

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2023 edition, pp. 69-70]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, the General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the *Book of Church Order* in this way (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2023 edition, p. 114]):

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed newer ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how

best to witness to the gospel of Christ, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming the world at this point in history.

This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents yearly to General Synod. The report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups but on the work and witness of the RCA.

World Council of Churches (WCC)

The World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.” The WCC gathers its fellowship from 352 churches in 120 countries, representing over 580 million Christians worldwide.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years. Between assemblies, the WCC is governed by the Central Committee. This body meets every two years and last met for its first session on June 21-27, 2023, in Geneva, Switzerland. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as the RCA’s delegate to the WCC Central Committee.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: The WCC invites Christians to join in prayer January 18-25 for the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” and offers resources for worship, prayer, and Bible study. This year’s materials were prepared by an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso facilitated by the local Chemin Neuf Community. The theme was “You shall love the Lord your God... and your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27). The commission urges churches, pastors, and elders to mark their calendars for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and make use of the rich resources created by the WCC each year.

Public Statements: This year, the WCC has made public statements on the war on Ukraine and the war in Israel and Palestine, among many other world issues. All the published WCC public statements can be read in full on the WCC website (www.oikoumene.org). The commission urges pastors and churches to read and engage these statements through discussion, prayer, and ministry contexts. Included below are segments from the WCC’s “Statement on the War in Palestine and Israel,” which was released at the WCC executive committee meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, on November 8-14, 2023, and which demanded an immediate ceasefire and opening of humanitarian corridors in Palestine and Israel.

We look to the Holy Land with a heavy heart for all the death, destruction, and trauma being inflicted on the people of the land. We listen to the cries of innocent children, women, and men who suffer so grievously and unjustly from this brutal violence. We lament with all who suffer – Israelis bereaved, held hostage, or otherwise affected by the attacks on 7 October, the people of Gaza displaced from their homes, grieving for loved ones buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings, and enduring continuous intense bombardment.

We yearn for peace and for justice, for an end to the seemingly endless cycle of violence and suffering, and for its fundamental root causes to be addressed. We lament the abject failure of the international community and of political leaders in the region who did not persist in the search for a sustainable peace founded on justice and mutual respect for the equal human dignity and rights of all, and who kept the cycle of violence turning. As we stand on this precipice of morality and faith, we pray for peace, for justice, for wisdom, for understanding, and for restoration of our humanity.

The World Council of Churches joins in the international shock and outrage at the brutal attacks on Israeli communities by Hamas militants on 7 October 2023. We condemn the attacks on civilians, the killing of so many innocent children, women, and men, as well as the taking of hostages and the use of civilians as human shields.

Examining the current situation in Gaza, under attack from Israeli armed forces, the WCC, together with the churches of the region, are outraged by and condemn Israel's disproportionate retaliation. We have seen the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, hospitals, churches, and mosques by Israeli forces. The death toll has surpassed 11,000 - over two-thirds of them children and women - and the number of injured 37,000. Attacks on churches and their institutions, including shelters for displaced civilians – especially children and women who have lost their homes due to Israeli airstrikes on residential areas since the war began – are totally unacceptable....

The executive committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, on 8-14 November 2023, lifts up before our loving and merciful God, the suffering and traumatized people in the land of Jesus Christ's birth. We highlight the lifelong and potentially inter-generational consequences of the terrible trauma that children in both Palestine and Israel are experiencing. We lament that the heads of churches in Jerusalem, due to the current circumstances of the war, concluded that they had to cancel the celebrations of Advent and Christmas. We pray for peace in the land, a sustainable and just peace founded at last on recognition and respect for the God-given human dignity and equal human rights of all people – Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians alike – rather than a false "peace" imposed by occupation and force of arms which cannot and should not be sustained.

The executive committee:

Appeals for respect by all parties for the God-given life and dignity of every human being.

Further appeals for respect for the principles of international humanitarian law, especially for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure – including hospitals (such as the al-Ahli, al-Shifa, and al-Quds hospitals), places of worship and holy sites (such as the St. Porphyrios Greek Orthodox Church), and UN premises – and calls for full and impartial legal accountability for all violations of these principles by whomsoever committed.

Demands the immediate, unconditional release and safe return of all hostages.

