REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2025

Response to *MGS 2025*, ONB 25-3, p. 104

> To direct the General Synod Council to form a task force to prepare advice for the church on issues relating to the care of churches and supervision of consistories where there are long-term ministerial vacancies, for report to the General Synod of 2027. The task force should include members of the Commissions on Church Order and Theology and others with contextual experience with long-term ministerial vacancies.

At its fall 2026 meeting, the General Synod Council (GSC) formed this task force with Greg Town and Claudette Reid representing the GSC, James Brumm representing the Commission on Theology, and Amanda Bruehl and Christopher Jacobsen representing the Commission on Church Order.

In the first few meetings, the group shared our various experiences with long-term vacancies, where churches go five years or more without having a called or contracted pastoral relationship (be this a minister of Word and sacrament or a commissioned pastor). We recognized that churches that have contracted with a preaching elder count as a long-term vacancy, as supervision is required by the classis in these cases.

We compiled a survey for classis clerks, with the help of the Office of the General Synod, to better understand the various dynamics of long-term vacancies and specific needs within the classes. As of the GSC's stated meeting in March nine responses had been received, and a reminder was sent.

Recognizing that the vast majority of the initial members of the task force serve within classes within the two eastern synods, we reached out to various others across the denomination, and added Edie Lenz and Tom Grabill to the task force in March 2026.

The task force plans to submit a full report to General Synod 2027.

Response to *MGS 2025*, RE 25-2, p. 203

> To direct the General Synod Council to form a task force to study the issues regarding inability of recruitment practices to identify and put forth significantly more people of color to serve on entities for which the Commission on Nominations vets nominees. At the least, the task force should include GSC members, a member of the Commission on Nominations, representatives from the four councils, and a representative from CORE. The task force should address the challenges in recruiting sufficient numbers of people of color and recommend recruitment measures that can double the number of people of color currently serving on commissions, boards, and agencies. The task force's work is to be reported to the 2027 General Synod.

At its fall 2025 meeting, the GSC formed this task force and appointed GSC members Patrick Beckford, Vivian Campbell, and Sarah Palsma to serve on it. Other members of the task force are: Al Plat, representing the Commission on Nominations; Tony Davis, representing the Commission on Race and Ethnicity; Deontè Moses, representing the African American Black Council; Calvin Tajujung, representing the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries; Joel Aguirre, representing the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries; and Clara Rice, representing the Native American Indigenous Ministries Council. The task force's report is expected to be presented to the 2027 General Synod.

Response to *MGS 2025*, RE 25-3, p. 204

> To direct the General Synod Council to form a task force to study whether the formation of classes or middle assemblies on the basis of race or ethnicity is in conflict with the RCA's anti-racism policy adopted by General Synod 2022. The task force should conduct its work virtually, and should bring a report to the 2026 General Synod.

At its fall 2025 meeting, the General Synod Council appointed Vivian Campbell, Corinne Ellis, Carlos Rivera, and Drew Yamamoto to serve as this task force, which presents its report and recommendations below.

Mandate and Scope of the Task Force

Presented with its mandate above, the task force conducted its work virtually through prayer, theological reflection, historical review, and policy analysis, drawing upon the RCA's recorded synodical actions, confessional commitments (including the Belhar Confession), and lived experiences within the denomination.

Historical and Theological Context

The task force grounded its study in the RCA's longstanding witness on racism and reconciliation, including:

- The **1957 Credo on Race Relations**, which named racism as sin and called for repentance expressed through concrete action (*MGS 1957*, pp. 181-184).
- Subsequent General Synod actions establishing commissions, councils, and taskforces addressing racial injustice, apartheid, white privilege, and systemic inequities.
- The **1977 theological basis for racial and ethnic councils**, which confessed that the church erected barriers along racial and ethnic lines while affirming diversity as a gift meant to enrich the body of Christ (*MGS 1977*, R-2, pp. 80-81).
- The **2009 declaration** that "racism is a sin because it is an offense to God" (*MGS 2009*, R-70, p. 311).
- The **2010 adoption of the Belhar Confession**, centering unity, reconciliation, and justice as essential to the church's witness.

- The **2022 antiracism policy**, which defines antiracism as confronting and changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racism and commits the RCA to dismantling racism in all assemblies (*MGS 2022*, RE 22-1, pp. 235-236).

This history reflects a consistent tension the church has sought to hold faithfully: honoring cultural identity and protecting marginalized voices while resisting structural separation that undermines reconciled unity.

