

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

*Note: The General Synod Council (GSC) considered both parts of this report from the African American Black Council (AABC) at its March 19-20, 2024, meeting. The GSC's responses, including related recommendations it is bringing to this General Synod, can be found immediately following this report on pages 78-84 of this workbook. The racial and ethnic councils are advisory councils of the GSC; as such, their recommendations are made to the General Synod Council, not directly to the General Synod. This General Synod will vote on the recommendations in bold immediately following this report—recommendations coming from the GSC.

Introduction

The African American Black Council (AABC) made the following recommendation to the General Synod Council (GSC) in the AABC's March 2023 report:

To direct its 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.

GSC made that direction.

On September 19, 2023, the AABC forwarded its recommendations and specific ideas to GSC.

In an October 24, 2023, letter to the AABC, Kim Van Es, GSC moderator, thanked the AABC for its response. The GSC requested that recommendations that contain specific changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* be returned to the GSC.

In the same letter, moderator Van Es requested additional information about the AABC's recommendations that were broader than *BCO* revisions. She wrote that GSC suggested "prioritizing and developing specific initiatives" for those recommendations.

The GSC requested both sets of recommendations be forwarded to GSC by December 31, 2023.

The AABC recommendations will be presented in two parts. Part 1 focuses on specific *BCO* revisions. Part 2 focuses on recommendations that are broader than *BCO*-specific revisions.

Part 1: Recommendations for Specific Changes to the *BCO* Related to Antiracism

AABC Recommendation #1 to GSC

***BCO* location:** Preamble, Paragraph 3.

Current *BCO* language:

Second, there is only one ministry and that ministry is shared by all Christians. The particular ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to preserve it.

Recommended *BCO* language (with changes tracked):

Second, there is only one ministry and that ministry is shared by all Christians. “All Christians” includes everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity, color, or class. Policies, beliefs, and behaviors that, because of race, ethnicity, color, or class diminish the contributions of any Christians must be confronted and changed. The particular ministries of those who hold office arise out of this common ministry in order to preserve ~~it~~ the inclusive meaning embedded in the word “all”.

Rationale for change:

1. The *BCO* was created by Dutch people, for Dutch people. Though the phrase “all Christians” has been in the preamble for many years, “all” historically meant “Dutch” or “Dutch-American.” People of other races and ethnicities eventually became members of the RCA. However, they—non-Dutch people—had to adopt as their own the *BCO*’s Dutch-oriented polity practices. The newness and giftedness that non-Dutch people brought with them were lessened by the practiced application of the *BCO*. That resulted in the non-inclusion of their approaches to polity. Efforts were not made to re-craft the *BCO* into a multiracial, multicultural polity tool.
2. In most classes and churches, people of Dutch and Dutch-American descent make up a controlling majority. Intentionally or unintentionally, contributions of people who are not of Dutch or Dutch-American background have not been given equal consideration. Majority rules without minority wisdom and integrity being safeguarded.
3. Stating that “all Christians” is sufficient is tantamount to the U.S. Founding Fathers’ assertion that “all men are created equal.” The Founding Fathers really only meant, “all landowning white men are created equal.” Decades of advocacy, court cases, and legislation were required to expand the Founding Fathers’ intent about “all men being created equal” to mean “all people are created equal.” A similar expansion is required for the RCA’s intentions about “all Christians.”
4. The *BCO* is the introduction to how the RCA governs its ministry. The preamble is the *BCO*’s first statement about that work. Silence about racism in the preamble can be tantamount to consenting to not addressing or eliminating racist policies, beliefs, and actions in the RCA’s ministry. Silence

about embedded racism supports a passive racist approach that assimilates non-Dutch people. That assimilation denies them the right to bring their whole selves to the denomination's leadership and life.

AABC Recommendation #2 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1

Current BCO language:

The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods. Typically, the "world within which the classis ministers" is comprised of people from various racial, ethnic, class, and color identities. The classis ministries, therefore, should reflect the diversity found within the classis bounds.

