

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. 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