An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America

With RCA statements
“The Unity We Seek to Manifest”
and “An Affirmation of Christian Unity”
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Introduction

"Unity has a purpose larger than itself—the manifestation of the glory of God to the world (John 17: 1-5).”

Heeding the gospel call to unity, the Reformed Church in America has been an active participant in the ecumenical movement since its inception at the beginning of the last century. It is both a charter member of historic bodies, such as the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, and a driving force behind newer and broader ecumenical initiatives, such as the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In addition to these conciliar expressions of Christian unity, the RCA has participated in the U.S. Reformed-Catholic dialogue for over 50 years and recently celebrated 20 years of “full communion” partnership and cooperation with the Lutherans (ELCA) through the Formula of Agreement.

Guiding the RCA’s conciliar, dialogical, and cooperative engagement with Christians of other denominations has been the Ecumenical Mandate, a foundational document unanimously adopted by the General Synod in 1996. Although more than two decades have passed since its adoption, the rationale for and description of Christian unity found within these pages is still just as true. And yet, the world has changed considerably. Many of the communities in which the RCA has congregations are now home to new immigrants, the result of a global movement that brings millions of immigrants to the United States and Canada each year, the majority of whom are Christian. Many immigrant groups have ties to churches in their country of origin, but not in their new home. The ecumenical challenge, then, rests not only in national or international interchurch movements, but also locally. Each congregation is called to engage ecumenically in our own communities by practicing Christian hospitality.

In the years since the Ecumenical Mandate was written, Christianity has also exploded in the Global South—in Africa, South America, and Asia. We in North America and in the RCA have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in these places. One of the gifts that we have received from South African Christians is the Belhar Confession, the newest standard of unity adopted by the General Synod in 2009. A major theme of the Belhar is Christian unity, which it describes as both a gift of God and an obligation of the church. Another significant contribution is the Belhar’s insistence upon justice and reconciliation as constitutive of unity.

Through our baptism, every person within Christ’s church is called to a ministry of reconciliation, justice, and unity. As the Ecumenical Mandate sets forth, “To be a faithful agent of God’s work of reconciliation in the world and in the church, the RCA must set a course that places it at the forefront of ecumenical endeavor and enables it to be ever vigilant in the quest for realizing and manifesting our unity in Christ.” To be a faithful agent of God’s work, we must do this globally and locally. For as the ekklesia, we are a people “sent out” into the world and into our neighborhoods to reconcile and to witness to the oneness we have in Christ, who has already broken down the walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:4-22). May this Ecumenical Mandate serve as a helpful guide along that journey.

To God be the glory,
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A very special thanks to Douglas Fromm, who served as associate for ecumenical relations and directed the production of this document, and to members of the Ecumenical Task Force and the Commission on Christian Unity from 1992 to 1996 for their roles in writing and revising the Ecumenical Mandate.

1 An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America, 8.
AN ECUMENICAL MANDATE FOR THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

Considering the precious and blessed unity of the Church of God and the plainly expressed will of our Savior that all should be one, and also the need which the separate parts have of one another, and especially remembering how small and weak we ourselves are, therefore, our hearts have longed for intercourse with the precious Zion of God ever since our feet first pressed the shores of this New World ... All God’s children, of whatever denomination, are dear to us (The Classis of Holland, Michigan, 1849, letter to the General Synod, requesting admission into the Reformed Church).

INTRODUCTION

Ecumenism can be defined as that movement within the church which seeks to give visible expression to the unity that all believers have in Jesus Christ. Ecumenism has always been an important commitment of Reformed Christians. John Calvin was prepared to “cross ten seas” to further the unity of the church. In the Nicene Creed we confess our belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic church,” and an ecumenical vision is implicit in Question and Answer 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic Church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

In 1981 the RCA adopted the following “Affirmation of Christian Unity”:

We believe that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all ... We pledge to seek the unity of the church through communing with other Christians in worship and work, cooperating with other Christians in councils of churches, and uniting with other Christians in faith and order (MGS 1981, R-5, p. 147).