Rationale:

Obedience to the Holy Scripture means that ministry is based on the need for Jesus, not on racial or ethnic preferences among the people who need Jesus. Participation in the work of classis, as the classis works within its respective bounds, needs to include people from the geographic community being served. There should be no race-based "us" or "them" when planning, organizing, implementing, resourcing, and evaluating the work of a classis within its bounds. The work of classis must reflect the Holy Spirit's interests in all communities.

AABC Recommendation #3 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11, sub-section f

Current BCO language:

The points of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism shall be explained by the minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The points of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belhar Confession shall be explained by the minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Rationale:

1. The Belhar Confession is the backbone confession supporting antiracism. It is the RCA's only Standard of Unity that clearly and directly guides us toward a future freed from racism and culturalism.
2. Sunday worship services are the optimal times for providing biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical antiracism instruction for leadership, discipleship, and mission for RCA members. Further, antiracism should be experienced and lived as fully integrated into our leadership, discipleship, and mission, not as a stand-alone feature. Hence, the Belhar Confession should do for all of us what the Heidelberg Catechism should do for all of us.
3. In African American and, perhaps, other worship traditions practiced by people of color, stories of God's guidance of us into a racial future grounded in unity, reconciliation, and justice is part of what it means to be children of God. This change further highlights contributions of historically oppressed people to worshiping, living, and working before God. It also encourages white pastors to include stories and biblical narratives important to people of color in worship services.

AABC Recommendation #4 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 14, sub-section e

Current BCO language:

The elders and deacons shall be elected for a term not to exceed five years, the length of the term being at the discretion of the consistory. A classis may, under extenuating circumstances and at the request of a consistory, grant permission for an extension of the term of office of elders and deacons, subject to classis review at least once every five years.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

The elders and deacons ~~shall be elected for a term not to exceed five years,~~ the length of the term being at the discretion of the consistory will serve up to two consecutive three-year terms per office. To fill vacant positions, the nominating group will first seek nominees who never served on consistory, or are not members of the greater consistory. A classis may, under extenuating circumstances and at the request of a consistory, grant permission for an extension of the term of office of elders and deacons, subject to classis review at least once every ~~five~~ three years.

Rationale:

1. Some churches that have multiracial memberships often do not experience diverse and equitable, multiracial leadership within the consistory. That is, regardless of how many members of color there are, leadership tends to remain white-dominant. This pattern might be caused by too few people of color being interested in leadership. It can also be a result of not preparing significant numbers of church members to assume leadership. Three-year term limits can open more opportunities for leadership than can five-year terms to a wider racial, etc., diversity of congregational members.
2. Some of our mono-racial white congregations are located in multiracial communities. Active policies and behaviors are not in play to ensure the church membership mirrors the community's membership. The recommended *BCO* change can incentivize intentional congregational policies, beliefs, and behaviors to develop multiracial congregations within those multiracial communities.
3. Other RCA church bodies such as the GSC and commissions have term limits of three years that are renewable for three additional years. This change makes consistorial service consistent with those service opportunities.

AABC Recommendation #5 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1, new section f

Current *BCO* language:

Section f does not exist.

Recommended *BCO* language (with changes tracked):

Classis shall ensure that Ministers of Word and Sacrament serving in its jurisdiction are adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.

Rationale:

1. People living in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal areas often face spiritual, life, and cultural challenges particular to those geographies.
2. While people of color live, work, and worship in all of these geographic areas, members of urban churches tend to be predominately people of color, and tribal congregations are predominately First Nations/Native American people.
3. Paragraph 3 of the *BCO* preamble states the following: "First, the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its head – to announce the good news of his Saviorhood, and extend his Lordship throughout the world." The development of a church's life always is influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives the church's members live and work in. Ministers and commissioned pastors who are unaware of those distinctives cannot best position their declaration of the good news to that church's members or their local mission field.

4. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism can have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices living within those contexts. Such silence can and has undermined the fruitful “announcement of the good news” and extension “of his Lordship throughout the world.”
5. Many local congregations appear to prefer to maintain their historically white or Dutch heritages as opposed to transitioning to embrace changed and changing cultural and demographic contexts. Such preferences can, intentionally and unintentionally, violate tenets of the antiracism policy.
6. Multiracial congregations and classes with African American and other people of color members tend to have consistories that are largely or even all white. Those leadership patterns effectively block the ordination of people of color into leadership positions.
7. Worship choices and patterns likely will insufficiently reflect the cultural rhythms, patterns, and needs of people who are not of Dutch descent, or bring to God in worship the particular challenges faced in urban, suburban, rural, or tribal areas. Such lack of reflection suggests that God is not sensitive to the challenges to life and faith that are particular to particular people groups. If all these matters were considered with fresh hearts, minds, ears, and eyes, the AABC believes some different understandings and approaches to our shared ministry would result.
8. Each area has its own local mission challenges and opportunities. Leadership should be knowledgeable of them and be able to articulate them to God and the congregation in worship.

AABC Recommendation #6 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Sec. 1

Current BCO language:

A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within the classis and under the auspice of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Recommended BCO language (with changes tracked):

A commissioned pastor is an elder who is selected, commissioned, and supervised by the consistory, church, or ministry in which the person will serve. Commissioned pastors are trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within the classis and under the auspice of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments. The commission ~~shall~~ may be valid for the period of assigned service. The commissioned pastor must be annually recertified to that service. Successful recertification is to be based on evidence that the assigned service’s constituents are growing faithfully and fruitfully.

Rationale for change:

1. There are a number of qualified elders who are people of color who could be ordained as commissioned pastors but are not. Many times, it appears that the decision not to commission is based in a classis view or policy not to utilize the office. Whether or not a congregation or ministry has the right to a commissioned pastor should be a consistory matter, not a classis one.
2. Reduce classis discretion in this matter, but do not transfer that authority to a higher assembly or body.
3. There appear to be times when commissioned pastors of color are not adequately held accountable by the classis. We know of commissioned pastors of color who do not participate in active coaching, training, and/or do not regularly attend classis meetings. Such persons may not be held accountable for these deficiencies. Classis leaders might not challenge such commissioned pastors out of concern for or fear of being called racist. We are aware of no such deficient commissioned pastors who were decertified.
4. Annual recertification should focus on the following features: satisfactory participation in a regular coaching relationship, completion of expected training, participation at scheduled classis meetings, and increasing faithfulness and fruitfulness within their assigned service.
5. Increasingly, some churches are unable to support the full-time, one pastor/one church model. Pulpits are often left vacant for excessively long periods of time while searching for suitable seminary-graduated pastors. Also, some congregations cannot afford to pay a full-time pastor. A result of both situations can be a decline in the fruitfulness of pastor-less worshiping congregations. Additional pastoral leadership models are needed. Increased use of full-time commissioned pastors, bivocational commissioned pastors, and commissioned pastor teams would benefit and bless more worshiping communities.

AABC Recommendation #7 to GSC

BCO location: Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2, new sub-section d

Current BCO language:

Sub-section d does not currently exist.

Recommended BCO language (with tracked changes):

Classis shall ensure that commissioned pastors serving in its jurisdiction are knowledgeable of and adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.

Rationale:

Same rationale as Recommendation #3.

Part 2: Recommendations on Extra-BCO Matters Related to Antiracism

This report is Part 2 of the AABC's report to the GSC also submitted on December 31, 2023. This report is the AABC's response to GSC moderator Kim Van Es' request for additional information about antiracism recommendations that are broader than *BCO* revisions.

Prioritized Proposal #1

“Learn from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) how they inputted antiracism into all aspects of Seminary life and customize replication of NBTS's best practices for use in assemblies, congregations and denominational staff.” (From AABC report to the GSC dated 9-19-23)

Proposal information gathered from interviews and email exchanges with the following persons. Representing NBTS: Rev. Micah L. McCreary, PhD (president of NBTS), Charles Rix, PhD (interim vice president of academics and dean of the seminary, and director of MA in Theological Studies and Ministry Studies). Representing the AABC: Rev. Dr. Peter Watts (coordinator), Rev. Sharon Atkins (chair), Rev. Maudelin Willock (secretary), and Earl James (vice chair).

The AABC uses the following descriptions of “best practices” for this report:

1. A standard or set of guidelines that is known to produce good outcomes if followed and
2. Related to how to carry out a task or configure something.

