.

### **Campus Ministries**

Campus Ministries students and staff plan and lead a variety of activities and events on campus.

#### *The Calm*

On average, 70 students participate in The Calm, a weekly worship service to start the week off focused.

#### *Fundraisers*

Campus Ministries holds several fundraisers annually for organizations including Jonathan's House for Orphans, World Vision, Water to Thrive, Freedom House, and Many Hands for Haiti.

#### *Outreach*

Campus Ministries is involved with Urban Bike Ministry, World Vision, Love Packages, Single Parent Provision, Jonathan's House for Orphans, Angel Tree, and other service organizations. Additionally, Central students travel to Des Moines, Iowa, and join others to distribute food, blankets, gloves, and hats to people in need.

### *Mission Trips*

Mission trips allow students to serve others while growing their faith. Campus Ministries is dedicated to global missions and has traveled to Texas, Guatemala, Haiti, New York, London, and a variety of other locations over the years.

Over spring break 2022, Campus Ministries led a group of students to Kentucky to work with Grace Covenant Ministries. While there, they worshiped, held nightly vacation Bible school for local kids in the foster care system, completed construction projects, and served at the Grace Covenant Ministries thrift shop. They plan to return over spring break 2023. In May 2022, Campus Ministries had their first international trip in four years. Students and staff traveled to Honduras with Pella Area Teams To Honduras (PATTH) and to London with Mission to the World.

During fall break 2022, Campus Ministries led men's and women's retreats in Illinois to serve, provide fellowship, dive into the Word, and be refreshed! Over winter break, 60 students went to Mission, Texas, to build homes, serve near the border, help at a local church, and host a carnival. This tradition has become a favorite for students!

### *Services and Discipleship*

Many students are involved with local churches, including assisting with worship services and youth/children's ministries. In addition to connections with local churches, 45 students have participated in a discipleship program designed to help grow their faith and relationship with God.

### *Small Groups and Bible Studies*

Campus Ministries encourages small group studies to build trust and faith. Studies address a variety of topics ranging from the basics of the faith to various books, the Bible, and music. This year's Bible study groups expanded to include women, men, couples, and seekers. Plus, Campus Ministries has been writing and emailing a daily Lenten devotional to the campus community as a way of sharing faith within the community and encouraging one another in our Christian walks.

## **Community Service**

Service plays a major role on Central's campus. It is expressed through student organizations, classes with service-learning components, and independent projects by students, faculty, and staff.

Community service teaches civic engagement. By engaging with the community, students practice treating others with care and respect. Living a servant-hearted life means understanding one's responsibility to others and the pursuit of justice for all. Central is committed to teaching civic responsibility through multiple activities.

### *Service Learning*

Service learning strengthens cognitive, vocational, social, emotional, behavioral, and moral competencies. The Career Development and Civic Engagement Office places students where they can provide direct service to community members, such as teaching English-language learners, leading fitness activities with seniors, assisting with after-school programs, and serving food to families who are food insecure.

### *All-Campus Service Day*

Each year on Service Day, the college makes it possible for all members of the Central family to collaborate on projects that address a community need. In 2022, 700 students, faculty, and staff served at 55 locations in Central Iowa—many at faith-based organizations. In total, there were 2,227 hours donated on a single day with an economic impact in the community of more than \$54,000.

### *Coursework*

This past fall, Central had 14 service-learning courses across six academic departments. On average, 120 to 140 students per semester register for these courses.

Students were surveyed at the completion of their experience. As a result, 100 percent of students in the fall 2022 survey said the experience helped them critically reflect upon their own values and biases. Survey results showed that 100 percent of students felt service learning developed a greater sense of personal responsibility, while 97 percent of students reported their service experience helped them to “appreciate the diversity of cultures present in the United States”; to be “more sensitive to persons of different cultural perspectives”; and to “strengthen their ethic of social and civic responsibilities.”