The RCA has expressed this commitment in a solid tradition of ecumenical involvement. It is a charter member of the World Council of Churches, of the National Council of Churches in Christ of the USA, and of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. It belongs to the Evangelical Fellowship

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2 Calvin to Cranmer, Letter No. 1619, Calvini Opera XIV. 313.
of Canada, to the Canadian Council of Churches, and, through some regional synods, classes, and local congregations, to the National Association of Evangelicals. Further, its mission work exemplifies the ecumenical spirit. Throughout its history the RCA has shown a consistent willingness to cross denominational lines and work with other communions for the greater good. For example, the RCA undertakes world mission only in partnership with another church in the given region and seeks to expand that local church in its setting, rather than begin a new or separate expression of the RCA. Locally, many RCA congregations have sought closer ties with other churches for a variety of purposes, and many RCA pastors seek fellowship with pastors from other churches.

What does this ecumenical commitment and tradition mean as we move toward the beginning of the next millennium? Ours is a day when denominational walls are crumbling. Believers attend religious conferences and participate in mission and educational events with comparatively little concern for church affiliation. Many RCA congregations have taken in members from nearly every Christian tradition. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics and Protestants have worshiped together in a variety of settings short of eucharistic fellowship. In today’s religious climate many exciting ecumenical invitations and opportunities are arising!

But today’s ecumenical opportunities also bring uncertainties and questions: Are we compromising our understanding of truth in our ecumenical activities? What should be the focus of our ecumenical energy and with whom? How do we approach and develop our ecumenical involvements? Do we ever withdraw from them? If so, when?

With these questions in mind, this report, mandated by the Commission on Christian Unity and developed largely by the RCA’s Task Force on Ecumenism, seeks to “define goals and criteria for the RCA entering into and maintaining participation in ecumenical relations.” Part one of this report will lay the theological foundations for Christian unity, with implications therein; part two will detail expressions, assessments, and ramifications of RCA ecumenical activity; and part three will list goals, criteria, and operating principles for maintaining the RCA’s present ecumenical involvements and for establishing new ones.

We live in a fragmented world. Excessive individualism and corporate greed are tearing apart the fabric of our human relationships. The dignity of human life and respect for the diversity of different peoples is severely eroded. Throughout the world, nation lifts sword against nation, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, and the suffering of the poor increases. We are out of harmony with the created world that God has entrusted to us. The church’s disputes and divisions have contributed to some of these problems. We are unable to sit down at the same Lord’s Table and set an example to the world. A fragmented Christian witness exacerbates the fragmentation of the world.

Jesus Christ’s prayer for unity within his church (John 17) was to the end that the world might know that the Father had sent him. The reality and power of God’s kingdom in Jesus flow through our ecumenical efforts. These efforts proclaim that we have been called out of fragmentation into unity, that we are the reconciling community, and that as Christians our diversity will not prevent us from
working toward an authentic experience of oneness in Christ. Christian unity can offer a visible witness to the power and purpose of God who reconciles our broken and divided world.

I. THE FOUNDATIONS, FORMATION, AND PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

A. THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

1. Christian unity is spiritual.

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11).

We learn from Jesus’ prayer that Christian unity is derived from the spiritual fellowship of the Father and the Son and is a work of the Holy Spirit. It originates in the Triune God and is therefore God’s gift. The Belgic Confession testifies to the spiritual nature of Christian unity:

We believe and confess one single catholic or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Article 27).

But all people are obliged to join and unite with [the church], keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them, as members of each other in the same body (Article 28).

As such, the spiritual unity of the church is an article of faith and it transcends all ecclesiastical divisions. Indeed, “out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end,” as the Heidelberg Catechism says, the Lord Jesus “gathers, protects, and preserves it” by “his Spirit and Word.” As our Lord’s gift, this spiritual unity is not something we create ourselves. Rather, by faith, we seek to discover it, receive it, and embrace it.