Demands an immediate ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors and calls for guarantees of the unimpeded distribution and delivery of vital humanitarian assistance, including water, food, medical supplies, and fuel, and the reinstatement of electricity and internet services in Gaza.

Urges the UN and relevant authorities to investigate all war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law committed from 7 October 2023 until the end of the war, where truth must prevail and accountability must be ensured so that such crimes may not happen again and again.

Implores the UN Security Council to overcome the obstructive partisanship that is preventing it from fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to the current conflict in accordance with the principles of international law, including in relation to the need for a humanitarian ceasefire.

Refutes all those who seek to portray the current conflict in religious terms, misusing scripture to justify violence, killing, cruelty, and oppression; we reject and denounce all such efforts to distract from the root causes of the conflict in the region.

Stresses its grave concern about the proliferation of hateful acts and expressions of antisemitism and of hatred of Arabs and Muslims in the region and the wider world against the background of the current violence. In light of attacks on Jews all over the world who are falsely held responsible for the actions of the Israeli government, we reiterate the executive committee's acknowledgment one year ago of "the legitimate fears of Jewish people around the world of the shortness of the trajectory from antisemitic attitudes and hate speech to genocide" and its reaffirmation of "the categorical denunciation by the WCC's founding assembly in Amsterdam of antisemitism as sin against God and humanity."

Rejects any attempts to transfer Palestinians outside Gaza, permanently or temporarily.

Urges all members of the international community to re-engage in active and sustained support of efforts for a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, based upon an end to the illegal occupation and to the siege of Gaza, recognition of the equal human rights of all, and the applicable principles of international law. Without this, peace cannot be sustained and the recurrent cycle of violence is tragically likely to continue.

Reiterates the WCC 11th Assembly's categorical condemnation of all such deadly and destructive violence, whether perpetrated by Israeli forces or by Palestinian armed groups, which only perpetuates the cycle of violence and reaffirms the Assembly's observation that the situation in the region cannot ultimately be resolved by violence but only by peaceful means in accordance with international law.

Expresses the worldwide ecumenical movement's profound solidarity with all the people of the region in the midst of the current violent upheavals and uncertainty for the safety and security of their communities.

Invites all member churches and ecumenical partners, together with all people of goodwill, to pray for peace and to actively support the ministries of the churches of the region and ecumenical and interfaith initiatives for justice, peace, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

The full statement can be found at

www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-war-in-palestine-and-israel.

World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is a global Christian communion comprised of over 100 million Christians in 110 countries in more than 230 member denominations, including Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian churches. Members in North America include the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

The focus statement of the WCRC is "Called to Communion and Committed to Justice." Rather than a loose federation of churches ordinarily termed a "council," the WCRC takes very seriously the biblical concept of *koinonia*, commonly translated as "communion." In our diversity, we seek to be a living expression of "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC engages in theological dialogues on the global level.

In being committed to justice, the WCRC's justice work includes promoting ecological, economic, and gender justice. Further, it advocates for peace and reconciliation in the world's "hot spots." With all the partners God provides, we work

for the transformation of the whole world so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

In 2023, the WCRC held its first in-person Executive Committee meeting since COVID in Johannesburg, South Africa. The 2024 annual Executive Committee meeting will occur in West Michigan on May 18-22. Additionally, the regional expression of the WCRC, the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC), will meet in the Cayman Islands in October 2024. Finally, planning for the next General Council, scheduled for October 2025 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is underway, with many groups working at various components of preparation.

Since mid-2021, the WCRC has functioned with a “Collegial General Secretariat” model, which included the Executive Secretary for Communications, Philip Tanis of the Reformed Church in America. Phil has completed his second and final term, and we gratefully acknowledge his work on behalf of the WCRC and the RCA. The Rev. Setri Nyomi, from Accra, Ghana, has been named Acting General Secretary until a new General Secretary of the communion may be installed. The Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal continues as WCRC Vice President from the Caribbean and North America region.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Dr. Lisa Vander Wal

As a sign of the RCA’s further commitment to the WCRC, Revs. Jeff and Chelsea Lampen have accepted God’s call to partner with RCA Global Mission and the WCRC and are in the process of relocating to Hannover, Germany, to pastor the Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover (RELISH)—a multicultural and multigenerational church seeking to disciple the English-speakers in Hannover to the glory of Jesus Christ—and to provide crucial support locally as well as internationally as the WCRC continues to bring Reformed bodies into unity and collaboration. To learn more about the Lampens’ mission and to discover ways to support them financially or in prayer, please visit www.rca.org/lampen or email jeffery.lampen@gmail.com.

