

## Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

*“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... ” (Revelation 7:9).*

“The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations committed to a multiracial future engaging all of God’s people in mission and ministry and resisting the sin of racism” (GSC Ends policy E-5, 2023).

### Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2023 edition, p. 117):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are Nathan Gullion, Rolfi Elivo Lopez, Stephen Kim, Riana Shaw Robinson, Young Na, Earl James (secretary), Nathan Pyle (vice moderator), and Kelvin Spooner (moderator). Alina Coipel faithfully serves as the General Synod Council support staff to the commission.

### Antiracism Policy

Since 1957, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) has endeavored to address the issue of racism in the church and world with a plethora of statements, programs, processes, and measures in its efforts to become a denomination freed from racism. And for the first time in the nearly 400-year history of the RCA, the 2022 General Synod overwhelmingly adopted its first denominational antiracism policy, which was presented and recommended by the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (*Minutes of General Synod [MGS] 2022, RE 22-1, p. 235*):

To direct the General Synod Council and the general secretary to strongly urge all entities of the Reformed Church in America (racial/ethnic councils, assemblies, commissions, institutions, boards, and agencies) to adopt the following antiracism policy:

The Reformed Church in America shall:

1. Build on the 2009 General Synod declaration that “racism is a sin because it is an offense to God” and declare that the sin of racism is expressed as a policy, behavior, and/or belief against a person or people based on their identification and/or membership in a particular racial or ethnic group that is considered a minority.
2. Define antiracism as the practice of confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.
3. Confess that our sin has led us to erect religious, cultural, economic, and political barriers along racial and ethnic lines and that these barriers have separated us from one another and deprived many of us of the right to develop our personal and corporate identities.
4. Respect the rights and freedom of all people of color regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality where the cries of people who have become victims of racial injustice and/or discrimination are to be taken seriously and are given full voice and opportunity to make their complaints, without retaliation, to their appropriate judicatories; and inform the Office for Advocacy and Race Relations as well as the Commission on Race and Ethnicity.
5. Support allies who speak out against persons and systems that perpetuate racial injustice.
6. Commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional synods, and General Synod).

In the two years since the antiracism policy was adopted, there has been a name change in the RCA office that addresses matters of racial justice. The name changed from the “Office for Advocacy and Race Relations,” formed in 2021, to the “Office of Diversity and Belonging.” The staff coordinators supervised under this office include those who lead the ministries of equity-based hospitality, disability concerns, and racial and ethnic councils. This office assists the RCA with “living into a multicultural, multiracial future freed from racism, sexism, and ableism.” The full-time director of the Office of Diversity and Belonging is the Rev. Jeremy Simpson. CORE understands that the RCA is in a season where it must do more with less, but CORE must name our concern with possibly overburdening one person to the detriment of all the ministries in the Office of Diversity and Belonging.

Nevertheless, with staying in alignment with current RCA terminology, CORE requests that wherever the RCA antiracism policy appears online and whenever it is used within the RCA, an editorial change be made by the RCA communication department, or whoever is responsible, to update the terminology to the Office of Diversity and Belonging.

The antiracism policy has been a catalyst for conversation, reflection, and action since its adoption. CORE is glad to report that for many, the policy is not just words in print or on paper; rather, it is a living principle the people of God are striving to achieve. To that end, more classes and regions have committed to intentionally include antiracism work in their contexts. These include the Regional Synod of New York and New Brunswick Classis. Last year, Hope Reformed Church in Holland,

Michigan, and North Grand Rapids Classis committed to doing antiracism work in their areas. CORE's hope is that we can name more and more churches, classes, and regions that are engaged in antiracism work.

As churches, classes, and regions strive to live out the principles of the policy, their judicatories must be open to taking seriously any reports of microaggressions and/or discrimination, and individuals must be culturally aware and sensitive to how they address one another. Just last year, microaggressions occurred at General Synod 2023: offensive comments were made to a Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries executive committee member, discriminatory comments were made toward visiting high school students from an Upward Bound program, and assumptions were made about another person's ethnicity/nationality, just to name a few. This is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. CORE has been informed that antiracism training will occur at General Synod 2024. We commend this effort to enlighten, educate, and edify the General Synod delegates and attendees to be more alert in their interactions and conversations, but CORE also hopes this training will become a resource and made available to churches, classes, and regional synods throughout the denomination.

The Reformed Church in America's antiracism policy, stated in full above, includes the following elements:

- "Define antiracism as the practice of confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions."
- "Respect the rights and freedom of all people of color regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality where the cries of people who have become victims of racial injustice, and/or discrimination are to be taken seriously and are given full voice and opportunity ..."
- "Commit to dismantling racism in its attitudes and structures in all assemblies (local churches, classes, regional centers, and General Synod)."

Currently, the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* requires that only the Commissions on Race and Ethnicity and Nominations include people of color from the four racial and ethnic councils (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Sections 7a and 8a [2023 edition, p. 117]) as members. That inclusion allows those two commissions to fully embrace the word and intent of the antiracism policy.

