

## Report of the General Secretary

Dear delegates of General Synod 2023, the Lord be with you!

It is an honor for me to address you this morning to share my report with you. It's always a joy to see you, to connect in person with you, and to worship the Lord together. Pastors, I pray with many of you on Monday evenings or Friday afternoons, and it's a real blessing to see you in person at this meeting. Elders, you are a huge blessing to your congregations and to the RCA. Thank you for your service to God in the Reformed Church in America!

Last year my report and pastoral call to you focused on lament and hope. There are so many reasons why we must continue to lament today. One of those reasons is the loss of many of our churches. When I gave you my report last June, I shared with you that 68 churches had left the denomination by that time; today that number has grown to 222! Friends, this is a huge loss for a small denomination like ours. Two hundred and twenty two of our congregations have made the difficult decision to leave our family to form their own networks or to join other denominations; some of these churches have already left, and some are still in process. I'm sure that that has not been an easy decision for many of them to make. All of them went through a season of prayer, discernment, and difficult conversations. Not every congregation made a unanimous decision to leave the family and many of them continue to process their future. This has affected all of us—the ones who left and the ones who stayed. Our relationships have changed. Our covenantal vows have been broken, and our unity has been torn. These departures have been more gracious than we have seen in other denominations, yes, but the loss of each other is a wound, and we lament.

Often, people ask me about the reason why all of these churches decided to leave the denomination. Based on my own conversations with many people throughout the denomination, my travels and observations, I think that the three main reasons are money, conversations about human sexuality, and women in ministry. Please keep in mind that this is my own personal opinion, and I'm fine if you agree or disagree with me about this.

In my opinion the first reason—and this is, I believe, the main reason—why many of these churches left the denomination is money. Many of them believed that they were paying too much in assessments and didn't get much in return from the denomination. I have heard this comment more than I would like to hear it, and I personally don't agree with that because I know how hard our GSC staff team works to serve and walk alongside churches and pastors of the RCA. But when we talk about money in any context, that's always a difficult conversation. I give thanks to our finance team that always helps us to navigate money conversations with grace and gratitude.

The second reason why churches left the denomination is the conversation about human sexuality. Some of our churches and leaders were uncomfortable with the

decision of General Synod 2021 when synod approved recommendation one of the Vision 2020 Team's report, affirming our existing polity and calling for a restructure of the denomination. This is the recommendation they adopted:

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 use 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 2023.

That recommendation references four principles that made some people uncomfortable. These principles are:

- Classis are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geography-based
- Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage
- Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level
- The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod is examined in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains.

After some conversation, synod decided to add one more year for the restructuring team to bring their final report to the meeting of the General Synod in 2024. A couple of weeks ago I shared, in the News and Resources email we send to pastors and churches, about the future of the RCA. In that communication to the church I shared that we are envisioning a future that is not either/or but a future that is both/and. Both extremes are dividing the church in North America, and we need to find a common ground where the focus is on the ministry of the gospel, and not about who is right or wrong, not who has a better understanding of the Bible. The future focus of the RCA is on the calling of Jesus for ministry, the calling of the gospel to make disciples who are committed to gospel ministry in North America and in the rest of the world.

Rather than making a final decision about sexuality or changing our historic statements on this topic, the RCA's decision in 2021 was about finding a way to live together in the messiness of the middle. We decided to stay in the middle. The middle is blurry and messy, just like the world is. The world in which we live today is messy, and we need a lot of humility to live faithfully in the midst of the messiness of the world. Jesus modeled humility by living faithfully in the midst of a messy world. We need to learn the humility of Jesus.

The third reason why many of these churches have left, believe it or not, is women in ministry. Even after half a century that women have been ordained as deacons, elders, and pastors in the RCA, some churches and leaders still had a problem with that. But we in the RCA will always, unapologetically, bless and embrace all of our women leaders and pastors. Women of God, we need you! Thank you for responding positively to God's call in your life. We, men, are blessed to do ministry together with you, and at this General Synod meeting we will have a special celebration for five decades of the ordination of women in the RCA on Sunday evening. Please don't miss that important celebration. My prayer is that women will always flourish in ministry in the Reformed Church in America.