### *Season of Gratitude and Food Security Projects*

In the fall of 2022, college departments and community partners collaborated for Season of Gratitude events. Activities included Coffee Cup Compliments with words of encouragement, Single Moms Christmas gift drive, observing World Kindness Day with friendship and a gratitude board, a food drive for the Pella Food Pantry, crocheting mats made of used plastic grocery bags for homeless individuals, a coat drive for refugees, celebrating Giving Tuesday to encourage giving to nonprofits, and a Global Care Fair.

### *Individual Service Commitments*

Students and faculty individually pursue a number of service commitments. Students often initiate their own service or social justice-oriented groups. Two notable examples of service are Muhumure Nzabakiza and Carlos Posas. Both students engaged in a service-learning module during Spring 2022. Nzabakiza worked with youth programs at the Iowa Congolese Organization and Center for Healing, which

serves a large population of immigrant and refugee families. Posas served with pi515, an organization that teaches STEM-related skills to youth. Posas supported students as they developed their coding and computer science skills.

### *Martin Luther King Jr. Day*

Central honored Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy of equity, justice, and peace with a full day of learning and service activities to bring students and community members together with a shared vision for justice. Bettina Judd, associate professor of gender, women, and sexuality studies at the University of Washington, opened the day. Central faculty members led programs that addressed core values of Martin Luther King's vision for social justice and acceptance. Students also participated in service projects and trained to become mentors in violence prevention. More than 900 students attended Martin Luther King Jr. Day programming.

### *School Visits*

Central's community-based learning program collaborates with the admission department to offer college visits to students served by Central's community partners. These visits are different from typical college visits primarily because these groups of students all represent underserved, first-generation families who have never been on a college campus. This increases college access to students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural perspectives. It also strengthens the college's partnership with the community.

In the spring of 2022, the program hosted a group of North High School students and engaged in activities related to music, privilege, racial inequity, social justice, education, college, and more. Central also hosted 60 students from Harding Middle School for a tour and performance. This past fall, Central hosted third graders from Findley Elementary School to participate in music, STEM, and art activities.

### **Financial Aid**

In the 2022-23 academic year, 54 students are receiving a total of \$67,134 in Community Service Awards. These scholarships are based on prospective students' past community engagement and their plans for engagement in and after college. Students also enjoy a tuition price of \$19,800 in addition to generous scholarships and awards.

### **Conclusion**

Central takes seriously its mission of preparing students to lead. Part of this preparation is learning what it means to serve and how to change the world for the better. These lessons are integral to the life of a Christian and central to the college's mission, and the college's relationship with the RCA is essential to this mission. Central values its relationship with the RCA and the support—through gifts, guidance, and prayer—that the RCA offers this vital undertaking.

## **Report of Hope College**

Affiliated with the Reformed Church in America since its founding in 1866, Hope College is known for our invitational, ecumenical Christian atmosphere, vibrant campus community, and outstanding academic and co-curricular offerings. We are intentional about our mission to educate students for lives of leadership and service in the context of the historic Christian faith.

Hope is a recognized leader in undergraduate research, scholarship, and preparation for graduate school and the workplace. Hope faculty members offer an academically rigorous, co-educational and residential education to approximately 3,000 undergraduate students from more than 40 states and 45 countries. Our teachers and talented researchers engage students in small classes and one-on-one collaborative research opportunities for an 11:1 student: faculty ratio. Hope offers over 1,800 internships and 300 study abroad opportunities in over 60 countries to provide a global perspective and experience that equips our graduates to excel in a global society. Ninety-four percent of our graduates join the workforce or enroll in graduate school within six months of graduation. The college's 80-plus student groups are marked by tradition, service, and enthusiasm, through which students are encouraged to explore their interests, build their leadership skills, and give back to the community.