Our participation in the WCRC consultation in Asia during the fall of 2023 provided another valuable occasion to come together and engage in global ecumenical work. We worshiped, delved into Scriptures during the gathering, and initiated discussions on important agenda items for the upcoming 2025 General Assembly in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Leaders from diverse Reformed traditions and continents convened at the consultation, fostering dialogue, prayer, and discernment on crucial topics leading up to next year’s assembly in Thailand. The RCA was well represented by two ministerial representatives, Rev. Laura Osborne and Rev. Carlos Corro. Additionally, we were grateful to see our fellow RCA colleague, Phil Tanis, participating in this consultation as one of his final ecumenical assignments before returning to the U.S. in 2024.

Global Christian Forum (GCF)

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) creates space for a new methodology of worldwide ecumenical dialogue based on relational fellowship. The Global Christian Forum seeks to widen the ecumenical table, drawing together world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches.

Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, the GCF is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the Global South, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF's work.

The Guiding Purpose Statement of the Global Christian Forum is “to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.”

The Global Christian Forum is planning its fourth Global Gathering on April 14-19, 2024, in Ghana. The theme of the gathering is “that the world may know” from John 17:23b. A Youth Pre-Assembly will also be held under the same theme.

Rev. Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the International Committee of the Global Christian Forum and on a task force planning the next Global Gathering. Rev. Stacey Duensing Pearce serves as a youth delegate to the International Committee and as a consultant to the team planning the Youth Pre-Assembly to the 2024 Global Gathering.

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC)

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include over 40 million persons in more than 100,000 local congregations nationwide. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC, and our general secretary, the Rev. Eddy Alemán, serves on its governing board. The RCA is also represented on the NCC's Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations, Christian Education, Faith Formation and Leadership, and Faith and Order.

In May 2023, the NCC launched a two-year celebration leading up to the organization's 75th anniversary in 2025. It held a special worship service at the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., on May 16, concurrent with the Spring Governing Board meeting. At that meeting, the Rev. Vashti Murphy McKenzie, a retired bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was announced as the new president and general secretary. She has been serving as interim president and general secretary since April 2022.

Looking toward the future, Bishop McKenzie plans to add more activism to the NCC's long history of advocacy on important issues such as world peace, gun violence, antiracism efforts, and economic and social justice. The NCC hosted its annual Christian Unity Gathering as a hybrid event in Nashville, Kentucky, in October, titled "Faith Under Fire: The Church in the Public Square." Session topics included "Courageous and Faithful Witness in the Public Square," "Christian Extremism and Christian Supreme-ism (i.e. supremacy)," "Faith Leaders Transforming Public Safety and Communities," "Religious Nationalism and the Persecution of Religious Minorities in Global Contexts, with a Focus on the Situation of Christians in India and Artsakh," and two sessions on gun violence.

The NCC's Faith and Order Convening Table met in person in May to review articles written by members of three study groups on issues relating to ending racism: "Awakening to the Reality of Racism as the Original Sin of the U.S.," "Confronting White Supremacy as the Defining Myth of the U.S.," and "Transforming the Church and Humanizing the Public Square." A book bringing together these articles is in the process of publication. Kitt Jackson has been representing the RCA at that convening table and submitted an article describing the steps our denomination has taken over the years to address and dismantle racism.

The members of the Faith and Order Convening Table have chosen the Nicene Creed as their next topic of study, concurrent with the World Council of Churches celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed in 2025. General headings of a planned publication would include the historical importance of Nicaea, the meaning of Nicaea for us today, and the importance of Nicaea moving forward.

Christian Churches Together (CCT)

Founded in 2006, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest ecumenical fellowship in the United States, representing over 57 million American Christians from Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, Historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations, such as Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, and Sojourners. This mix of churches and religious organizations is one of the characteristics that makes Christian Churches Together unique among North American ecumenical organizations.

Another distinction of Christian Churches Together is its intentional focus on relationship-building and mutual understanding instead of theological agreement. This feature has created the ideal context for Christians from diverse communities and often with very different convictions to come together uniquely and holistically.

