

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 [2023 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 This Commission by the 2023 General Synod

The General Synod of 2023 directed, through CA 23-2, that a member of the CCA meet alongside one representative each from the Commission on Theology, General Synod Council, RCA legal counsel, RCA human resources, and RCA financial offices related to investigating and understanding the denominational policies (if any) and use of nondisclosure agreements and other practices in the ending of staff relationships. This work was undertaken and a separate report from that ad-hoc committee may be found in this workbook on pages 99-103.

Peace in the Holy Land

In 2023, the CCA presented and the General Synod adopted recommendations related to praying for peace in the Holy Land (that is, the lands of Israel and Palestine) along with recommending resources and study trips that are often undertaken by RCA members with the leadership of mission partners.

Little did we know that not four months later, a horrifying terrorist attack and overwhelming retribution would violently, and perhaps permanently, destroy the fragile hopes for peace in the region. The CCA was asked at that time to write an amending preamble to the resources we offered the 2023 General Synod. We did this, but our conversations on this matter did not end there.

As people of faith thousands of miles away, many of us felt helpless to understand or act in regard to a war that was callously litigated in every corner of the media. Support for Israel’s right to defend itself was seen as supporting a genocide of innocent Palestinians. Attempts to underline that the majority of Palestinians are peaceful people not associated with terrorism was understood to be full-throated anti-Semitism. Those who argued for a ceasefire were often misunderstood as placaters and enablers. Amid the rampant misunderstanding and entrenched hostility, we saw glimmers of hope. One of these glimmers came to us from an event in the Albany, New York, area, where RCA leaders in coalition with other faith leaders, as well as by the Churches for Middle East Peace organization (cmep.org),

made space for one another. The Commission on Christian Action shares the following letter of this accidental hope from Rev. Mashona Walston, member of the CCA and senior minister of First Church in Albany, New York.

“Do your little bit of good where you are;
it’s those little bits of good put together
that overwhelm the world.”
- Desmond Tutu

The continuous tragedy occurring in the Middle East has pulled the world into wanting and calling for peace. Is our desire simply a cease fire? Is peace only the absence of bombs and gunfire? Oh, my dear siblings in Christ. We know that peace is about forgiveness, wholeness, and restoration.

So, what can regular, everyday Christians do? A few of us at The First Church in Albany are trying to do our little bit of good from where we exist in our everyday lives. As I share our “little bits” I encourage you to do what you can from where you live, work, and worship.

Our first “little bit” happened quite accidentally. The First Church in Albany is in the capital of New York State. Last year before the violence we agreed to host the January 2024 “Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Capital Area Council of Churches Annual gathering.” This event brings together several religious groups to remember the legacy of Dr. King. Well, on the night of the event, we all gathered in the sanctuary. Christians, Jews, and Muslims. During the ceremony I could feel a tension among the clergy. It was not the usual tension of nervousness. There was pain in the air. We gathered to remember America’s history of apartheid. We gathered in the history of rabbis and Jews marching and dying alongside African American Christians and Muslims in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. There we gathered as rabbis, cantors, ministers, and imams. The rabbi and the imam were very civil and cordial. That made it easy to seat them near one another without being side to side. Each spoke of peace during their time. The imam left early. We did not end the war in the Middle East that night. However, The First Church in Albany was neutral territory where all felt safe enough to attend and participate in remembering the cries for justice.

Our next acts include:

- Prayer for peace travelers to the Middle East.
- Talks with those in our congregation who are willing.
- Keeping our ears open as to how we can support the peace efforts. We are planning on hosting another community gathering led by John Paarlberg where congregations for peace will gather.

Finally, I invite you to join in overwhelming the world with whatever you can contribute for peace in the Middle East.

The CCA commends the leaders who made space for one another. We also commend the work being done by “regular, everyday” Christians across North America and in the Holy Land as well.

We encourage RCA members and friends far and wide to dig into the resources found on Churches for Middle East Peace’s website, cmep.org. We recommend further the work done by Revs. Joshua Vis and Chris DeBlaay, the RCA mission partners doing the denomination’s work in relation to the Holy Land. More about them, their work, and the immersion tours they lead can be found at www.joshvis.com.