2. Christian unity is visible.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

Here Jesus prays that the spiritual unity of the church will be something that the world can see, so that it might believe. The spiritual unity of the church must never be separated from its visible expression in the institutional church. The Belgic Confession (Article 29) refuses to distinguish between the invisible church and the visible church, as if the former were truer than the latter. There are not two churches, one invisible, one visible. Rather, the spiritual church is known because
and insofar as it appears in the visible church. The visible unity of the church is an expression of its spiritual unity. Therefore, the ministry of ecumenism finds its calling, its roots, and its meaning in the spiritual unity of the church.

3. Christian unity is “already and not yet.”

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:1, 3-6).

In these verses we note that Paul's seven-fold declaration of Christian unity is preceded by the call to maintain unity. Paul is teaching that Christian unity is simultaneously something we have already, but also something we must work toward. In this regard, Christian unity is like all the other realities of the reign of God which are simultaneously “already and not yet.” Another such reality is the gift of sanctification that all Christians already have in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2) and yet are called to work out (1 Pet. 1:15).

Therefore, ecumenical ministry must be carried out eschatologically, that is, in terms of Christ’s coming again and the final fulfillment of salvation. Its vision and urgency come precisely because Christian unity is part of the ultimate reality of God’s reign. God's “plan for the fullness of time” is to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10, RSV), and the church's mission is to prepare the world for that unity in righteousness. The unity of the church is a sign that the church is itself a firstfruits of the greater harvest. To deny the church's calling in this regard is to deny our very hope. However, the “already and not yet” of Christian unity also presents us with the sobering reality that the visible unity of the church in this present age is always partial and defective. Its complete perfection must wait until that day when “Christ who is your life is revealed” (Col. 3:4). And so we are humble, prayerful, and dependent on the grace of God in the work of ecumenism.

4. Christian unity is unity in truth.

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one” (John 17:17, 20-21a).

The unity that Jesus prayed for was centered in truth. More specifically, this truth is the word of God in Christ, the word he taught to the apostles whose witness, in turn, is transmitted in the Scriptures. This unity in truth is a matter of shared beliefs as well as of a set of relationships that are “true,” i.e., that are characterized by mutual integrity as well as by faithfulness to God. Christian unity comes out of being one in Christ, as he is in the Father (John 17:21-23).

Because Christian unity is “in Christ,” and because of the need always to bear witness to the apostolic
faith, ecumenical activity will involve us in a continual dialogue about doctrine. The nature of the doctrinal discussion will vary according to the form and objective of the particular ecumenical endeavor, but all such discussions are matters of some complexity, requiring patience and perseverance. At the same time, because our unity is in truth, the reality is that limitations to unity do arise. Where the truth of the apostolic witness is consciously denied or rejected, there is no longer any real unity, and in that case Scripture even sounds a call towards separation (2 John 10-11).

This issue is close to the heart of Reformed identity, because our churches define themselves as “confessing churches.” Our confessions, or doctrinal standards, serve as “standards of unity.” But, as the history of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Belhar Confession reminds us, there are times when the organizational unity of the church threatens the integrity of its confession, forcing it into a status confessionis (“state of confession”), where apparent disunity may be the necessary price to pay for the sake of the gospel. In such cases, although the Reformed Church in America does not dare to judge another denomination’s spiritual unity in Christ, it may be forced, in grief and without triumphalism, to withdraw from apparent unity.

There is a danger, therefore, of making an idol of unity at the expense of doctrine. Unity has a purpose larger than itself, the manifestation of the glory of God to the world (John 17:1-5). Both love and truth are necessary to this end (Eph. 4:15). Truth must not be undermined in our ecumenical activities, and neither must love. We should beware of choosing the easier route of separation in order to avoid the pains that come with love. As Calvin wrote:

The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished (Institutes IV, 1, 10).

As the ancient motto puts it, “Let there be in necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

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1 “Strictly speaking, one could say that the expression status confessionis [“a state of confession”] means that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat.” This definition comes from D. J. Smit, “What Does Status Confessionis Mean?” in A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982, edited by G.D. Cloete and D. J. Smit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 7-32.