The NBTS best practices are provided in three categories:

1. Prerequisites to be owned before an organization can transform into an antiracist one
2. Antiracism practices
3. Ways to deliver and implement antiracism best practices

Category 1 Best Practices – Organizational Prerequisites

1. Clarify the reasons upon which the entity must become antiracist.
2. Continually assert that antiracism is a roadmap, not merely a statement, that directs the entity's future.
3. Identify the sources of courage to continually drive the entity to become increasingly antiracist.
4. Adopt and operationalize organizational traits that promote frequent, safe discussions about racism.

Background and history behind Category 1 Best Practices:

1. NBTS's executive and board leadership recognized NBTS could not survive by largely training only white males. The seminary's financial and missional lives required deep changes in its administration, faculty, and student demographics, cultures, and power sharing practices.

2. At several points, racial-ethnic students charged the administration that their presence was desired only to increase revenues. They demanded greater inclusion.
3. There were strong voices and inertias to keep NBTS as a largely white/Dutch educational institution. Sufficient organizational courage had to be mustered to “stay the antiracism course.”
4. NBTS had to change how it assessed and managed both resource scarcities and abundances.
5. NBTS adopted the following organizational traits as lenses for antiracism progress:
 - a. Integrity.
 - b. Transparency.
 - c. Leave assumptions at the door.
 - d. Do not deny the truths of others.
 - e. Do not take things personally.
 - f. Do not justify positions, either historic or envisioned ones.
 - g. Do not adopt needs to defend positions such that other ones are not welcome.
 - h. Do not romanticize people, places, events, things, or histories.
6. Antiracism is to be embedded in all topics and is the lens through which all institutional decisions and actions are assessed.

Category 2 Best Practices – Antiracism Practices

1. Adopt, post, and frequently use an antiracism statement.
2. Look to God to bring forward expected and unexpected new opportunities for antiracist decisions and actions.
3. Regarding training:
 - a. Encourage members and constituents to participate in antiracism training at least annually.
 - b. Always directly connect training to everyday life experiences.
 - c. Help people identify what they will assume responsibility to prevent regarding racism.
 - d. Approach training as being more than cerebral. Include arts and music.
4. Act out antiracism in intersectional situations.
5. Create safe places to explore racism and be antiracist, and insist on that safety regardless of politics, cultures, and experiences.
6. Encourage each other to own the forms of diversity that make one uncomfortable.
7. Embed diversity in all that is taught about leadership, spiritual formation, and mission.
8. No people group has adequate windows into most of the experiences of other people groups.
9. Conciliation proceeds reconciliation. Develop relationships that can handle stresses and remain resilient.

Background and history behind Category 2 Best Practices:

1. The NBTS antiracism statement is prominently posted around the NBTS building and on its website. The NBTS board of directors repeats and uses the antiracism statement at all board meetings.
2. Every NBTS student has to engage in an annual antiracism training.
3. Training alone is insufficient. It must include opportunities for people to connect what they are learning to their real-life situations and evoke from participants a sense for committing to oppose racist actions, thoughts, and policies.
4. Antiracism is not treated as a stand-alone feature. Racism is expressed in conjunction with other demographic dynamics—economics, nations of origin, education, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc. Therefore, antiracism is lived out intersectionally, both personally and corporately.
5. We often give “favorable points” to people who are “like me” demographically, etc. That tendency is normal for many of us. Therefore, we find we must keep “front of mind” our biases, preferences, and tendencies to see the familiar as normal and the unfamiliar as abnormal or wrong. We must think and live with the knowledge that God lives in front of others who have ways unfamiliar to us just as God does with us.
6. Every NBTS class has some element of antiracism or diversity within it. A fundamental position is that if we do not teach leadership, spiritual formation, and mission with antiracism embedded, then we inadvertently embed racist assumptions and tendencies in how we teach leadership, spiritual formation, and mission.
7. Antiracism work can become uncomfortable. As antiracists, we need to especially and intentionally build into our skill sets resiliency and effective listening.
8. A critical part of living as an antiracist is always looking for and supporting antiracist freedom fighters, allies, and accomplices.

Category 3 Best Practices - Ways to Deliver Antiracism

1. Find or create catalytic events that highlight the needs for antiracism.
2. Embed antiracism into everything the organization does and promote discussions that assess the values for the embedding.
3. Consider trainings in highly focused 15-minute intervals in addition to longer training durations.