In our ongoing efforts to encourage a just and lasting peace in the region, we offer the recommendation below. We fully understand that by the time June 2024 arrives, the situation will have evolved, and these words may no longer be relevant. We trust the body to amend or dispense with them as appropriate.

CA 24-1

To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States, the United States Secretary of State, and the United States ambassador to the United Nations advocating for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, as well as a letter to the prime minister of Canada commending his call for the same; and further,

To direct the general secretary to send a communication to the churches and assemblies of the Reformed Church in America, encouraging them to write to their representatives, senators, or members of Parliament to advocate for a ceasefire and recommitment to a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine.

Mental Health Awareness and Care

Churches play a vital role in the lives of many people and there are congregants attending every single one of our churches who are having struggles with their mental health. Many don’t know what to do, how to go about getting the help that they need, or what to do if they can’t afford that help. Since COVID the demand for mental health assistance has increased, with a 25 percent increase in cases of depression and anxiety.¹

¹ “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” World Health Organization, March 2, 2022, www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide

What if the church could be the first step in helping those who struggle by providing resources in-house or through partnership with other organizations? What if the church was seen as a place of safety and respite, and not only for the 64 percent of Americans² or 53 percent of Canadians³ who identify as Christians? This could look different from church to church depending on what skills and resources that congregation has. For some congregations it looks like sponsorship of community events, or making church spaces available for community group use. It might look like local advocacy for mental health care in schools or funding for local hospital resources. Perhaps it simply looks like congregations and their leaders getting education from local health care professionals. Whatever the situation for each church might be, connecting with mental healthcare professionals and building a plan to support your community is more important than ever.

Unfortunately, the stigma around mental health and the need for mental health care is overwhelming for many. The church could use this opportunity to peel back the curtain, removing shame from the equation, and allowing a space for true healing and transformation. This could look like any number of things:

- Pastors educating the congregation about the importance of mental health practices and the biblical case for caring for oneself and others
- Identifying ways that the church can support people with mental health concerns or mental illness
- Providing easy-to-navigate resources and opportunities for connection for those too overwhelmed or ashamed to seek help
- Working to promote acceptance of those with mental health issues by sharing personal stories more broadly

The commission wishes we could say that being a Christian means one doesn't struggle with mental health or mental illness. What we can say is that, as Christians, we can have and offer hope for those among us who do struggle with these things. One in four Americans⁴ has been diagnosed with a mental health illness—and that doesn't account for the number undiagnosed. So how do we offer hope to that many people? How do we offer that hope when we are among the one out of four?

² Sarah McCammon, Michael Levitt, Kathryn Fox, "America's Christian majority is shrinking, and could dip below 50% by 2070," *National Public Radio*, September 15, 2022, www.npr.org/2022/09/15/1123289466/americas-christian-majority-is-shrinking-and-could-dip-below-50-by-2070

³ Nicole Thompson, "More Canadians than ever have no religious affiliation, census shows," *CBC News*, October 27, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/canadian-census-religious-affiliation-none-1.6631293

⁴ "8 Eye-Opening Mental Health Statistics around the Globe," *Mighty Pursuit*, https://mightypursuit.com/blog/8-eye-opening-mental-health-statistics-around-the-globe/?gad_source=1&qclid=CjwKCAiA6KWvBhAREiwAFPZM7lcznTdelLsqX-G6995UZQRi7qxfwMZ9QuERvh9qrrlmGjgTp61DxoCuv8QAvD_BwE

Perhaps, like the poor mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 26:11, mental illness will always be with us. While the Commission on Christian Action is not at this time making a recommendation related to mental health and mental illness, we strongly encourage members of all RCA churches and assemblies to connect with the professionals in your community who are trained in these matters or the faith communities already doing this work, and seek ways to offer hope.

Spiritual Abuse

In 2022, the CCA began researching the topic of spiritual abuse, bringing a recommendation to the General Synod of 2023. That recommendation was adopted as CA 23-7: “To invite and welcome 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 as well as other resources on spiritual abuse in order to equip congregations and members to address spiritual abuse, both locally and systemically (ADOPTED)” (*MGS 2023*, p. 164).

At the conclusion of this section of the report, we will reshare those resources with some new additions.