Both Lutheran and Reformed churches use the term. Reformed churches, unlike Lutheran churches, usually resolve the situation through the writing and signing of a confession or doctrinal standard, such as the Canons of Dort (1619), the Barmen Declaration (1934), and the Belhar Confession (1982).
B. THE FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

1. Christian unity is grounded in the cross of Christ.

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it” (Eph. 2:14-16).

God has established reconciliation in the cross of Christ as the basis for the unity that Christians have with each other. In other words, our unity comes from our sharing God’s forgiveness in Jesus. As baptized believers, we are the fellowship of his death and resurrection. At the cross we are called to surrender all the pride and self-love that create divisions among us, and our community is characterized by relationships that testify to God’s gracious reconciliation. This divine reality creates a spiritual unity among Christians out of which visible unity comes.

Christians cannot just negotiate their way into unity. Ecumenical activity must always include the work of repentance. This means that confessing previous sins, casting off the works of pride, and grieving over the pain of separation are all necessary to the formation of unity. Forming Christian unity must always be a corporate act of genuine repentance and conversion, which, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, is the “dying away of the old humanity, and the coming to life of the new humanity” (Answer 88).

2. Christian unity is a work of the Holy Spirit.

“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

It follows, then, that true Christian unity is the work of God in us, and it is not the product of human endeavor or idealism. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that it is the “Son of God through his Spirit and Word” who “gathers, protects, and preserves for himself” this “community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (Answer 54).

Since he does this by the power of the Spirit and the Word, it also follows that Christian worship is necessary to the formation of unity. Indeed, worship is the beginning and end of ecumenical activity. We exercise our humility and our faith in worship, and in worship the reconciling and unifying work of God is confessed, celebrated, and sealed to us by the power of the Holy Spirit.
C. THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

1. Christian unity is for maturity in Christ.

“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15-16).

In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul is writing about the diversity of gifts in the body. His teaching (also developed in 1 Corinthians 12) is that in the body of Christ we are not complete without one another and that we need one another to “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). One of the purposes of ecumenism, therefore, is to incorporate into our own faith and practice the full inheritance of the church catholic. It is entered into with the conviction that, individually and corporately, we need one another in order to grow up into Christ. The first work of the Holy Spirit, according to the Apostles’ Creed, is “the holy catholic Church” and this implies “the communion of saints,” which the Heidelberg Catechism explains as follows:

First, that believers one and all, as members of this community [of the church], share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members (Answer 55).

Ecumenism’s purpose is to express this corporately.

2. Christian unity is for mission to the world.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

Christ prays that the Father’s unity with him might be given to the church in order to manifest the saving work of God to the world. A chief purpose of ecumenism, therefore, is Christian mission, and all ecumenical endeavor must have the glorious and compelling vision continually before it of bringing the gospel to the world:

“This it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46-47).

This mission must also take into account the Lord’s particular concern for the poor and the disenfranchised of the world. It must understand the “world” as broadly as the Scriptures do, and
incorporate into its mission a biblical concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Faithful commitment to such mission should always engage us more deeply in ecumenical realities. With such a vision the church will more deeply realize its unity as it works together in acts of Christian mission.

II. EXPRESSIONS, PROGRESS, AND RAMIFICATIONS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Having laid some theological foundations and expressed a vision, we can look more closely at how we live these out. What are we doing? How far have we come? Where must we go? What are the different ways the RCA has practiced ecumenism?

A. EXPRESSIONS OF ECUMENISM

1. Cooperative Ecumenism includes those cooperative endeavors with other denominations to create programs of ministry and mission. Two examples of this are when the RCA works with Christian Reformed or Presbyterian educators to write church school curricula and when the RCA coordinates its earthquake or flood relief efforts. At the General Synod level, the RCA is currently involved in more than twenty cooperative world mission partnerships and more than sixty ecumenical involvements.

Cooperative ecumenism also takes place on the local and regional levels within the RCA. A number of RCA congregations engage with other churches in their communities to run vacation Bible schools, to participate in community worship services, and to distribute food. To a lesser degree some RCA classes cooperate in similar ministry endeavors with their regional counterparts.