Prioritized Proposal #2

“Study the four confessions in the *BCO* to identify specific bridges to antiracism and implement processes to incorporate those bridges into the *BCO* and its bylaws. The bridges can be specifically incorporated into the second article of the *BCO* that outlines the responsibilities of each assembly. This is critically important because policy is only as good as its accountability. An antiracism policy must also be embedded in the *BCO*’s portion on discipline so that when the policy is violated the body can be restored.”

Below are some initial efforts to show bridges that connects antiracism to our confessions into our *BCO*. The focus surrounds a clear understanding of the purposes in methods of discipline as outlined in the *BCO*.

The GSC might appoint a ministry team to identify additional and review the interconnections, and make specific recommendations to the GSC. The AABC is happy to have a representative serve on such a team.

BCO Chapter 2, Part 1 - Discipline. This is the locus for placing the *BCO* antiracism enhancements.

Article 1. Nature of Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sec. 2. The exercise of discipline may take the form of admonition, rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership in the church or from office, deposition from office, or excommunication, as the gravity of the offense in the opinion of the assembly or the judicatory may warrant. Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings. All further steps of discipline—suspension, deposition, and excommunication—are judicial in nature and require the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory. A judicatory may, in the judicial process, impose admonition or rebuke as a form of discipline.

Article 2. Nature of Offenses

Sec. 1. The only matters to be considered as offenses subject to accusation are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. [emphasis added]

The Confessions

Note: The Constitution of the RCA includes the four Confessions. These, in addition to the Bible, dictate the manner by which accusations can be brought forth.

Here are some examples from the Confessions of how and where race-related accusations and offenses can be considered.

Belhar Confession

(Reference numbered section 2, third bullet point of the “We believe” sub-section.)

...unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already

conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted. (John 17:20-23)

Heidelberg Catechism

1. Lord's Day 2, Q+A 4 - Love God and neighbor
2. Lord's Day 3, Q+A 87 - Case for repentance
3. Lord's Day 33, Q+A 89 - To be "genuinely sorry for sin"
4. Lord's Day 40, Q+A 105-106 - "not to belittle, hate, insult..." the roots of murder matter to God, not just the actual actions (envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness)
5. Lord's Day 41, Q+A 107 - Love defined
6. Lord's Day 42, Q+A 111 - "Do whatever I can for my neighbor's good"

Belgic Confession, Article 29

As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.

Critical nature of "notorious"

BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2, Section 3

Notwithstanding Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 2, notorious and scandalous offenses require immediate suspension and/or other action as determined by the responsible body, pending review by the appropriate assembly or judicatory. [emphasis added]

Definitions of "notorious":

1. Merriam-Webster dictionary: "Generally known and talked of, especially widely unfavorably."
2. Cambridge Dictionary: "Famous for something bad."

The Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America are infamous for their racist history including apartheid, participation in the transatlantic slave trade, and anti-abolitionist positions. Therefore, any act of racism should be considered a "notorious" offense. Such acts should require immediate suspension as per the BCO.

Resource:

- “The Dutch Reformed Church and its Contribution to Apartheid,” from the European Academy on Religion and Society (<https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/news/the-dutch-reformed-church-and-its-contribution-to-apartheid>)

BCO Part II

Article 5, Section 11a

The judicatory shall establish such administrative rules for the trial as it deems appropriate to ensure that the trial will be conducted in a fair and impartial manner.

Does the judicatory administering the rules have an equity lens? They should be trained and astute in racial equity, cultural norms, and power dynamics.

Article 2, Nature of Offenses

Section 2: Matthew 18 and power dynamics, especially in racial and ethnic congregations where complaints across intergenerational and gender lines can be downplayed and not taken seriously.

Article 4, Section 4: If a committee is going to hear a complaint involving racial and ethnic parties, the committee should be made of individuals trained and astute in racial equity, cultural norms, and power dynamics.