The CCT process (based on loving relationships, learning theologically, and leading actions) allows CCT members to commit to working together in discernment to engage in steps that lead to beloved community.

Most recently, at the 2023 annual Forum in Savannah, Georgia, participants engaged in dialogue on their common baptism, the call to discipleship, and the nature and purpose of the church in a culture so divided over issues of politics, racial justice, and theology. The group of 65 church leaders (representing over 30 denominations) took a pilgrimage to the Historic Baptismal Trail in Georgia, where they heard oral histories of the Gullah/Geechee community that baptized its members in the local river there for over a hundred years. On the shores of the river, the group both lamented over the history of enslavement and racism in the U.S. and renewed their baptismal call to ministries of justice and peace. The RCA delegation consisted of General Synod president Rev. Judy Nelson (elected to serve on CCT's board), Rev. Laura Osborne, and Ruth Langkamp (who participated in the Young Ecumenists' panel discussion).

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, the annual Forum serves as an opportunity to build personal relationships with people across the church, to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between traditions, to grow together in Christ, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Dr. Monica Schaap Pierce is the executive director of Christian Churches Together. CCT's website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its history, mission, and work as well as common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

Judy Nelson submitted the following report regarding the work of the CCT Steering Committee:

The CCT Steering Committee met January 24-26 in Washington, D.C. Members were lodged at the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement Retreat House. Meetings were held at the USCCB offices nearby.

All participants enjoyed worship throughout the weekend led by the various Families present and in line with the Liturgy from the Week of Christian Unity.

Reports by director Dr. Monica Schaap Pierce and Committee moderators were given and well received. Reports indicated growth and sustainability.

Extended discussions regarding requests made by the Historic Black Church Family were enthusiastically participated in. As well, a lengthy discussion followed regarding the discomfort experienced by certain members of certain Family groups attending the 2023 Fall Forum.

Budget and finance reports were shared and deliberated, and recommendations were given.

Committee assignments were given and preliminary discussions regarding the 2024 Fall Forum started.

Representing the Reformed Church in America on the CCT Steering Committee is a pleasure.

Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the RCA, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC[U.S.A.]) and the United Church of Christ (UCC), approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. Leaders from within the RCA have historically served in positions with the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and on the ecumenical committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Rev. Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula's provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a revised guide in "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament" document: images.rca.org/docs/ministry/FormulaOfAgreement.pdf. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistories considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches.

We are pleased to see that pastors from the ELCA, PC(U.S.A.), and UCC are serving many RCA congregations. We encourage congregations embarking on the search process to broaden their scope by considering candidates from the other Formula churches.

Testimonial from Rev. Dale Buettner:

I am thankful for the Formula of Agreement [FoA]. As a specialized minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA whose ministry is part-time, options are limited in my town. However, when a local ELCA congregation needed a part-time staff person to serve as a director of faith formation, not only did they hire me for that position, but the FoA also allowed me to preach, lead liturgy, and preside at the Lord's Table. This also opened opportunities for me to do pulpit supply at other ELCA congregations. I served at that church for two years before being called to a different ministry, but I still feel it is "my church" in many ways. We learned from each other about our respective traditions, and we served together for the common cause of the kingdom of God. I continue to be thankful for the partnership that was formulated in 1997!

Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP)

Through events, resources, and trips to the region, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) provides opportunities to learn about the Middle East and a holistic approach to advocating for peace. CMEP elevates diverse voices advocating for equality, security, and human rights for all people in the Middle East. You and your church can advocate for just U.S. policies toward the Middle East by contacting your members of Congress; participating in Hill and government meetings; and attending Advocacy Summits.

This past year has been focused on the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The RCA's coordinator for interreligious relations, Rev. Laura Osborne, joined the CMEP on their executive leadership trip in January 2024. The group visited with patriarchs and heads of churches, pastors and local Christians, political leaders and heads of state, peace activists, and human rights leaders in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, and Lebanon. CMEP leaders advocated for an end to all violence. They called for a comprehensive ceasefire, highlighting the massive number of deaths and demanding an end to the bombing and ground invasion and its effects on civilians in Gaza. CMEP also advocated for the immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas and other militant groups and the release of Palestinian prisoners. In addition, CMEP demanded immediate and adequate humanitarian access be granted to Gaza so that basic needs like water, food, electricity, and health care be provided and not utilized as leverage for political aims.