The motivation for cooperative ecumenism does not necessarily spring from the specific desire to express Christian unity. When RCA people join together for a youth event with their Lutheran neighbors, they may not be consciously promoting the value of Christian unity, or ecumenism, even though they are in fact engaged in an ecumenical relationship. Their cooperation is for the sake of their youth, perhaps to help their young people build a sense of Christian identity in the local high school. There is, however, more often than not another by-product of such cooperation: the two congregations cannot help being drawn more closely together, even to the point of wondering aloud why they do not engage in more joint ventures.

Cooperative ecumenism can happen at any level, formally or informally, and it is usually prompted by a mutual desire to accomplish a specific ministry of mission goal. It should be understood, however, that cooperative ecumenism must be open to full ecumenical engagement rather than obstructing it.

2. Conciliar Ecumenism is what most people mean when they speak of the “ecumenical movement.” The examples of this form of ecumenism are the various councils of churches (world, national, regional, and local). Following the example of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, such conciliar activity attempts to bring the churches into a common and concrete
forum for fellowship and action. The councils encourage people to come together to hear the Word, to pray and sing, to study the Word and, when possible, to celebrate Holy Communion, demonstrating in these very acts the unity of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. The councils also facilitate the collaboration of denominations in various programs of service and witness, recognizing and accepting the distinctive contributions of each corporate expression of the church catholic.

The Faith and Order Unit of the World Council of Churches is a primary forum for the expression of conciliar ecumenism. In this arena, representatives from all major Christian traditions meet for the purpose of understanding each other’s unique contributions to the whole body of Christ. Issues of theology, church government, and the sacraments are discussed to determine the places of convergence and divergence. Vigorous and passionate discussions demonstrate how deep are the convictions that the various traditions bring to the table. Building a consensus is often a slow and painstaking process.

One well-known result of the Faith and Order conversations is the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM) document, which was widely distributed and discussed throughout the member communions of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Every RCA congregation received a copy of BEM for study and response. This massive effort by the Faith and Order Unity of the WCC indicates a determined commitment to facilitate the whole church’s wrestling with the meaning of being one in Jesus Christ.

Another important WCC activity is the conciliar process of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, which provides the international chance for churches of the world to speak and act together in response to political and economic powers.

**3. Conversational/Dialogical Ecumenism** includes the bilateral and multilateral dialogues that take place between the churches at the denominational level. An example of this is the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue, which is a formal, ongoing conversation now more than twenty years old, and which holds the promise of bringing these two historic Protestant families closer together in the United States of America.

The RCA, through its membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, is also represented in other church-to-church conversations, such as Reformed-Orthodox, with its focus on such issues as Scripture and authority. The RCA participates in these formal conversations in order to be faithful to its self-understanding: that it is already, by virtue of God’s grace, united with all believers in all the denominations around the world. The dialogues seek to give faithful expression to what the RCA believes.

The Lutheran-Reformed dialogue has resulted in the achievement of a significant ecumenical milestone: the principle of “mutual affirmation and mutual admonition.” This principle means that denominations that differ in theology may still be in complete fellowship with each other, if, in full recognition of their differences, they honorably affirm and admonish each other,
where appropriate, in an ongoing relationship of fidelity and humility. Working on the basis of this principle, the Reformed Church in America is able to enter into relationships of “full communion” with other denominations which confess the ecumenical creeds, and which, according to their own standards, rightly preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and practice discipline with integrity.

For the Reformed Church in America “full communion” means full “pulpit and table fellowship” and the recognition of each other’s ministries, in keeping with the authority and responsibilities of the classes and the consistories. It means responsible and continual engagement and interaction at the levels of the General Synod and denominational program. It also means that, for the Reformed Church in America to have true “ecumenical capacity,” it needs, as a confessional church, to be faithful to its confessions and its constitution at all levels—regarding its Standards, for example, not as a hindrance to ecumenism, but as part of the gift that it brings. The principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition” allows for this. Indeed, since the RCA Standards call the RCA to “look forward to that great day” of Christ’s return, when the “not yet” becomes the “already,” the goal of full communion, no matter how far off and how impossible it seems, is always the goal of the RCA’s participation in dialogues.

