

## **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.beyondbuckskin.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