

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.
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).

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) 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.