Neither the *BCO* nor any other authority ensures that the attitudes or structures of the other General Synod commissions are influenced or impacted by people of color. The consequence of this lack of racial and ethnic representation is that the ongoing work of the commissions to guide and shape the discussions, decisions, and actions of General Synods might neglect the experiences, needs, wisdom, and desires of our diverse denomination. In short, this structural oversight may cause us to fall short of the denomination's goal of being free of racism. Therefore, CORE recommends:

**RE 24-1**

**To direct each General Synod commission to annually seek advice and input from each racial and ethnic council in order to incorporate their experiences and concerns into the commission’s mission and goals. Each commission is to provide the General Synod Council (GSC) with its annual schedule of engagement with the councils. And further,**

**To direct GSC to monitor how each commission implements its engagement with the councils, and to include its findings in its evaluations of the commissions, as per *BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g (2023 edition, p. 111).**

This recommendation allows for the discussions, decisions, and actions of General Synods to be enriched by the experiences and wisdom of the wide racial and ethnic diversity of the RCA.

CORE also recommends that each commission be required to participate in antiracism training. At these events, commissioners should discuss the elements of the antiracism training and consider together how the policy intersects with their commission’s *BCO* mandates.

**RE 24-2**

**To direct each General Synod commission to participate in an antiracism training at least once every two years. The training is to include discussion of how the RCA’s antiracism policy affects the commission’s work. This training can coincide with opportunities offered through or approved by the RCA Office of Diversity and Belonging; working through the staff office will enable commissions to find trainings that are both meaningful and do not have additional budgetary impact.**

**Antiracism Training and the Consistorial Report Form (CRF)**

CORE is called to “recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church” as well as “monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives” (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b [2023 edition, p. 117]). To get a clearer idea of the denomination’s efforts to become a fully multicultural and multiracial church, CORE conducted research utilizing the Consistorial Report Form and one-on-one interviews.

The 2021 General Synod adopted the following recommendation presented by the General Synod Council serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod on behalf of the African American Black Council (*MGS 2021*, EC 21-22a, p. 44):

To include a question about participation in antiracism training in the annual Consistorial Report Form.

CORE received and reviewed the 2022 Consistorial Report Form (CRF), which contained the question: Did your church host or participate in antiracism training this year?

Throughout the eight regional synods, a total of 717 churches responded to this question; out of those, only 51 churches, or 7 percent of the respondents, stated they hosted or participated in antiracism training in 2022, while 666 churches (93 percent) stated they did not. The following chart shows the breakdown by regional synod.

<b>Regional Synod</b>	<b># of Responding Churches</b>	<b>Had Antiracism Training in 2022</b>	<b>Did Not Have Antiracism Training in 2022</b>
New York	134	17	117
Albany	92	3	89
Canada	28	2	26
Mid-America	67	2	65
Far West	51	3	48
Great Lakes	109	9	100
Heartland	94	3	91
Mid-Atlantics	142	12	130
<b>Totals</b>	<b>717</b>	<b>51 (7 percent)</b>	<b>666 (93 percent)</b>

Based on the comments of some respondents in addressing whether their church hosted or participated in antiracism training in the past year, there are several factors that may contribute to these results, including:

- Addressing racism as a sin from the pulpit from some churches
- Lack of opportunities/resources to participate in antiracism training
- The church's location is in a non-diverse rural area
- Lack of interest of congregation and/or church leadership
- The "color blind" theology that all people are image bearers of God, therefore race has no significant bearing on relationships
- Seminaries do not prepare their students to live antiracist lifestyles
- Classes do not hold their students under care or their member ministers of Word and sacrament accountable for embedding antiracism into their ministries

Some viewed participating in the monthly antiracism prayer gathering as antiracism training, which, in CORE's opinion, it is not. CORE appreciates and values the monthly

antiracism prayer gatherings and all who participate and support it. These gatherings enlighten, generate conversation and reflection, and above all, prayer, to convict hearts to eradicate racism, which is sorely needed.

To supplement the information compiled from the Consistorial Report Form (CRF) regarding antiracism and multicultural work among churches, CORE conducted interviews with classis clerks and educational institution presidents (or their designees). Nine open-ended questions, two of which included sub-questions, were used to allow interviewees wide latitude on how they wanted to respond.

Letters and emails were sent to classis clerks and the RCA's educational institutions. Eleven leaders responded from various regions throughout the RCA, with two leaders being from the same classis. Only one college/seminary leader responded.

Regarding those who responded to our request, CORE found this method of information gathering to be much more illuminating than the CRF method. However, most classes and educational institutions did not respond to our request. While CORE recognizes there are several possible reasons for the non-response, ranging from overwhelming ministry responsibilities to an apprehension to engage the antiracism conversation, we were disappointed by the lack of participation.

Through the interviews, CORE discovered these important insights:

1. While some locations appear to have clear mechanisms in place to hold the assembly accountable to grow as an antiracist body, most appear to lack such a capacity.
2. While we have no information about whether or how pastors are trained to be antiracist, it appears, in many assemblies, they are not accountable to be, model, or expect people to be antiracist.
3. Antiracism can be thought of as an idea, as an organizational policy matter, and/or as a lifestyle. It appears that most interviewees assess their organizations as seeing antiracism at least as an idea. It appears that a few see antiracism as an organizational or policy matter. It appears that very few see antiracism as a lifestyle matter. It might be that the nature of the interview question itself influenced this observation.
4. Strategic focuses going forward might be to encourage assemblies to adopt an antiracism or similar policy and empower ministry teams to encourage the embedding of that policy into their respective assemblies' life at the levels of discipleship, leadership, and mission.