We must continue to lament for the loss that we are experiencing, not only with the departure of the churches that are no longer part of the RCA, but also because of what we are experiencing in the world today. At the same time, we must also keep hope alive. Hope is a beautiful thing, and it is what helps us carry the heaviest burdens of life. Biblical hope is not only the desire for something good to happen in the future, it is the confident expectation that it will happen. Hope is holding on to the promises of God that he will be with us to the end of the age. There is so much to be hopeful for and to celebrate in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America. Let me share some highlights.

### **The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry**

As part of the ongoing Transformed & Transforming vision mandated by General Synod in 2013, and as a response to this time of change and restructuring we are currently living in the RCA with a smaller ministry staff, I brought all of the GSC ministry staff together in one team that we are calling: "The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry." The center is led by Rev. Chad Farrand and is composed of Rev. Anna Radcliffe (next gen and ministry innovation), Ruth Langkamp (next gen), Rev. Dr. Fredy Aviles (church ministry and revitalization), Rev. Jeremy Simpson (belonging), Rev. Liz Testa (women's transformation and leadership), Pastor Jonatan Basora (administration and operations), and Rev. Dr. Andres Serrano (multiplication). They are supported by Lorraine Parker and Dawn Muller.

Because of all the changes we are experiencing as a denomination, we have to be creative and strategic. Bringing all of the ministry staff together in a new center is an effort to respond with creativity and innovation to the current reality we are facing as a denomination.

The center seeks to honor both the spirit and the goals of Transformed & Transforming, while also embracing the Spirit's movement toward a new global future for the RCA. The center offers training for discipleship, leadership, local mission, women's transformation and leadership, disability concerns, next generation engagement, as well as a holistic discipleship work for church planting locally and around the world.

The global pandemic and all the changes and restructuring we are experiencing as a denomination have taught us that we need to do a better job of responding, listening, and working alongside churches and leaders. Pastors more than ever before need sabbath and mental health resources, training on adaptive leadership and innovation processes, avenues to pursue anti-racism and advocacy, and resources for ongoing next generation work.

The center is committed to developing a more nimble and responsive way for the GSC ministry staff team to provide quality services for both the present and future RCA, which is made up of mostly small to mid-size churches and includes many racial and ethnic congregations that worship in different languages. Part of this retooling will be greater partnership with regional synods, classes, and classis leaders, recognizing and supporting the work that God is already doing in and through the regions and classes in the Reformed Church in America.

The training and learning opportunities offered by the center to classes, churches, and ministry leaders will empower them for greater discipleship, leadership, and local mission, as it has in the past, whether they serve long-established congregations or new church plants. Different levels of learning are available, including in-depth coaching and consulting. You will hear more about the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry at the plenary session this evening.

### **Global Mission, Ministry, and Multiplication progress:**

Even in the midst of the challenging season we are living in these days as a denomination, we have made significant progress in many important areas of mission, ministry, and multiplication this year. These are some of the highlights.

- In August 2022, 160 leaders from the GSC's racial and ethnic council as well as the Commission on Race and Ethnicity met in Chicago where they shared the future of the RCA that reflects the vision of Revelation 7:9. We worshiped together in several languages. We heard amazing stories of what God is doing in these churches.
- In January 2023, I met with the coordinators and the executive teams of the racial and ethnic councils in Orlando, Florida, along with leaders from the center, to talk about ways to partner together in ministry.
- 105 people participated in the Dismantling Racism prayer gatherings, doing discipleship work that is the foundation for seeking justice.
- More than ten women are enrolled in the She Is Called cohorts for New Brunswick Theological Seminary's certificate program in church leadership and theological studies. These women are exploring their callings to become

preaching elders, commissioned pastors, go further in their seminary studies, or simply become better equipped ministry leaders. I had the privilege to be present at the NBTS commencement ceremony where several of these leaders graduated last month.

