

# **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