

# Report of the General Synod Council on Global Mission

## Working Together to Share God's Love with the World

RCA Global Mission exists to strengthen and grow the global church by supporting ministries of compassion, developing leaders, and sharing the good news. Our goal is to provide engagement opportunities for Reformed Church in America (RCA) churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful that help us all to live and love like Jesus.

### Stories of God's Faithfulness

#### *Portugal*

For hundreds of years, RCA Global Mission has been forming partnerships all around the world. As a result, our team is also passionate about introducing friends to friends—introducing our partners to each other. One great example of this is how we've worked with our mission partners in Brazil, the Presbyterian Church in Manaus (IPM), to plant a new church in Portugal. After successfully planting a thriving church in Braga, Portugal, they have now planted another church in Porto, Portugal. In addition, the church leaders from Braga recently visited Ancora Church—started by RCA missionaries Felipe and Janelle deWaard-Silva—in Vulcan, Romania, to help lead an evangelism retreat. This is a testament to our goal of strengthening and growing the church together around the world!

#### *Madagascar*

Imagine living in a space designed for 250 people—but you're now one of 1,900 residents. This is the reality of prisons in Antalaha, Madagascar. In 2023, an RCA missionary (name not disclosed due to sensitivity) visited an Antalaha prison ward and met some of the inmates. Partnering with a local organization and denomination, the RCA missionary intended to develop a training program where artisanal products could be created by the young prisoners, providing them with educational opportunities and enabling teenage minors in prison to gain employment upon release. But when the RCA missionary witnessed the inhumane living conditions of the prison, she was overwhelmed by the health concerns that needed to be addressed first. Working with a Malagasy team of three, the RCA missionary built trust among the prison officials and was given full access to the various sections of the prison to carry out renovation projects. From new latrines, new mattresses, and new paved courtyards, to restoring the water supply, building a new kitchen, and rebuilding a septic system, the work was plenty. Because of your support of this RCA missionary and her work, you have improved the lives of inmates and shared the love of Christ by responding to their humanity and needs.

#### *South Africa*

Children in Botshabelo, South Africa, have a second chance because of the RCA's heart to provide resources that keep vulnerable children in their own homes and to

place orphans into loving foster or adoptive families through the work of our partners Setshabelo Family and Child Services (SFCS). Blessed is one of those children. When she was born, she had visible disabilities and was cast aside by her biological family. While receiving care at the hospital, a nurse who did not have children prepared to open her home and heart to foster Blessed. There was one big problem—her small home presented an obstacle for her to become a licensed foster parent. SFCS adoption worker Boniswa Bele was able to step in and convinced the court to approve the home study. Now, Blessed is preparing to be adopted by the woman whose heart is bigger than her home. Thank you for supporting the work of SFCS and RCA missionary Denise Kingdom. You are changing the life trajectory of the next generation in South Africa.

### *Mozambique*

Alberto has come to New Harvest Farm—a farm established and run by RCA missionary Chad Vanden Bosch in Mozambique—every Friday for two years to participate in a Bible-based agricultural training. Alberto has always had a keen interest in agriculture and knew from a young age he wanted to own a farm. Alberto completed his agricultural training at a local technical school and began farming, but was finding very little success. As he participated in the “Growing with God” training program at New Harvest Farm, he began spending more time observing and seeking to understand God’s creation and the natural cycles that were put into place by God. Within this new framework, what Alberto was seeing in his fields started to make sense and he became an early adopter of both regenerative agricultural techniques and agroforestry. Alberto shared with Chad and his team how these new methods and understanding not only brought his farm from debt to profitability, but also how his faith and depth of understanding of the Lord has increased. The most exciting thing is that Alberto is now a professor at the technical school he attended and has the opportunity to share his knowledge and experience daily with his students.

### *Brazil*

A lack of sign language training resources has caused the Deaf community in Brazil to be vastly unreached with the gospel. In 2023, the RCA made it possible to provide resources to our partners at the Presbyterian Church in Manaus (IPM) and International Christian Centers for the Deaf (ICCD) to hold the first-ever conference to encourage the Deaf ministry leadership of IPM and also to create momentum for a training on LIBRAS—Brazilian sign language—that began after the conference. One of the conference attendees, Bruna, was inspired to use her gift of sign language to become an interpreter after what she experienced at the conference. Bruna and her team are so grateful for the resources you’ve provided to help them train more people to share the gospel with the Deaf community in Brazil.

### *Mexico*

Where do you see God at the border? That is the question RCA missionary Angel Lopez asks every group he takes to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The RCA’s support of Angel Lopez helps him bring small groups to the U.S.-Mexico border to see what

God is doing through Frontera de Gracia—a church and shelter run by his brother, Pastor Samuel Lopez—and to help them begin to understand the needs of migrants. Eleanor McMullen, a young person from Holland, Michigan, traveled to Ciudad Juarez with Angel in 2023. Eleanor shared that she expected it to be hard to consistently find peace and love in a place full of frustration and shattered dreams.