Foundational Clarification: Race and Ethnicity

The task force identified the lack of shared definitions of race and ethnicity as a central challenge in this study.

- Race is understood, in line with RCA polity and history, as a socially constructed system of power that operates through policies, behaviors, and beliefs to advantage some and disadvantage others. Racism, therefore, is structural as well as personal and requires repentance expressed through the dismantling of unjust systems.
- Ethnicity refers to lived cultural identity—shared language, history, traditions, and communal memory—through which people understand themselves and experience belonging. Ethnicity is not inherently hierarchical but becomes marginalized when constrained by racialized systems.

From a Belhar lens, race names the dividing walls Christ calls the church to dismantle, while ethnicity names the diversity of gifts God intends to flourish within reconciled unity.

Findings of the Task Force

<u>1. On Forming Race- or Ethnicity-Based Middle Assemblies</u>

The task force finds that forming classes or middle assemblies explicitly organized around race or ethnicity would be in tension with the antiracism policy, particularly the policy's commitment to dismantling racism in the structures of all assemblies. While such proposals may arise from legitimate pastoral concerns, the creation of separate governing assemblies risks institutionalizing separation along the very lines the church has confessed as sinful.

<u>2. On Belonging, Voice, and Access</u>

The task force recognizes that without intentional safeguards, people of color and language-minority communities can be marginalized within shared assemblies. The antiracism policy requires that their cries be taken seriously, that they be given full voice, and that barriers to participation be addressed.

3. On Race/Ethnicity Networks

The task force affirms that race- or ethnicity-based networks within existing middle assemblies, when clearly defined as non-governing, supportive, and advisory, are consistent with the RCA's history of racial and ethnic councils and align with antiracism commitments. Such networks can foster belonging, mutual support, and advocacy without creating parallel or segregated structures.

4. On Language Access

The task force identifies language as a significant structural barrier. Investment in translation and interpretation is a concrete antiracist practice that enables full participation and reflects the church's Pentecost vision of unity amid diversity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The task force concludes that:

- The formation of race- or ethnicity-based middle assemblies is **not consistent** with the RCA's antiracism policy and confessional commitments.
- The policy does not prohibit honoring ethnic identity or addressing racialized harm; rather, it calls the church to do so **within shared structures** that resist separation and promote reconciled unity.
- Clarity in defining race and ethnicity is essential for consistent, faithful application of antiracism commitments across the denomination.

RF 26-1
To affirm that the formation of middle assemblies on the basis of race or ethnicity is inconsistent with the RCA's antiracism policy; and further,

To encourage middle assemblies to establish non-governing race- and ethnicity-based networks within their structures to support belonging, advocacy, and mutual accountability; and further,

To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, to identify a process for periodic review of these practices that supports the ongoing dismantling of systemic racism.

RF 26-2
To urge middle assemblies to provide translation of meetings and materials; and further,

To instruct the general secretary and General Synod Council to share their best practices and learnings for translation efforts

with middle assemblies, as well as a list of resources and technologies that can be used to assist in translation efforts.

RF 26-3
To instruct the Commission on Race and Ethnicity to articulate and steward denomination-wide definitions of "race" and "ethnicity" informed by RCA history, the RCA's antiracism policy, and the Belhar Confession; and to provide guidance on the application of these definitions in governance and structure; and further,

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to add these definitions to the Glossary of the *Book of Church Order*.

In keeping with the Reformed conviction that the church is reformed and always reforming, the task force offers this report in humility and hope—trusting that faithful discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit, will continue to lead the RCA toward a future marked by unity, reconciliation, and justice, where every member of the body is able to flourish and participate fully.

Response to *MGS 2025*, RF 25-1, pp. 96-97

To direct the General Synod Council (GSC) to establish a six-member working group to define and address spiritual abuse within the RCA. If necessary, this working group will work with experts in spiritual abuse.

The working group will:

- Clarify the definition of spiritual abuse from a faith perspective.
- Develop resources for individuals and congregations facing spiritual abuse.
- Create educational material for classes, middle assemblies, and congregations.

The group will include two representatives each from the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on Theology, and the GSC. Meetings will be virtual, with the first convening before October 31, 2025.

At its fall 2025 meeting, the GSC formed this task force and appointed Tim TenClay and Lois Wendlandt to serve as the GSC representatives. They are joined by Anne Troost and Leah Ennis-Gasero representing the Commission on Christian Action, and Sara Nielsen and Doug Scholten representing the Commission on Theology.

The group has met virtually several times and has begun work on gathering resources. It plans to report to the 2027 General Synod.