Creation Justice Ministries

Robin Suydam is the RCA's ecumenical representative to the Creation Justice Ministries (CJM) board.

Last year was truly monumental for Creation Justice Ministries (CJM), marking the organization's 40th anniversary. In October, CJM hosted a large celebration to reflect on where it came from and celebrate victories since 1983. Even in the past year, the

organization successfully protected, restored, and rightly shared God's creation, making programmatic waves and new connections along the way. In the last twelve months, CJM hired three new employees, built its climate portfolio, expanded theological education programming, and more.

Ocean Conservation

This past year, CJM kickstarted a few ocean conservation-related programs and expanded on existing ones. First, CJM's three-year "Participatory Education in Faith Communities for Climate Resilience" program (www.creationjustice.org/participatoryeducation.html), funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), launched in May, hosting webinars and workshops to build climate resilience in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina communities. CJM also continues to co-lead the Ocean Equity Collective (OEC), which strives toward a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable ocean conservation movement. In addition to co-leading the OEC, CJM's policy advocate, Helen Smith, was appointed co-lead of the ocean workgroup for the America the Beautiful 4 All Coalition last fall and continues to co-lead that group. Finally, Blue Theology (www.bluetheology.com), a youth program designed to connect theology to the ocean, also had another successful year, and CJM continues to lead the program administration for three Blue Theology outposts from coast to coast.

Climate Portfolio

Building CJM's climate portfolio is one of its top priorities because the climate and the health of God's earth are so intertwined. CJM expects a new Farm Bill, which it has been closely following and advocating for. CJM representatives met with congressional agricultural offices, participated in multiple panels and workshops, and co-convoked a webinar on the principles of a faithful Farm Bill. Between August and September, CJM met with House agriculture offices, and CJM plans to meet with Senate offices between now and the end of the year. The organization's Farm Bill advocacy focused on supporting Black farmers, which CJM also prioritizes through other avenues of its work. For example, CJM consistently engages with Black churches and denominations and even partnered with two churches to expand the Black church programming and presence at the University of Maryland's Environmental Justice Conference. Another climate issue CJM follows closely is the conservation of public lands. Its 30x30 work continues to grow; it has met with the Bureau of Land Management, and it continues to look for ways to expand this portfolio.

Theological Education

This year, CJM hired a full-time theological education and training coordinator, Derrick Weston, who has enabled CJM's theological education program to expand significantly. On the training end of the spectrum, CJM hosted or plans to host six Pastoral Care for Climate workshops in 2023 and 2024, mobilizing pastors to preach about the climate-changing earth. Additionally, CJM hosted an ecumenical prayer service, which boasted over 300 registrants. On the education side, CJM launched

The Green Lectionary Podcast, a podcast focused on looking at climate change through a spiritual lens through conversations with other faith leaders (www.creationjustice.org/green-lectionary-podcast.html). Finally, CJM launched its 2024 Earth Day Sunday resource, *Plastic Jesus*, which features stories and other resources meant to guide Christians through a plastic-filled world plagued by overconsumption (www.creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html).

Reformed-Catholic Dialogue

The goal of the Reformed-Catholic Dialogue is to bring together Catholic and Reformed scholars to model and deepen a “dialogue of love” in which each tradition brings its own distinctive gifts to help each other pursue the truth and grow in the love of God and neighbor. The next meeting is scheduled for June 2024, and the commission will report at that time.

Meeting with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA

The CCU received the following directive from General Synod in 2023: “...to invite the leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA (UOC-USA) to meet with them, to hear about the Ukrainian Orthodox experiences of the war in Ukraine, to consider further ways of supporting and partnering with the UOC-USA in war relief, and to offer the RCA’s expressions of solidarity and support, with our prayers of intercession and prayers for peace in an in-person setting” (*MGS 2023*, CU 23-1, p. 181).

Commission on Christian Unity members had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the UOC-USA at the Metropolia Center in Somerset, New Jersey, on October 20, 2023, to carry out this General Synod recommendation. The commission met with His Eminence Archbishop Daniel, Ruling Hierarch of the Western Eparchy of the UOC-USA and President of the Consistory, and the Very Rev. Fr. Vasyl Pasakas.