“While those were present, [peace and love were] evident in how openly families let us sit at their tables and eat with them and in the generosity from those who had much less than us,” said McMullen. “It was easy to see ‘love your neighbor as yourself,’ even in the shadow of a wall that works to separate. However, this love needs to be extended on both sides of the border, starting with the churches in the U.S.”

Angel continues to take trips to the border and welcomes you to join him in this work.

### *Japan*

Each month, RCA missionaries Nathan and Nozomi Brownell open up the Greenhouse Youth Center for Sunday Afternoon Fellowship (SAF)—a gathering of graduates from the area mission schools in Yokohama, Japan. This time is designed to build a community among graduates centered around the gospel and provide a space to raise up the next generation of leaders. Some attendees come from nearby and others fly from the other side of Japan to join. The majority of the group come from non-Christian homes and are not yet believers. SAF has become a very uncommon type of gathering in Japan where the Christian minority is completely free to share their faith organically during table conversations. Through this ministry, hearts are changing and some of the graduates are visiting churches, responding to the invitations of the Brownells’ team and the other Christians who attend SAF. God is doing something beautiful in Japan thanks to your generous partnership in mission!

### *Bangladesh*

For Bible translation work, 2023 produced the most concrete example of fruit: 1,000 copies of the Bramar New Testament. More than that, the New Testaments were the fruit of the church working together to bring God’s Word to a Bibleless group: foreign mission workers were involved, but more important were the Bramar mother tongue translators, the Bramar church leaders who gave feedback on the translation, and believers like you around the world who supported the translation project for more than ten years by praying and giving. In May of 2023, about 80 Bramar believers gathered to dedicate the New Testament. It was a time of celebration—of praising God for his faithfulness and goodness to his people, of thanking the many people who played a part in the translation work—as well as a time for committing themselves to know God and make him known through his Word. The turnout was small compared to most dedication ceremonies, but it was still the largest gathering of Bramar believers our partners on the ground had ever seen. Due to persecution, many Bramar believers are reluctant to gather as a church, so it was precious and

encouraging that the New Testament dedication ceremony was the occasion for such a turnout.

### **Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) Shares**

The mission personnel and staff of RCA Global Mission would like to express appreciation to the churches and individuals of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) who so generously support our mission programs. The RCA mission program is supported almost entirely by contributions and Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares. Without you, there would be no RCA Global Mission.

The Reformed Church in America has over 80 active partnerships in over 40 countries around the world. There are 48 missionaries and 46 partner personnel (those employed by the partner but supported through RCA Partnership-in-Mission shares). These mission personnel were supported by 405 churches and 301 individual donors through PIM shares. There are over 120 active projects, including disaster response and projects of compassion. These projects were supported by gifts from 228 churches and 789 individual donors.

#### **GM 24-1**

**To keep the value of a full Partnership-in-Mission share at \$6,900 for 2024; and further, to ask every RCA congregation that does not currently support an RCA missionary with a Partnership-in-Mission share to consider taking on a full or partial share of support.**

### **Transitions in Mission Personnel**

#### *Keith Krebs*

For nine years, Keith faithfully served the staff and patients of the American Mission Hospital in Bahrain, followed by his time serving as spiritual care coordinator for RCA Mission in Europe and the Middle East. Keith's calming, hopeful, loving presence was a blessing in both roles. Keith has shared the love of Christ in word and deed with so many people, and he has left an impact in the hearts and lives of so many. Keith ended his mission service on May 31, 2023.

#### *Kathy DeKock*

Kathy served with RCA Global Mission on staff for 33 years as the Speakers Bureau and PIM share coordinator. Before that, she spent several years serving in Annville, Kentucky, with Jackson County Ministries. Kathy retired on September 30, 2023, and our team misses her dearly and wishes her all the best in this next chapter!

#### *Cheryl Barnes*

Cheryl served in partnership with RCA Global Mission as the education facilitator with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) General Assembly from April 1,

2019, through March 31, 2023. In that time, her transformative work helped improve the educational systems of CCAP in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This work was and still is essential in breaking the cycle of poverty and providing children, especially girls, with the opportunity for a better quality of life. Cheryl transitioned into a new role as the Africa Area Coordinator of PC(U.S.A.) World Mission; Global Mission is working on filling her previous role to continue to carry out the important mission.

#### *Isaías Colop-Xec*

For 30 years, Isaías worked in Guatemala with Rutzij Tijonic (Teaching His Word Ministry) before retiring in October 2023. David Colop, Isaías's son, has already begun carrying out the ministry in his place. David has exciting dreams and plans for where God might be taking the ministry in the coming years to grow the global church and raise up leaders in the Maya K'iche community.