CORE concedes that the antiracism question has been on the CRF for only two years, and CORE has not yet reviewed the 2023 CRF. In addition, the antiracism policy has existed for only two years. Nevertheless, this research indicates that much work and greater effort is needed in all assemblies as well as RCA educational institutions to ensure that the denomination achieves its multiracial and multiethnic objectives. All of the interviewee responses have been anonymously documented. If anyone is interested in reviewing the responses, please contact the new CORE moderator, Nate

Pyle, at [nathan.pyle@gmail.com](mailto:nathan.pyle@gmail.com). Also, CORE will continue to monitor the antiracism training question on the CRF with the hope that additional churches will be committed to antiracism work in their communities of fellowship.

## Looking Ahead

The 2022 General Synod passed a recommendation funding three sankofa journeys and cohorts with the Institute for Healing Racism (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-2, p. 237). These experiences require significant time and energy to implement. Unfortunately, there have not been any sankofa journeys or Institute for Healing Racism cohorts yet. CORE remains in contact with the Office of Diversity and Belonging with the desire to assist in coordinating sankofa journeys that will be impactful for everyone who participates. More information will be shared in the coming months.

The Executive Committee of the African American Black Council (AABC) conducted an in-depth analysis of the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to “alter, eliminate, or replace any article or section that would result in making those portions of the *BCO* more antiracist and culturally inviting.” These recommendations were submitted to the General Synod Council (GSC) under two reports: Report #1 – Recommendations for Specific Changes to the *BCO* Related to Antiracism; and Report #2 – Recommendations on Extra-*BCO* Matters related to Antiracism. CORE received and reviewed these reports and commends the AABC for the time, effort, reflection, and conclusions that the council made. CORE fully endorses the reports and anticipates that GSC will bring related recommendations to the floor of General Synod 2024 for discussion and adoption.

CORE has met with representatives of the RCA Board of Benefit Services (BOBS) to discuss their paper “An Equitable Future,” which highlights institutional inequities in the benefit services of installed ministers of Word and sacrament of color in the RCA. CORE believes this is a matter that is important and requires attention. For CORE is committed to promoting equality and justice within our denomination, and it is with this commitment in mind that we fully commend BOBS’ paper “An Equitable Future.” The paper poses this question, “How do we provide a structure and accessible resources so that clergy have the option to save for retirement and receive other critical benefits, but in a way that fits their contexts and needs?” It is a question that needs to be addressed and resolved so that installed ministers of color have some assurance of stability when they reach retirement. However, it has been difficult for BOBS and CORE to gain traction from other assemblies and agencies in this area during this season of transition as other issues have taken higher priority. Moving forward, CORE will continue to collaborate with BOBS for an equitable future for its ministers.

General Synod 2022 overwhelmingly adopted the following recommendation:

To direct the General Synod Council to reinstate and recognize a fourth racial/ethnic council for Native American and First Nations Ministries as a council in the Reformed Church in America with all rights and privileges hereto

according to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2021 edition, p. 109) (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-3, p. 238).

To date, bylaws have not been completed, an official leadership structure is not in place, and the staff coordinator position for this council has not been filled. CORE acknowledges that there are individuals engaged in implementing these structures. However, CORE is disappointed with slow pace and hopes the Native American Indigenous Ministries Council (NAIM) will be fully functional by year's end.

CORE is excited that the Global Hispanic Ministries Council has been fully engaged in church planting, particularly in the Global South. The RCA has a rich history of Global Mission ministry, and the Word of God, through the Hispanic Council, is reaching countries such as the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, and other countries in the Global South. We are all called to be ambassadors for Christ and the Hispanic Council is truly living into that divine calling.

### **Conclusion**

As the Reformed Church in America continues its transitional journey, which, we pray, will be more inclusive and empowering for people of color, CORE is committed to being a safe space for anyone who feels oppressed, discriminated against, wronged, or mistreated by a brother or sister in Christ because of race, ethnicity, or nationality. CORE is open to hear your story and address it accordingly and encourages anyone to come forward and speak your truth to power. For the only way that injustices come to light is that courageous people stand up and speak out against the sin of racism.

Lastly, CORE thanks Rolfi Elivo Lopez, who served one term and was instrumental in the creation of the antiracism policy. It is also with much gratitude that CORE thanks Kelvin Spooner for work for the last two terms and especially his leadership as moderator of CORE for the last four years. Kelvin has led with courage and humility, which enabled CORE to function as both a hospitable place for difference, and also a cohesive team that worked to see the RCA fulfill its Revelation 7:9 hopes. For that, we are grateful and pray God blesses Kelvin as he continues to serve God's kingdom.

Respectfully submitted,  
Rev. Kelvin A. Spooner, moderator