While meeting in person, the commission took time to pray with and for these leaders, the UOC-USA church, and the people of Ukraine who are still immersed in a war they did not choose at the time of this writing, the two-year mark since the war began. Prayer was the number one request that Archbishop Daniel made of the commission and of the RCA. “Do not let the lamp of support for Ukraine stop burning,” he asked; “continue to tell the story of Ukraine and remind one another of this war—and so the need for prayer—as long as it may continue.”

The commission further explored options for what RCA support of the UOC-USA and the Ukrainian community could look like together. Financial donations are the best option for tangible war-relief support, which was encouraged as a better alternative than material donations, which must be shipped at great cost. We were also encouraged to continue with solidarity, such as using our voice at the World Council of Churches (WCC) where the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is present. To our surprise, Archbishop Daniel was against our former approach of asking that the ROC be suspended from membership in the WCC. He suggested that it is only together

with the Russians that a solution to this war will be found. Not only the healing of Ukraine but also the healing of Russia is required if there is to be a lasting peace.

Local RCA churches and members can also undertake actions—indeed, this may be the best sort. Solidarity and prayer are most meaningful when offered locally by connecting with UOC-USA churches or Ukrainians who may be present in your area. In partnership with these Ukrainians that you or your congregation come to know personally, further actions like letters to congressional representatives can be discerned.

You can read and see more about the CCU's visit with the UOC-USA in the RCA news story found at www.rca.org/rcas-commission-on-christian-unity-meets-with-ukrainian-orthodox-church.

Our meeting closed, per General Synod's instruction and our desire, with the following prayer:

God of peace, God of mercy,
We come before you today with heavy hearts as we see so much sadness in the world.
We thank you for this time together to listen and to learn.
We lament the suffering and destruction in Ukraine—
...so many lives lost, people displaced, families torn apart, children taken away, whole cities destroyed.

O Lord, we pray for peace...for an end to the fighting and a just peace.

We pray for world leaders to take bold and courageous steps to help end this war and the conflict in the Middle East.

We lift up those who have welcomed refugees, offered support, and who speak up against the war, and stand up against evil.

For those who have fled, grant sanctuary.
For those who have stayed, your protection.
For those who are fighting for their country, courage and strength.
For those who are wounded, healing.
For those who mourn, comfort.
For your Church and its leaders in Ukraine and here in the U.S., help us to be faithful witnesses and servants.

May all glory and honor be yours, Almighty God, now and forever.

We ask all of these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, now and forever. Amen.

It is the commission's hope that Archbishop Daniel or one of his representatives will be able to address the General Synod this summer so that delegates can hear the story of Ukraine through the eyes of the church directly and receive a much more up-to-date set of requests for prayer and action.

Anabaptist Rapprochement

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to explore possibilities for repentance and reconciliation, being particularly attentive to the ways in which our ecumenical partners have pursued rapprochement with Anabaptists, and report back to General Synod 2021 (*MGS 2019*, H 19-2, p 276).

In accordance with directive H 19-2 from General Synod 2019, the Commission on Christian Unity is coordinating with Christian Churches Together to facilitate a discussion with the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren, and Bruderhof. We hope this will begin the process towards rapprochement, repentance, and reconciliation.

The Interreligious Relations Subcommittee

Missional Mandate

The missional mandate for the work of the Interreligious Subcommittee of the Commission on Christian Unity of the Reformed Church in America's General Synod is found in the 2018 Report of the Interreligious Task Force.

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God's saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. In this sense, we are a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God's renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while embracing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) (*MGS 2018*, p. 92).

Summary of Where We Are and Where We Are Going

Rev. Laura Osborne was hired as coordinator for interreligious relations in June 2019. The Interreligious Subcommittee was formed in August 2019. Recruitment for the team began in the fall of 2018.

Last year (2023) brought many great connections, networks, building, and events through this office. The subcommittee met via Zoom four times this past year. During three of the meetings, the Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) interreligious committee joined us. We made a joint commitment to work together and share resources.

Urgency: There is an urgency to share Jesus with others and to love our neighbor. With those urgencies at hand, our team is working on a few items with the team from the CRCNA:

- A shared database of interfaith “champions” to show which locations in the U.S. and Canada have the most connections. With that information, we can help resource churches with these champions in their area and help find resources in those that don’t.