A Real Impact Story

An elder made an accusation about a Black male staff member having a sexually inappropriate relationship with a young Mexican American female in the church. The staff member denied it. The elder was motivated by a desire to repay the staff member from differences they had with a business deal gone bad. The pastor decided not to engage the conflict, as it was clearly driven by something beyond the church’s jurisdiction. The consistory of all white people, on the other hand, was determined to get to the bottom of it. They wanted to directly ask the woman, a single mom of three children, if she had indeed engaged in an inappropriate sexual relationship with the staff member. The pastor discouraged the ask, but decided to ask the classis for advice. The classis representative sat with the consistory and immediately advised, “ask her.” The pastor and an elder met with the woman. Their questioning cut straight to her soul. Her response was not only a complete denial of the affair, but she also declared her painful disappointment that her church saw her as an adulteress, home wrecker, etc. Years later, she told her pastor that incident was one of her most painful moments in the life of the church she deeply loved.

1. Who made the decision? The white consistory, at the urging of a disgruntled elder toward a staff member, with the white male classis clerk’s approval.

2. Had the two parties been white, would they have so wantonly approached the young woman?
3. Are women of color, especially Black and Brown women, perceived as desirable, promiscuous, exotic, differently than white women?
4. Would it have been different if the gender roles were reversed—a woman on staff was accused of having an affair with a man in the congregation who happened to be a single father?
 - a. Would the classis have advised them to ask him?
5. How do we determine if racial bias influences or guides cross-racial decisions and actions? Where does the power to determine that lie?
6. We all are admonished to rely on Matthew 18:15-17 to resolve differences. However, like in the impact story, there are unspoken biases at play. Those unspoken biases were fueled by unequal power dynamics. The use of Matthew 18:15-17 as a dispute resolving tool without accounting for power imbalances can lead to unjust, unrighteousness, unbiblical, personally devastating decisions and outcomes.

Prioritized Proposal #3

“Develop a racial equity lens that includes assessment of power dynamics to ensure fundamental equity or justice in decisions and actions of the denominational staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions. Use of that lens, or one similar to it, could be incorporated into the *BCO* articles that outline the responsibilities of each assembly. Alternatively, the lens could be recommended to the churches and assemblies by General Synod and required for use by GSC.”

Why develop and use a “racial equity lens”?

Currently, the RCA has an antiracism policy that has little to no accountability for its implementation.

The traditional approaches we use to resolve disagreements tend to not take into account power imbalances in contested situations. Neither do they take into account implicit biases embedded within systems. Contested situations may be between people, or involve group decision-making or the implementation of decisions. Power imbalances can exist in situations involving people of different races, ethnicities, genders, generations, etc. Even resolution techniques based on Matthew 18:15-17 typically might not take power imbalances into account.

A racial equity lens will intentionally assess situations, decisions, and actions for real or apparent power imbalances, and will make recommendations to the decision-making authorities to resolve them.

What is a racial equity lens?

The lens is a group of people trained to a high level of expertise to ask questions to identify racial power imbalances in decisions and actions. They must:

1. Know what racial inequity patterns look like.
2. Be able to identify them in real-time situations.
3. Make recommendations to bring racial equity to disputed decisions and actions.

There might be a small number (perhaps five or six) who can be engaged in smaller groups of two to four around the RCA. Or each assembly, institution, and agency may have its own team of experts.

When should a racial equity group be utilized?

The use of such a team should be triggered whenever a charge involving racism is brought through *BCO* Chapter 2, Part 1: Discipline and Part 2: Complaints. It can also be used when there is any reported violation of the antiracism policy to help bring understanding and healing.

Critical matters going forward

1. The selection of the training provider is crucial. The training provider should be concurred with the racial and ethnic councils and have deep experience with:
 - a. Racial and cultural patterns of communication, etc.
 - b. Facility with identifying racial power imbalances.
 - c. Demonstrated skills at conflict resolution.
2. The selection standards for identifying strong candidates for serving on the racial equity team should be clear, high, and require a positive history of conflict resolution.
3. Delineate how this racial equity lens fits into RCA polity.

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL RESPONSE TO AABC REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At its March 19-20, 2024, stated meeting, the GSC received and addressed both Part 1 and Part 2 of the AABC's report. The GSC expressed its deep appreciation to the AABC for the significant amount of work that the AABC dedicated to providing these reports. The GSC is grateful for the AABC's partnership in continuing to help the RCA move toward attitudes, structures, and processes that embed antiracism in the whole of our life together.