### **Hope Forward**

Under the leadership of President Matthew A. Scogin, Hope College is pursuing a vision to fully fund the tuition of all students who come through Hope's doors. Called "Hope Forward," this vision is for an entirely new funding model for higher education: instead of charging tuition up front, which often burdens students with decades of debt, Hope will ask students to commit to donating to Hope after they graduate. Based on the biblical principles of generosity and gratitude, this model is rooted in our Christian mission and worldview. Hope is enthusiastic about the early momentum, with close to \$60 million raised so far and national recognition by various thought leaders. Hope recently hosted The Catalyst Summit, focused on access and innovation in higher education, featuring Malcolm Gladwell, Anne Snyder, Michael Crow, Dave Levin, and other special guests.

While Hope Forward is in some ways an entirely new way of thinking about funding college, it's also deeply rooted in our DNA. When Hope was founded, and for over 50 years afterwards, Hope didn't charge tuition. A course catalog in 1907 states, "the aim constantly kept in mind is to provide at Hope College everything necessary to a broad, liberal education at the lowest possible cost." Our hope is to make Hope's transformative Christian education accessible to even more students, just like our founders envisioned.

### **Academic Excellence and Collaborative Research**

Grounded in a general liberal arts education, Hope offers specialized study in more than 90 majors, minors, and pre-professional programs. Our students are presented



with a rigorous intellectual experience, and their engagement with faculty often leads to the life-changing discovery of an academic passion or a professional calling.

Our faculty are active teacher-scholars, committed to their students. We are a recognized leader in undergraduate research (ranked #22 per U.S. News & World Report) and teaching (ranked #49 by the U.S. News & World Report) with our students and faculty carrying out high quality research projects that are challenging and meaningful and contribute to exciting new knowledge in a broad range of disciplines.

For decades, our students have benefited from this “graduate-level undergraduate experience.” This experience is transformational, giving students the opportunity to conduct research, publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals (sometimes as primary author), present their work at conferences, and perform in front of audiences around the world. Hope faculty and staff continue to publish, design, and submit proposals and publications profusely. As of the conclusion of the fall semester, Hope College had received over \$5 million in external grants and funding to support sponsored research and programs across all of the academic divisions, with another \$5 million still up for consideration.

### **Creative Performance**

Hope College was the first private, liberal arts college to hold national accreditation in art, dance, music, and theatre, and the only liberal arts school in Michigan with an accredited art program.

- In addition to superior art facilities, our art students have the benefit of an extensive exhibition program that regularly crosses cultural and historical boundaries.
- We believe in the transformative power of dance, and our dance program is a place where our students grow artistically, intellectually, physically, and spiritually.
- A student’s passion for music speaks to the world, and we believe music is the language that communicates to everyone. Music students at Hope practice in state-of-the-art facilities and perform in acoustically superior spaces.
- The Hope College theatre program is one of recognized excellence that develops students as practicing theatre artists and engaged audience members. Both theatre majors and non-majors participate in all aspects of theatre work.

There is a strong inter-divisional collaboration among our art, dance, music, and theatre programs, which contributes to the success of each. Hope students work with nationally known writers, musicians, performers, and artists on stage, in the gallery, in the concert hall, and in the classroom. In March 2023, the Hope College Chapel Choir toured the country sharing their music with various communities in Indianapolis, St. Louis, Denver, Colorado Springs, Chicago, and Kansas City.

## **Athletics**

In addition to excelling in scholarship, research, and artistic performance, our students also excel in athletics. We believe that intercollegiate sport is a powerful vehicle for education as well as for personal development. Our athletics program is part of our Kinesiology Department and is guided by a community of coaches, scholars, and leaders who prioritize excellence and the student-athlete experience. The members of our athletics program are committed to the utmost integrity in competition and engagement in Christian faith formation, and they are dedicated to excelling in sports, academics, and life.