Our team from the RCA is working on these goals:

1. Statement work: as mandated by General Synod, we have worked on the joint statement with the CRCNA and are tweaking it as needed.
2. Resourcing churches trying to connect with their neighbors of another faith and elevating the stories of churches that already are connecting.
3. Collaborating with local missional engagement, refugee coordination, and other departments that intersect with other faiths to be a resource.
4. Observing how our colleges and seminaries are training the next generation of leaders in world religions. If this isn’t being done or can’t be done, then we can find a way to work closer with the churches nearby to help equip students. The subcommittee is working now to add a seminary student and an undergrad student to the committee.
5. Readyng volunteers to help love their neighbor of another faith as they serve at home and abroad.
6. Partnering with the Al Amana Centre in Oman to help train more groups in interfaith work, scriptural reasoning, and interfaith dialogue. This work has now included developing a new center at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Summary of Interreligious Work

This past year (2023) brought great challenges and also a deep sense of connection. The coordinator for interreligious relations has the opportunity to work together with many people. In conjunction with the Commission on Christian Unity’s Interreligious Subcommittee, this work connects churches and individuals to their neighbors of another faith. This takes shape in many ways: through partnerships, a rich history of interfaith work, and new initiatives. With continued wars around the world affecting our neighbors of other faiths and our faith traditions here in North America, this work has been all the more important.

Highlights from 2023

Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Photovoice — These tools help people engage with their neighbor of another faith. In partnership with the Al Amana Centre and Rose Castle Foundation, there have been a few trainings around scriptural reasoning. We have been able to train campus pastors from around the world in these techniques. Interfaith Photovoice is an amazing tool for groups to get to know their neighbors.

IRSC — The Interreligious Subcommittee (IRSC) of three people works in different parts of the U.S. and the world to help share their faith and connect to their neighbors of another faith through chaplaincy, counseling, teaching, preaching, bridge building, and so much more. This team met with the Interfaith Subcommittee

of the CRCNA and will continue to do so two to three times a year. We rejoice that our values and mission are quite similar.

Global Partnerships — The coordinator for interreligious relations shares in the work of RCA Global Mission. There is a great connection with the Al Amana Centre in Oman, and a few intercultural trips are planned for 2024. The timing of these trips has been affected by the war in Gaza. We partner with the Al Amana Centre through scriptural reasoning and share a few interns who work on similar projects. There has been much collaboration with the refugee ministries coordinator with an online workshop to help folks reach the diaspora in their neighborhood.

RFPUSA — A new partnership has been formed with Religions for Peace-USA (RFPUSA). This organization helps with awareness of other faiths and sometimes champions related justice issues. There are monthly gatherings to get people involved in the work. Religions for Peace had a strong presence at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Illinois, in August 2023. Their coordinator for religious relations sat on a panel with other religious leaders on the topic of religious appropriation.

National Council of Churches — A member of the subcommittee sits at the NCC's Interreligious Convening Table. This table coordinates dialogues with other faiths to raise awareness of various topics and issues. This table helps facilitate interreligious dialogues across the country and religions. Interreligious work is ongoing within our groups. Best practices, connections, and planning are all shared at the meetings. The RCA coordinator for interreligious relations now sits on the Theology Task Force. That task force is working on papers addressing the threat of Christian nationalism.

Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign — This campaign works to stop bias against our Muslim neighbors. The RCA has been a long-standing member and has a seat on the steering committee. Through the Kaufman Interfaith Institute in Grand Rapids and the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, the RCA has been present at Michigan interfaith gatherings for interfaith leaders. Continual training and connections are happening through these networks. Rev. Laura Osborne serves on the steering committee for Shoulder to Shoulder, our strategic partners in countering discrimination and violence against Muslims.

There is a strong RCA and CRCNA joint committee that helps bring programming to our communities to fight Islamophobia and antisemitism. An online webinar in the fall on evangelism and religious dialogue was very well attended.

Journeys Into Friendships — This is a collaborative network with the CRCNA and has been since its inception almost six years ago. This network invites people to walk together with others who work with diaspora people groups and those who need a place to start. Our focus has been on immigrants/migrants, refugees, international students, and Muslim-Christian relations. This network has shifted a bit because of staffing issues, but it is still working.

Learning Communities — Three learning communities have been focused on interreligious work: campus pastors and interfaith work, Journeys Into Friendships, and Michigan-based campus pastors who work with international students.