Part 1: Specific Recommended Changes to the BCO

A subcommittee of GSC members (Joshua Scheid, Kim Van Es, and Maudelin Willock) reviewed the seven proposals for *BCO* amendments in Part 1 of the AABC's report, and recommended that the GSC bring five proposed amendments to the *BCO* in response. GSC's response to each of the AABC's seven proposals is detailed below, along with rationale and recommendation for General Synod action, if applicable.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #1

In response to the AABC's first recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-42).

EC 24-10

To adopt the following amendment to the Preamble of the *Book of Church Order* (2023 edition, pp. 3-5) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

The Representative Principle. The power which Jesus Christ bestows upon his church is mediated by the Holy Spirit to all ~~the people~~ of every tribe, tongue, and nation. Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made on~~in~~ their behalf by those who represent them.

Government by Elders. The Reformed churches have sought to follow the practice of the churches whose experience is recorded in the New Testament. The churches then were ruled by "presbyters" or "elders," just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the "teaching elder." Ministers and elders therefore govern the church together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church. Thus also the lines of authority in the Reformed churches move from the local church to the General Synod. This is so since Christ, according to the New Testament, has appointed officers to govern the church under himself. Their authority to govern derives from him even though they are elected by the people. The local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern.

While governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies, the church expresses its full

ministry through all its members in a variety of tasks. Each assembly is charged with determining the nature and extent of its ministry in faithful obedience to Scripture and in responsible concern for the church's mission in the world. Every member, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color, or class, receives a ministry in baptism and is called with the whole church to embody Christ's intentions for the world.

The Equality of the Ministry. The Reformed Church in America uses the term "parity" to describe its concept of the equality of ministers. It is not meant that authority can never be exercised by one over the other. But in every instance this authority will be delegated by the proper body, and the authority will cease to be exercised when the need for it is no longer demanded. The principle of equality pertains also among churches, among elders, and among deacons. The principle of the equality of the ministry, conceived now in its broadest sense as including the functions of the elder and the deacon, is based upon the fact that the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself in such a way that he is, in a sense, the only one holding that office. Every ministerial function is found preeminently in him. By his Holy Spirit he distributes these functions among those whom he calls to serve in his name. Therefore, the church continually seeks to equip, empower, and embrace servant leaders who reflect the full diversity of the body of Christ. The church is called to reform any biases, behaviors, policies, or procedures that diminish the spiritual gifts or contributions of any Christian due to gender, race, ethnicity, or economic class.

Rationale:

1. The GSC agrees with the AABC that explicitly inclusive language should be added to the Preamble of the *BCO*, but we feel as if the point is better made in the latter part of the Preamble.
2. Given the fact that for most of RCA history the majority of members have been people of Dutch descent, it is important in the Preamble to the *BCO* to explicitly state that "people" called to ministry include those from every tongue, tribe, and nation regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, color, or class.
3. Given that RCA office holders have historically been majority white men, it is important to explicitly state that leaders should arise from the diversity of the people of Christ.
4. Given the RCA's priority of antiracism and given the RCA's fallenness in this area of corporate life, the commitment to reform should be included in the *BCO* Preamble.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #2

In response to the AABC's second recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-43).

EC 24-11

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1 (2023 edition, p. 31) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 1. The classis, in consultation with its congregations and its partners in mission, shall regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within classis bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers. The classis may form such entities as may be needed for the ministry of the church, provided such bodies do not infringe upon the prerogatives of other classes, consistories, or synods. To the extent possible, the ministries of the classis shall reflect the racial-ethnic and socio-economic diversity found within the classis bounds.

Rationale:

The GSC appreciates the aspirations of the AABC's original proposal and offers this adjusted language. In an age of "us versus them," the *BCO* should explicitly guide the planning, organizing, implementing, resourcing, and evaluating work of the classis to take into account the diversity within its bounds. While there may be extenuating reasons (e.g., financial, leadership equipping, etc.) that a classis's ministry cannot always fully reflect such diversity, the work of classis must reflect the Holy Spirit's interests in all populations within their communities.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #3

In response to the AABC's third recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-44).