## **Calling and Career**

Hope's Boerigter Center for Calling and Career (BCCC) is a college-wide initiative engaging our students and alumni in lifelong practices for career development beginning in a student's freshman year. The BCCC is more than a resource for reaching career goals; it is a process, a plan, and a guided journey over four-plus years. Interests, strengths, and values are assessed, and students become part of the Hope network. Integrated into the academic program of the college, the BCCC includes and expands upon the work of our former Career Development office. This spring, colleagues from the Academic Advising, Boerigter Center, Center for Leadership, and Alumni and Family Engagement teams were relocated to a new centralized workspace to focus their combined efforts on preparing our students for the future of work.

## **Campus Ministries**

Hope College is a Christian community that invites all its members into a holistic and robust engagement with the historic Christian faith and a personal encounter with the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our Christian identity is described by these three aspirations: Hope aspires to be faithful, welcoming, and transformational. Hope is committed to the historic Christian faith as expressed in the ecumenical creeds of the ancient church, and the variety of expressions of the Christian faith we hold contributes to the vitality of the life of the college. Hope seeks to affirm the dignity of all persons as bearers of God's image, and we welcome those of different faiths or of no faith at all. We are committed to freedom of inquiry, yet also to the centrality of Scripture and renewal of our minds according to the will of God. The whole Hope community is encouraged in a lifelong commitment to grow in God's grace and to pursue vocations through which the world so loved by God is renewed.

## **The Hope-Western Prison Education Program (HWPEP)**

An extension of our mission beyond Holland, HWPEP is a partnership between Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, which began in March 2019. There are a collective 23 students in the first and second cohorts enrolled in credit-bearing courses. The program is designed to accommodate 80 students when fully subscribed. Ten Western Theological Seminary and Hope College students have served as teaching assistants and peer group leaders. HWPEP received a \$120K grant

from the Ascendium Education Group/Jobs for the Future to build institutional capacity for the Federal Department of Education's reinstitution of the Pell Grant for incarcerated students in July 2023.

College education programs in prisons can lower violence by up to 80 percent; lower recidivism by 45 percent; lower costs to taxpayers; improve education for traditional students; engage hard-to-reach donors; transform prisoners' hearts and minds; and unify faculty, staff, students, and friends across different perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Hope College is a Christian community offering a liberal arts curriculum, graduate school-style research, hands-on opportunities, creative performance opportunities, competitive athletics, and challenging collaborations. Our students learn through experience in more than 300 study abroad programs and countless internships available locally and throughout the U.S. Ours is an environment of the highest standards where students have a sense of belonging, can explore, and become all that God intends them to be.

## Report of Northwestern College

Northwestern College is pleased to report another year of standout graduate outcomes. Six months after their graduation, our 2022 grads have achieved a 99 percent placement rate with 83 percent employed and approximately 16 percent continuing their education in graduate programs ranging from medicine to industrial and organizational psychology.

Amazon, Avera Health, the San Diego Padres, Sight & Sound Theatres, Vermeer Corporation, and Youth for Christ are just a few of the more than 125 companies and organizations that hired Northwestern's graduates. The average reported salary for class of 2022 graduates who are employed full time was \$44,575. The highest salary reported was \$71,500.

### Stand Out Students and Faculty

**Sierra Tumbleson.** Northwestern College senior theatre major Sierra Tumbleson was awarded first place in the dramaturgy category at the Region Five Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Des Moines, Iowa. Tumbleson, honored for her work in last year's Northwestern production of *The Cherry Orchard*, is one of eight regional winners selected to participate in an all-expenses-paid dramaturgy intensive at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in late July. Tumbleson, from Trimont, Minnesota, plans to pursue a doctorate in theatre at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in the fall.

**Jett Skrien and *Life is a Dream* ensemble.** The Northwestern College theatre department's production of *Life is a Dream* was one of seven productions selected for presentation at the Region Five Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Des Moines. The production was selected due to its strong ensemble effort—excellent performances, scenery, lighting, projections, and costume design all coming together for a very impressive collaboration in a visually stunning show. Among other striking visuals, senior theatre major (and skilled illusionist) Jett Skrien designed projections that use motion graphics to create a dazzling, neo-futurist version of the Spanish renaissance.