- Eleven New Congregation Plans were approved in New York, Ontario, Iowa, Texas, and Florida.
- Disability concerns hosted its largest ever virtual conference, equipping 149 leaders to address ableism in their churches so their churches become places where everybody belongs and everybody serves.
- Interest in fresh expressions of church developed in the Northeast, Western Michigan, and Chicago areas. These movements are supported by three simple church catalytic grants from church multiplication.
- The “She is Called” Women of the Bible study is being led in 40 churches, and 1.25 million people have accessed the studies on Faithward, our resource website. Daily online engagement with these studies nearly quadrupled in less than a year. The series was developed with diverse authorship, which includes men and women from around the world, there were 14 authors of color, including 2 Brazilian, 2 Canadian, and 2 Taiwanese authors. The graphic artist is an African American. Thirty new congregations purchased books from the series this year.
- One new church plant in New Hampshire developed in partnership with women’s transformation and leadership and the president of Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries.
- Two classes are building capacity to multiply congregations with grants from church multiplication.
- The center staff team met with 50 leaders from West Michigan, Ontario, Hope College, and Oakland, California, to work together against racism and enhance interracial cooperation.
- Rev. Jeremy Simpson is planning a series of Sankofa journeys in response to General Synod 2022’s adoption of RE 22-2.
- The women’s transformation and leadership team equipped 450 participants in various leadership and discipleship online workshops.
- Over 120 young leaders have been engaged through listening sessions, leadership camps, scholarships for theological education, and short-term missions.
- Faithward ([faithward.org](https://faithward.org)) now reaches on average 340,000 viewers a month to deepen their faith. These viewers speak English or Spanish. Almost half of them are age 18 to 34. This site serves the RCA, yet it also serves the wider

church; the vast majority of visitors are from many denominations around the world.

- Over the course of the year, Global Mission held eight regional celebration events in New York, New Jersey, Iowa, and Michigan. During these events, the team shared and celebrated RCA mission work that is changing the lives of people around the world. You will hear more about what God is doing around the world in the Global Mission report at tonight's plenary.
- Finally, our Global Mission director, Rev. Dr. JP Sundararajan, had set a goal to raise additional 33 Partner-in-Mission (PIM) shares for missionaries who are currently fundraising, and he is making good progress. Global Mission has raised 17.75 new PIM shares so far, and continues to raise more support in addition to retaining what we already have.

All of these are amazing signs of God at work even in the midst of a difficult season. I give thanks to God for all of these opportunities to equip RCA churches for mission!

### **Connecting with RCA churches**

This year I have been able to travel a lot. Those of you who are friends with me on social media have been able to follow me in my journeys to many different places in North America and around the world. I have been to California, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, Iowa, Ontario, Canada, Argentina, and many other places. I give thanks to God for all the wonderful opportunities to visit all of these RCA churches to meet with their leaders and preach God's Word in their pulpits. All of these visits have been a huge blessing for me and for the churches and leaders as we encourage one another and pray for one another. As we continue in the process of restructuring and re-focusing, it is my goal to continue to make these personal connections with RCA churches and with the individual donors who support the mission and ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

### **Restructuring Team Roundtables**

I also want to mention that during the fall, winter, and spring I have been able to attend all of the 13 in-person restructuring team's roundtable conversations. It has been exhausting to make all of these trips, but it has been great to connect with RCA churches and leaders around the U.S. and Canada. I give thanks to all the pastors and churches that hosted all of these meetings:

- Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa
- Iglesia Vida de Reino, Sarasota, Florida
- Igreja Vida Nova, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- Michigan Regional Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan

- New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, New Jersey
- Good Shepherd Reformed Church, Queens, New York
- Community Reformed Church, Manhasset, New York
- Niskayuna Reformed Church, Schenectady, New York
- Sequoia Church, Fresno, California
- Faith Church, Norwalk, California
- Christ Community Church, Lemont, Illinois
- The Bridge Church, Johnston, Iowa
- Iglesia El Buen Pastor, Austin, Texas

We also had a webinar on May 11 with over 400 people in attendance. All of these have been great opportunities for the restructuring team to share about the progress and to receive feedback.

This afternoon you, delegates of General Synod 2023, will have the opportunity to hear the interim report of the restructuring team, and tomorrow you will spend time in small groups offering feedback.

## **Pastoral Call**

I want to conclude my report by offering a pastoral call to the Reformed Church in America. My pastoral call to you today is to love, to unity, and to witness.