B. PROGRESS IN ECUMENISM

There has been real progress made over the years toward greater expression of RCA unity with other believers, and this is in large part due to RCA ecumenical activities. The RCA has built bridges, begun conversations, fostered understanding, and replaced old suspicions with new friendships. The ecumenical movement has enabled the RCA to relate better to those outside its family faith. The ecumenical movement has demonstrated the value of cooperation and of sharing resources. The ecumenical movement has opened up the church catholic to the RCA in fruitful ways.

However, this ecumenicity has not yet resulted in overcoming many of our most critical and longstanding divisions within the body of Christ. It may be that our expressions of unity have often led us only to those who think about things the way we do, believe in what we do, and practice their faith in ways that are comfortable to us. If so, we haven’t gone far enough. If we move toward other Christian traditions only on the basis of mutual agreement on one or two issues, or from the appeal of a certain worship style, then we only mirror the world’s way of operating. We ought instead to express our unity in ways that fully reflect the spirit of Jesus’ prayer in John 17, “that we may be one.”

Another reason for division in the church is an unwillingness to change and learn from others whose traditions differ from our own. Learning from others and changing is not easy. Some Christians fear that involvement with others will lead to the erosion of their group’s identity. But ecumenism does not have the purpose of asking that the RCA, or any other church, give up its traditions and standards. The purpose of ecumenical involvement is to recognize our need for each other and our commonality as God’s people, redeemed by Christ and empowered by the
Holy Spirit, so that we might celebrate the full inheritance of the church catholic and attain “to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

Until the “unity of the faith” is attained, our ecumenical endeavor cannot cease. Our motivation for ecumenism arose, as it did for many other church bodies, out of our world mission experience during the last century. It made sense to our forebears to cooperate in the efforts to reach the world with the gospel. What began as a shared program of many Protestant churches eventually evolved into the formation of the World Council of Churches. Now, some fifty years later, the legacy of these united mission efforts reminds us of what the church can accomplish through togetherness instead of separation.

C. RAMIFICATIONS OF A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO ECUMENISM

The first ramification is that we, as a body (the Reformed Church in America), will need to continue our ecumenical work until the whole church is reconciled. Therefore, we will go beyond achieving our ecumenical goals with only those communions that comprise the historic Reformed family. We will attempt to express our unity with those churches, for example, that practice adult or believers’ baptism, or which adhere to a nonpresbyterian form of government, or which are regarded as liberal or conservative. In other words, our movement toward other church bodies will be one of genuine openness. We will want to see other church bodies heal their divisions.

Because of the RCA’s particular tradition in doctrine and liturgy, and in the spirit of the holistic gospel that the RCA affirms, we accept the special responsibility to build bridges, indeed to be a bridge so far as we are able, between those churches that identify themselves as “evangelical” and those churches that identify themselves as “ecumenical.” To be Reformed is to be simultaneously evangelical and catholic, and the RCA’s commitment to ecumenism is informed by the conviction that these two categories are properly complementary, not opposites.

Our desire for community with all followers of Christ will also direct us toward those Christian bodies that do not refer to themselves as “churches,” and to the many Christian people whose faith experience draws mainly on parachurch organizations or Christian-based agencies and councils. The RCA will thus need to orient some of its ecumenical outreach toward nontraditional settings where significant Christian mission, service, or fellowship is practiced.

Our chief motivation for ecumenism on the denominational level is to provide RCA members a place in the life and worship of other churches, and their people a place in RCA congregations. Ministers of the gospel would have equal access to each other’s pulpits; communion tables would be open to each other’s members; and baptisms would be mutually accepted.