The troubling phenomenon of spiritual abuse is defined as “when someone uses spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare or control you.”⁵ This specifically and often includes the misuse of religious authority for personal gain or control, and is increasingly being unveiled in the church. As congregants look to their church leaders for guidance and support, oft-unseen moments of abuse present a significant challenge to the spiritual health and well-being of those in RCA churches.

Spiritual abuse takes many forms, but common examples include manipulation, coercion, and the imposition of rigid, extrabiblical rules and regulations in the name of faith. These actions can result in emotional, psychological, and even physical harm to individuals who are led to believe that their spirituality and salvation are dependent on unquestioning obedience to their faith leaders. The power differentials inherent in the clergy-congregant relationship can exacerbate these abuses, leaving victims feeling isolated, confused, and powerless to seek help.

One of the contributing factors to the rise of spiritual abuse in the church may stem from cultures of authoritarianism that have taken root in various areas of the church, including within the RCA. This authoritarianism is often justified by strict adherence to a single interpretation of Scripture, which can be used to legitimize abusive behavior and control. In some cases, church leaders may exploit their positions of authority to silence dissent, enforce conformity, and perpetuate a climate of fear among their constituents.

⁵ “Spiritual Abuse,” 1800 Respect, www.1800respect.org.au/violence-and-abuse/spiritual-abuse#:~:text=What%20is%20spiritual%20abuse%3F,you%20don't%20want%20to

Furthermore, the lack of accountability mechanisms (or awareness of how to operate these) can enable spiritual abuse to go unchecked, including in the RCA. Without robust oversight and processes for addressing allegations of abuse, perpetrators may continue to operate with impunity, causing further harm to those under their influence. The complexities of navigating these issues within the context of a religious community can make it even more challenging for survivors to come forward and seek justice.

It is essential for the RCA to take proactive steps to address the issue of spiritual abuse within not only its congregations but the denomination as a whole. This may involve implementing training programs for clergy and church leaders on recognizing and preventing spiritual abuse, as well as creating safe channels where members can report instances of abuse without fear of retaliation. Additionally, establishing independent review boards or ombudsman offices to investigate allegations of abuse and hold perpetrators accountable could help to create a culture of transparency and accountability within the denomination.

As members of the RCA grapple with the rise of spiritual abuse, it is crucial for the denomination to uphold its commitment to justice, compassion, and the ethical stewardship of religious authority. By taking decisive action to address these concerns, the RCA can work toward creating a safer and more supportive environment for all its members, where the values of faith, integrity, and respect are upheld.

We encourage all those within the RCA to familiarize yourself with what spiritual abuse is, and to look into the resources the CCA offered last year and again below.

Online Resources

- Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (www.netgrace.org)
- The RCA's We Are Speaking statement (www.rca.org/we-are-speaking/)
- The RCA's Church Sexual Harassment and Abuse Policy Resources (www.rca.org/about/government/consistory/resources/church-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-policy-resources/)
- Faithward's "Addressing Sexual Abuse and Violence in Worship" Resources (www.faithward.org/addressing-sexual-abuse-and-violence-in-worship-resources)
- My Sanctuary Healing, Inc. (<https://mysanctuaryhealing.org/home-page/>): A therapy clinic owned/operated by members of RCA churches/pastors, specializing in spiritual abuse recovery
- Resources from CBE International (the RCA is a member organization)
 - www.cbeinternational.org/?s=spiritual+abuse
 - https://cbeinternational.christianbook.com/page/tcg/cbei/cbei-abuse?navcocat=cbeinternational_Relationships|Abuse
- RCA resources on racial trauma and dismantling racism (www.rca.org/about/dismantling-racism/anti-racism-policy)
- Tears of Eden (www.tearsofeden.org/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

To underscore our deep concern regarding spiritual abuse, we offer:

CA 24-2

To direct the General Synod Council to undertake study on spiritual abuse, utilizing resources from CBE International, Tears of Eden, and others listed in the Commission on Christian Action's report to the 2024 General Synod, as well as opening communication with My Sanctuary Healing and other RCA-connected spiritual abuse professionals to explore resources that may be shared and/or developed for use in RCA congregations, assemblies, and affiliated institutions, reporting back to the 2025 General Synod.

With gratitude for the work of the CCA and my fellow commissioners, I submit this report.

Cameron Van Kooten Laughead
Moderator