### *Love*

Love is a small word but a powerful one. Love is a beautiful thing. 1 Corinthians 13 says that:

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails....*

And the passage ends by saying:

*<sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

In the Gospel of John, love is what defines what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Love is the marker of discipleship! Hear these passages from the Farewell Discourse of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel:

First, listen to these two verses from chapter 13:

<sup>34</sup> “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Two more verses on chapter 15:

<sup>12</sup> “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:2).

<sup>17</sup> “This is my command: Love each other” (John 15:17).

In his book, *Love in the Gospel of John*, New Testament scholar Francis Moloney explains that:

“Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Gospel of John knows it contains love commands (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17). But there is something different in the Fourth Gospel that has attracted the interest of scholars in recent times. Despite the widespread insistence upon love in the Gospel of John, the command to love one’s neighbor has disappeared. A command to ‘love one another’ has replaced it. It is equally interesting that Jesus does not command to love God. He instructs his disciples—and through this Gospel, all subsequent readers and hearers—to love him.”

So, in the Gospel of John the command is to love Jesus and to love one another. This is the invitation I want to make to you today, dear friends of the Reformed Church in America. Let us love Jesus with all of our strength and love each other deeply. Please hear me well, I’m not saying that we should not love God and our neighbor. What I’m saying to you today is that we have to do a better job in learning how to love each other. It is important to note that the command to love God and neighbor predates the Christian era. Love for God and neighbor were locked together by Jesus in his synthesis of the Law and the Prophets in Matthew 22:37-40. The new commandment in John is to love one another.

I think we do a decent job in loving God. We pray, we worship every Sunday, we read the Bible, we give, etc. I think we do an okay job in loving our neighbor. We serve our communities, we welcome people into our churches, we advocate for justice, we practice hospitality, etc. But we do a poor job in loving each other. The kind of love that we need to have for one another is the same kind of love that Jesus had for his disciples. Jesus gave his life for his friends! This is sacrificial love! We are far away from that kind of love. You just need to read articles in newspapers and social media outlets about the current reality of the church in North America to see how followers of Jesus are treating each other these days. Or you just need to attend a classis meeting or any other church meeting in our denomination to see how much work we still have to do in this extremely important area of discipleship.

Friends, let us put into practice true discipleship by loving Jesus and by loving one another deeply. We as believers of Jesus in this world are identified by one thing, and one thing only: our love. The color of our skin is not important, the language we



speech is not important, our political views are not important. What's really important for followers of Jesus is their love for one another.

## *Unity*

Christian unity is so important to our Lord that he prayed to the Father for it in John 17. In the last part of this prayer of Jesus, this is what it says about us:

*<sup>20</sup> "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:20-23)*

In that prayer Jesus asked God to help us, believers, to be one and to live in complete harmony with each other. Jesus did not only pray for unity but also gave reasons for it. We need to live in unity so that the world may believe that Jesus was sent to the world by the Father, and so that they may believe God loves the world.

The unity of the church refers to the union of the people of God in all our distinctive expressions bound to Jesus and to one another by the gospel. Unity does not mean uniformity. We need to be united in our diversity, and that is my pastoral call to the church as we continue to adapt to our new reality as a denomination. The unity we practice as a denomination will serve as a witness to the world.

## *Witness*

Finally, I call the church to refocus on our witness to the world. The proclamation of the gospel must be central to our ministry in the Reformed Church in America. For way too many years, we have been focusing on the wrong things, and thus we have been on steady decline for decades already. It is time for us as a denomination to renew our commitment to seriously focus on the proclamation of the gospel to the communities where God has called us to serve.

The church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, needs to be Jesus's witness in the world. Our communities need to hear the message of the gospel in word and in deed. This message of the gospel is the wonderful and powerful story of Jesus. It includes the story of the birth of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus. This must be the focus of our denomination. This is where we must spend all of our resources, our time, and our energy. This broken world so loved by God must hear the message of the good news of the gospel with passion and boldness through the ministry of the

Reformed Church in America in our North American context and in the rest of the world.

Dear friends of the Reformed Church in America, God is up to something great in our future. Let us love one another sincerely, let us be united in our diversity, and let us proclaim the good news of the gospel with passion and boldness!

Mr. President, this concludes my report.