#### *John Hubers*

John has had a long career history of serving with RCA Global Mission, but his most recent retirement on December 30, 2023, is from his four years of service to revitalize the Christian-Muslim Relations program at Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. John made wonderful advancements for the program over the last four years and set up the program to hire the first director of the proposed Christian-Muslim Relations training center that is set to open in the near future.

#### **GM 24-2**

**Be it resolved that the 217th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at the Westin La Paloma in Tucson, Arizona, from June 13-18, 2024, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Isaías Colop-Xec, Kathy DeKock, John Hubers, and Keith Krebs, and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission.**

#### **New Mission Assignments**

##### *Missionaries Serving in Thailand*

New missionaries are starting a Mandarin Chinese-language gospel ministry and church planting initiative in Thailand. Due to the sensitive nature of their work and the people they serve, we are unable to share their names in this space, and their ministry will be considered "do not post," meaning no updates from them or information about them should be shared online. Please contact [mission@rca.org](mailto:mission@rca.org) for more information.

##### *Grace Newhouse*

Grace serves as the coordinator of young adult global engagement. Grace connects young people with RCA mission partners through travel experiences that bring their

faith to life through real-world experiences and interactions. Her goal is to help young people understand what it means to be a Christian in different parts of the world in hopes that they will understand their faith and community in different ways.

*Tara Woodward*

Tara serves as a missional networker in South Africa. Tara builds bridges between churches on the African and North American continents to address the challenges of urban poverty in the Gauteng Province and to unite local churches and leadership toward a shared vision for the spiritual and social transformation of neighborhoods. Tara also connects South African young adults to a diverse diaspora network focusing on mentorship, job skills, and practice-based urban workplace theologies.

*Jeff and Chelsea Lampen*

Jeff and Chelsea have been called to co-pastor RELISH, the Reformed English Language International Service of Hannover (Germany). Jeff and Chelsea will also partner with the World Communion of Reformed Churches to support the ministry of unity and interdenominational collaboration within the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC) region.

## **Deaths\***

**Adeline Sybesma** passed away on April 8, 2023. Adeline Sybesma served as a teacher in Hong Kong, New York City, and Japan. We praise God for her faithful witness even after leaving the mission field. She will be deeply missed.

**Phyllis Vander Werff** passed away on August 20, 2023. Phyllis will be remembered for her role as the family storyteller, her heart for mission, and her dedication to the Reformed Church in America. Phyllis served for three years in Kuwait alongside her husband, Lyle, from 1961 to 1964.

**Arlene Schuiteman** passed away on September 21, 2023. Arlene devoted her life to serving others. After a spiritual calling, she ventured to South Sudan and later Ethiopia, establishing nursing schools and providing medical care. Her unwavering faith guided her through challenging times, leading to leadership roles in Zambia before her retirement in 1989. Arlene's legacy lives on through her impact on healthcare and her biographer's works based on her experiences. She was honored with an honorary doctorate from Northwestern College in 2020.

**Henry (Hank) Stegenga** passed away on November 6, 2023. Hank spent two decades in Chiapas, Mexico, serving alongside his wife, Charmaine, teaching at the Ch'ol Bible School and providing vital services. Fluent in Spanish and Ch'ol, he used technical skills from Pullman Tech to maintain equipment and assisted Mission Aviation Fellowship pilots. Besides teaching, he offered medical aid, from stitching hands to mending a three-month-old's broken leg. After 20 years, health reasons brought him back to the U.S., where he served as an associate pastor and later as pastor at various RCA churches. After retirement, he continued his spiritual journey, serving in

interim roles and working odd jobs. In retirement, he and Charmaine explored the world, making special trips to Mexico and sharing captivating stories of their mission work.

**Lavina “Vi” Block** passed away on December 15, 2023. Alongside her husband, Robert, Vi began her mission service teaching English at the School of High Hope in Iraq, where she fostered friendships and shared her faith. After their time in Iraq was cut short, they embarked on a path of service across churches in different parts of the U.S., where Vi’s talents as an organist, choir director, and educator flourished. Her passion for teaching extended to an Arabic bilingual role in New Jersey, impacting students’ lives for 14 years. In retirement, Vi and Robert ventured to Oman, contributing to the Al Amana Centre’s mission of interfaith understanding and language education.

**Lorraine Joyce Sikkema** passed away on January 28, 2024. She was a devoted RCA missionary who, alongside her husband, LaVerne, spent over 40 years serving the Lord in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. They first served rural communities through agriculture and later through aviation in partnership with Mission Aviation Fellowship. Her passion for God, hymns, and playing piano touched many lives, especially those attending mission gatherings. Lorraine’s favorite verse, Psalm 27:1, encapsulates her unwavering faith: “The Lord is my Light and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the Strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

*\*This report acknowledges known deaths that occurred from spring 2023 until spring 2024. We recognize that some people may have been unintentionally forgotten and for that, we greatly apologize. If you know of names we have missed, please contact us at [mission@rca.org](mailto:mission@rca.org).*