Our commitment must include recognition and acceptance of the fact that the church’s obedience to Christ’s call to unity is challenging and even painful. Sometimes we back away from engagement with other church bodies because it involves extraordinary effort either to make a
connection or to keep one. The practices of some bodies of Christians are so different from our own that we wonder what we have in common beyond our confession of Christ. Then there are those whose worship practice and theology are very similar to ours, but whose embrace of certain social or political agendas puts us at odds with them. It will require a new courage to surmount the obstacles that stand in the way of expressing with other communions the unity that is ours in Christ.

In summary, our ecumenical journey over the past decades indicates that the road ahead is strewn with challenges. Like the world that we inhabit, the Reformed Church in America experiences disunity in its own life. Not all of its members share an equal sense of belonging. The issues that divide people and nations into hostile camps, and that keep some churches separated from other churches, are the same issues that divide within our own family. A thorough, intentional commitment to ecumenism holds, by God’s grace, the promise for the healing of all divisions. To be a faithful agent of God’s work of reconciliation in the world and in the church, the RCA must set a course that places it at the forefront of ecumenical endeavor and enables it to be ever vigilant in the quest for realizing and manifesting our unity in Christ.

III. GOALS, CRITERIA, AND OPERATING GUIDELINES OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

A. GOALS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Christian unity is central to our faith, and so these goals are put forward for review by the General Synod.

1. That the Reformed Church in America continue the prayer of our Lord by regularly praying for the unity of the church universal. Further, that this prayer be lived out by humbly confessing the pride and hostility that divide us from the other members of Christ’s body and by diligently seeking and claiming the reconciliation that Christ has accomplished by his death on the cross and the oneness that the Holy Spirit extended at Pentecost.

2. That the Reformed Church in America move into greater expressions of unity with those endeavors that seek to model and promote Christian unity in the world, as demonstrated by our commitment of prayer, time, and resources. Such endeavors mean participation in international, national, and local councils, associations, alliances, and parachurch organizations that exist to promote the witness and mission of Jesus Christ.

3. That the Reformed Church in America in its ecumenical relationships be guided by the principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition.” This principle means that we will challenge our sister communions and Christian associations by word and example to live in obedience to Christ, and to be so challenged by them; and where they lead us into greater awareness of how our denomination can more faithfully witness to and serve Jesus Christ in the world, we will respond with appropriate actions (letters of support, cosponsorship, participation, and assistance). Our aim here is to “build up the body of Christ,” and it is in
this spirit that we will practice our affirmation and admonition.

4. That the Reformed Church in America move unreservedly toward embracing full communion with other churches meeting the criteria spelled out below. Full communion means the recognition in other churches that the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Word of God; and that we as a denomination make provision for the orderly exchange of ministers in accordance with the authority of the classes; and further that we share common commitment to evangelism, mission, and service. Full communion, however, does not require us to seek structural merger with other denominations.

B. CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

How do we establish and maintain ecumenical relationships with other denominations, councils, and Christian organizations? The gospel calls the followers of Jesus to both love and obedience, so it is necessary to emphasize both. The church in all places and at all times is called to maintain this balance. Paul states in Ephesians 4:15 that Christians are to speak “the truth in love.” If we fail in our ecumenical relationships to achieve a visible expression of unity, the failure is usually traceable to an unwillingness either to live or to embrace the truth of the gospel.

This overarching guideline of truth and love sets the parameters for ecumenical engagement. It does not, however, answer all of the questions that arise when a group is deciding whether to stay in fellowship or dialogue with another group, or, with great sadness, to turn away. Some objective criteria are needed to aid us in making determinations with regard to maintaining or establishing our ecumenical relationships. These criteria are thus set forth as a guideline for the RCA to be faithful participants in ecumenical relationships:

1. We are called to live out our unity with all who “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.”

2. We will live out our unity in Christ on as broad a plain and with as much depth as possible. This means that we will begin with a bias toward membership and full participation in worldwide, national, regional, and local conciliar, ecumenical bodies. The issue of maintaining such membership may arise should an ecumenical body depart from its own standards or basis of agreement concerning the confession of our common faith.

3. As an alternative to membership, we will enter into various ecumenical relationships for various periods of time to meet various objectives whenever and wherever the conciliar framework is either not the appropriate vehicle or is not intentional enough in moving toward a desired ministry or mission goal.