EC 24-12

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11f (2023 edition, p. 16) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

- f. The points of doctrine contained in the ~~Heidelberg Catechism~~ Doctrinal Standards shall be explained by the**

minister at regular services of worship on the Lord's Day, so that the exposition of them is completed within a period of four years.

Rationale:

1. The GSC understands why the AABC wants ministers to preach from the Belhar Confession, but we felt that it would be problematic to name two of our Doctrinal Standards but not the other two.
2. Sunday worship services are an optimal time for providing biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical instruction for leadership, discipleship, and mission for RCA members. Congregants benefit from the teaching of all four Reformed confessions (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, and the Belhar Confession), which are collectively referred to and defined as the "Doctrinal Standards" in the Preamble of the *BCO*.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #4

In response to the AABC's fourth recommendation, the GSC decided to take no action. Such changes are likely to contradict the bylaws of particular churches. The GSC believes that the *BCO* should not more specifically dictate consistory terms in churches.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #5

In response to the AABC's fifth recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-45).

EC 24-13

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 5 (2023 edition, p. 56) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 5.

- a. **The classis shall designate a minister to serve as a mentor to guide, counsel, and model the learning and developmental processes of each newly-ordained minister or, where deemed appropriate by classis, a minister received from another denomination.**
- b. **The classis shall ensure that all enrolled ministers actively serving under its jurisdiction are adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are assigned.**

Rationale:

1. Though this added point may appear obvious, ministers in RCA churches have not always been adequately trained to serve sensitively where they have been placed. This context-based training is necessary because the life of a church is always influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives of the community. Ministers well acquainted with those distinctives are best positioned to bring the good news to that church's members or their assigned mission field.
2. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism also have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices in those contexts. Ministers educated in the context and particular struggles of their communities are best equipped to lead with wisdom, grace, and humility.
3. The wording of the new sentence from the AABC's original proposed language is consistent with other language in the *BCO*, and the GSC believes that it fits best in Section 5 of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15.

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #6

In response to the AABC's sixth recommendation, the GSC decided to take no action.

While the GSC hears AABC's concerns, it does not agree with the council's proposed change because we believe that the responsibility to commission and oversee commissioned pastors should remain with the classis rather than being the responsibility of individual consistories. There is already significant disparity in the training of commissioned pastors across classes, to which the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) has been working to bring more consistency; moving the responsibility for commissioning and supervising commissioned pastors to individual consistories would likely increase this concern.

The GSC encouraged the AABC to share its concerns with PFOB if it still believes that change is needed, since PFOB is the body charged with working with the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team in "sharing best practices, addressing common problems, and developing creative solutions for the formation of commissioned pastor candidates" (PFOB bylaws, Article II, Section B).

GSC Response to AABC Recommendation #7

In response to the AABC's seventh recommendation, the GSC voted to bring the following recommendation to this General Synod (GSC 24-46).

EC 24-14

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 2 (2023 edition, p. 61) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

d. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate is knowledgeable of and adequately trained to serve fruitfully in the urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal areas to which they are to be commissioned.

Rationale:

1. The life of a church is always influenced by the cultural, geographic, and demographic distinctives of the community. Commissioned pastors well acquainted with those distinctives are best positioned to bring the good news to that church's members or their assigned mission field.
2. Interpersonal, cultural, and systemic racism also have distinctive expressions across urban, suburban, rural, and/or tribal contexts. Ignorance about distinctives can easily lead to silence about confronting and changing racist policies, beliefs, and practices in those contexts. Commissioned pastors educated in the struggles of their communities are best equipped to lead with wisdom, grace, and humility.
3. The wording of the proposed sentence uses language consistent with other places in the *BCO* and recognizes that the person is not yet a commissioned pastor but instead a candidate, which is appropriately reflective of its placement in this particular section of the *BCO*.

Part 2: Recommendations on Extra-BCO Matters Related to Antiracism

Due to a particularly heavy agenda, the GSC was unable to dedicate sufficient agenda time to the second part of the AABC's report to take action; however, the GSC recognizes the work done by the AABC as important and as requiring further consideration and possible action. For that reason, the GSC voted (GSC 24-47) to form a subcommittee to study the second portion of the AABC's report and bring recommendations to the GSC.