Our strongest partner in our interreligious work is the CRCNA. We have many joint communities of practice and sharing of resources. Journeys Into Friendship is a place for connection and mutual encouragement, prayer, and learning. We work together to develop a library of resources; to invite more people to join us; to walk alongside congregations stepping into ministry with refugees, immigrants, or international students; to support church planting movements among our new neighbors; and to promote a Reformed approach to interfaith dialogue that balances openness with an authentic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our goals are to align with where the larger RCA is headed, such as a future free from racism and a rich commitment to making disciples.

Working with folks from other faiths is a blessing, though such relationships can be tricky to navigate. We start in different places with regard to faith but are committed to trying to meet each other at the places we have in common.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Laura Osborne, on behalf of the Interreligious Subcommittee

One final item bears noting on our interreligious work:

As noted above, the interreligious subcommittee and coordinator role were established in 2018, and were fully funded from reserves for a period of five years per the directive of General Synod 2018 (*MGS 2018*, F 18-4, p. 66). Part of that recommendation from General Synod (RF 18-4, as referenced above) required an evaluation yielding a recommendation from the Commission on Christian Unity after five years regarding the future structure of this work. This past year was the five-year mark from the inception of this work, and so the CCU has conducted an evaluation, including a consultation with our partner in this work, the CRCNA. The commission reports that the present structure, including the work of our coordinator, effectively meets the mandate set forth by General Synod, as you can read above. We recommend that the work and funding continue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to share the Commission on Christian Unity's letter to the RCA restructuring team as it speaks to the importance of having a Commission of Christian Unity.

Editor's note: The following letter was written in response to the restructuring team's second draft proposal, published in the fall of 2023, and thus reflects the proposals as they were then presented. The restructuring team's final recommendations have changed and no longer recommend a reduction in the number of commissions.

Dear RCA Restructuring Team,

The Commission on Christian Unity met October 18-20, 2023, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In our meetings, our commission discussed the most current Restructuring Team update dated October 5, 2023. In recommendation 5, your team proposed to “*reduce the number of commissions as defined by the Book of Church Order.*” You continued to describe the specifics of this change and the reasoning:

Preserved commissions will be Theology, History, Church Order, Judicial Business, and Nominations, which are needed for the denomination to do its work as a whole. The other commissions (Christian Action, Christian Discipleship and Education, Christian Unity, Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity, Women) would no longer be staffed and resourced by the General Synod, since these areas are best done at a local level.

In conversations among our commission and with *ex officio* member Rev. Eddy Alemán, our commission named that while some ecumenical work should and can be done “at a local level,” nevertheless a majority of RCA ecumenical relations are not done at a local level; specifically our relations with the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, Global Christian Forum, the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, and other such groups.

Furthermore, the responsibilities of the Commission on Christian Unity, as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*, state:

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America’s membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 114])

In light of these things, our commission is significantly concerned with the Restructuring Team’s proposal to discontinue the Commission on Christian Unity. This would directly impact the RCA’s continued vibrant and historical relationship with national and worldwide ecumenical bodies.

Knowing that the RCA Restructuring Team has focused on certain principles and goals to guide their work, our commission would like to share ways our commission’s work intersects with these principles.

- Through our global connections (WCC, WCRC, etc.) we embrace God’s **mission** throughout the world.

- In collaborative endeavors we guide the RCA in being **aligned** with other assemblies.
- Because we sit at the table with **diverse** communities we invite the RCA to be accountable to all of Christ's family.
- Working together with the ecumenical community we can **efficiently** share ideas and resources for the blessing of all.
- Our commission's place at the world's table continues to provide the **Reformed** witness.

In light of all the above-mentioned, our commission is significantly concerned with the Restructuring Team's proposal to discontinue staffing and funding of the Commission on Christian Unity. This would directly impact the RCA's continued vibrant and historical relationship with national and worldwide ecumenical bodies. We hope that you will reconsider your direction with respect to the Commission on Christian Unity.

May God bless your continued work!

The Commission on Christian Unity

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to formally acknowledge and express its appreciation for the work of one member completing his term of service. Rev. Carlos Corro will have completed two full terms and three years as CCU's moderator. Kitt Jackson will assume the role of moderator of the commission for the 2024-2025 work year.

Respectfully submitted,
Carlos Corro, moderator