**Dr. Michael Kugler.** Dr. Kugler, professor of history, served as editor of a newly published book, *Into the Jungle! A Boy's Comic Strip History of World War II*. The book features the never-before-published collection of comic strips hand-drawn by Kugler's father in the 1940s. The late Jimmy Kugler was a teenager in Lexington, Nebraska, when the war ended, and he engaged his youthful imagination to recreate the Pacific War in hundreds of six-panel comic strips. In his re-telling, the war was waged between the "Frogs" and the "Toads," humanoid creatures brutally committed to a kill-or-be-killed struggle. Published by University Press of Mississippi, Dr. Kugler's book provides a thorough analysis of his father's adolescent art and explains how a small-town Midwestern boy distilled the popular culture and media coverage of his day into his own war narrative.

**Dr. Juyeon Kang.** Dr. Kang, an award-winning concert pianist and professor of music, has released a new recording, *Joyful Praise*, a project inspired by a former student's funeral and aimed at encouraging the wounded and bringing comfort. The recording comprises 15 pieces, including several well-known hymns, such as "Great is Thy Faithfulness," "It is Well With My Soul," "This is My Father's World," and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

**Dr. Jiying (Jenny) Song.** Dr. Song, assistant professor of business and economics, served as first editor of a newly published anthology, *Servant-Leadership, Feminism, and Gender Well-Being: How Leaders Transcend Global Inequities through Hope, Unity, and Love*, published by SUNY Press. The book focuses on leadership problems related to worldwide gender dualism and gender stereotyping. It offers evidence of successful servant-leadership achieved when gender boundaries are crossed and gendered traits and behaviors integrated. In addition to serving as first editor, Song co-wrote the book's preface and authored the fourth chapter, "Servant First or Survival First? How Servant-Leaders Lead During COVID-19."

**Student-Athletes.** Northwestern's No. 3-ranked Raider football team put an exclamation mark on their phenomenal 2022 season, taking home the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) national title in December. While this win was worth savoring, Northwestern athletics is not just about winning—the Raiders' mission is to honor Christ through excellence. Northwestern's student-athletes are gifted not only athletically but also boast a 3.2 average GPA (545 students). All teams have achieved scholar-team status (avg. GPA  $\geq$  3.0), and, impressively, we have 127 scholar-athletes—juniors and seniors with a GPA  $\geq$  3.5.

Other standout athletics stats:

- 22 teams
- 545 student-athletes
- 63 student-athletes do multiple sports
- 31 full-time employees; 24 part-time
- 8 graduate assistants
- 14 volunteers
- 3,548 athletic summer camp participants

## Academic Program Updates

**Engineering undergraduate program.** Northwestern is currently interviewing candidates for a program director to develop and launch an undergraduate engineering major in the fall of 2024. Once the program is launched, we will pursue accreditation from the engineering accrediting body ABET. This will be a compelling addition to the other strong STEM programs Northwestern offers.

**Physician Assistant Studies graduate program.** Northwestern's physician assistant program graduated its first cohort of students in August of 2022, awarding 24 master's degrees to students from eight states ranging from Washington to Wisconsin and Texas to Minnesota. In the fall of 2022, the second cohort began their

clinicals, and the third cohort began their classwork. We are on track for achieving full accreditation by the program's accrediting body (ARC-PA) in the spring of 2024.

**Master of Education accolades.** Northwestern College's Master of Education (M.Ed.) program ([www.nwciowa.edu/online/master-of-education](http://www.nwciowa.edu/online/master-of-education)) is ranked 89th out of more than 325 schools in U.S. News & World Report's 2023 Best Online Master's in Education Programs list. Only one other member of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities is ranked higher.

Another national ranking organization, OnlineMastersDegrees.org (OMD), has ranked Northwestern's M.Ed. in early childhood tenth in the nation and highest among Iowa institutions. OMD also ranked Northwestern's M.Ed. in educational administration 22nd in the country. No other Iowa institution received a ranking in that category. And finally, Northwestern's special education M.Ed. was ranked 24th by OMD this year.

Northwestern's programs earned top honors from OMD for overall quality, affordability, and commitment to student success.

Northwestern offers the M.Ed. degree in eight tracks: early childhood, early childhood + endorsement, educational administration + K-12 principal endorsement, master teacher, special education, special education + endorsement, teacher leadership, and teaching history. Graduate-level endorsements and certificates are also available.

### **Employee Education: Understanding our Christian Identity**

In January and February, all employees were invited to participate in a three-part educational series focused on Northwestern College's Christian identity. Professors in our biblical and theological studies department—along with faculty and staff representatives from various Christian traditions—guided attendees to a deeper understanding of our Reformed commitment, evangelical engagement and ecumenical spirit:

Northwestern College was founded by the Reformed Church in America. We accept the ultimate authority of God's written Word and are guided by the wisdom of the ecumenical creeds and our historic Reformed confessions. We proclaim the sovereignty and grace of God in every area of creation and human life, our sinfulness and natural inability to have faith in God, God's sovereign and gracious choosing of God's people in Christ based solely on God's good pleasure and will, the Holy Spirit's initiation of the new birth resulting in faith and repentance, the life-giving spiritual union between Christ and believers, and God's compassionate embrace that keeps believers from ever truly falling away from faith. We affirm God's broad redemptive purposes, and we embrace the Christian call to reform the church, reflect critically on worldviews that influence culture, and transform the world.

As a Reformed institution, Northwestern stands within the broad tradition of evangelical Christianity. We affirm the divine inspiration, infallibility, authority and sufficiency of Scripture in matters of faith and practice. We seek a warm,

personal faith that is the product of conversion through an individual's trust in Christ as Savior and Lord and belief in Christ's redeeming and substitutionary work on the cross. We acknowledge that salvation comes solely through the unmerited, direct and transforming gift of God's grace. We believe that Christians are called to live holy lives, to make disciples throughout the world by embodying in word and deed the good news of salvation, and to love all people through acts of justice and mercy in Christ's name.

As a Reformed institution, Northwestern College identifies with the ecumenical spirit that unites all Christians in every time and place. This spirit is embodied in the unified confession of the historic Church as expressed in the Apostles' Creed. We desire greater unity among the universal Christian family. We celebrate the unique traditions and gifts of other Christian communities. We seek new cooperative relationships with other Christians in our common witness to the gospel and our pursuit of justice for all creation. Our ecumenical spirit calls us to appreciate alternative perspectives in an ethos of peaceful dialogue.

### **Northwestern's Impact**

The Northwestern experience impacts students' lives and the lives of their families. In the case of one family who contacted President Christy recently, their son ended up transferring for personal reasons and earning his degree from a different college, but his Northwestern College experience has had a lasting impact, nonetheless. (Note: the student's name has been removed).

Our family would like to thank you for the 3 years our son spent at NWC, from 2018 -2021. We would especially like you to know that without a few key faculty and staff, our son's future would not have looked the same. Coach Matt McCarty was instrumental in his development and was responsible for his football scholarship. Rahn Franklin's Bridge Scholar program enabled him to develop as a servant-leader. Julie Elliott took a personal interest in his development and was extremely helpful in welcoming our family as he transitioned into Northwestern. Prof. Han-Yen Kao helped to guide him in the many challenging academic decisions he had to make.

You may not be aware that just half of all adoptive and foster children ever graduate from high school, and only 6% of those go on to earn college degrees. Northwestern helped to place our son in that 6%. Today he is serving as a communications associate at a nonprofit that manages and helps to ensure good stewardship of charitable funds of \$550 million in assets. The foundation provides program funding for nonprofit organizations in 40 counties.

Thank you again for not only helping to make college a possibility for our son, but also for helping to instill the character he needed to move into his chosen field of service.