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4 From the Constitutional Basis of the World Council of Churches.
4. We will give priority to those ecumenical involvements that show greatest promise over time in moving the church to a greater sense of unity in effective mission. This priority must be adopted in view of limited resources, finances, and personnel. Choices must be made concerning membership and participation in the number and depth of ecumenical opportunities.

5. We will be faithful in establishing communication ties with those bodies who, though differing from us, share our desire for closer ties.

6. We will give particular attention to building ecumenical bridges of fellowship and partnership between conciliar bodies and “evangelical” churches and agencies, in order to enhance the healing of our divisions for the sake of our common witness.

7. We will regard our doctrinal standards not as hindrances to ecumenical relationships but as part of the gift we bring to them. As a confessional church we will maintain our ecumenical capacity by being faithful to our Standards and constitution as our means of being both evangelical and catholic.

8. We acknowledge our special relationships with those worldwide Reformed denominations that have confessions similar to our own, and we accept the special obligations such relationships have for mutual support, common testimony, and confessional solidarity.

C. OPERATING GUIDELINES

Finally, when we become involved in ecumenical activities, whether as denominational representatives or as individuals in local congregations, the way we approach those efforts is as critical to the success of the tasks as the work itself. These are occasions that demand integrity and common sense. We are called upon clearly to articulate our faith and also to be sensitive to the beliefs of others, affirming each other in Christ. These are not situations of compromise or manipulation, but rather opportunities for learning about and from one another, even as we engage in the particular tasks at hand.

Several operating guidelines can be suggested and applied appropriately to many situations:

1. Invite voluntary participation at the level of a person’s ability, interest, conscience, or tradition, recognizing that most ecumenical activity is a matter of choice rather than of assignment.

2. Provide a place for people of faith to gather around a project of common interest, nurture the inevitable dialogue, and expect fellowship to result, remaining open to the mystery and power of the Holy Spirit.

3. Welcome opportunities to appropriately address issues in partnership with someone else, such as ecumenical marriage preparation or political action.
4. Help people to do what they really want to do, getting involved in programming that extends the local congregation’s ministry, but that cannot be easily done without others, such as emergency shelter response or joint worship.

5. Take a practical approach. Acknowledge the distinctive gifts of all, setting aside differences while individuals cooperate in actions, study, or fellowship. Instead, focus on complementing existing projects so there is no unnecessary duplication of efforts or service.

6. Practice humility in judging and admonishing others. Respect with charity what another communion or denomination says about itself in the expectation that our relationship with others will be mutually enriching.

**CONCLUSION**

In 1966 the General Synod adopted a statement called “The Unity We Seek to Manifest,” from which an excerpt serves to summarize and conclude this report:

We of the Reformed Church in America resolve to manifest the God-given unity of the Church by working to overcome our divisions. The ways and means to unity are not always known. The goal of unity is a venture of faith. Therefore trusting in the Holy Spirit for guidance, we shall be open to his counsel, willing to converse with any church, ready to cooperate with all Christians, committed to participate in councils of churches on all levels, prepared to merge with any church when it is clearly the will of God, eager to heal the brokenness of the Body of Christ in all ways known to us, until all are one, so that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son as Savior and Lord (*MGS 1966*, pp. 246-247, 252).
THE UNITY WE SEEK TO MANIFEST

The Reformed Church in America believes God calls forth through his Holy Spirit from among lost men a people—his church—whom he commissions to proclaim to the world his gospel of Christ’s redemption.

This calling and commissioning belong to the one Church, a united fellowship, having one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, which is commissioned with one task to the human race.

We believe our task to be the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as we worship the Lord when we hear his Word and celebrate the sacraments, as we witness to the mighty acts of God in history, and as we serve the world with a ministry of love.

In obedience to this divine revelation, we of the Reformed Church in America resolve to manifest the God-given unity of the Church by working to overcome our divisions. The ways and means to unity are not always known. The goal of unity is a venture of faith. Therefore trusting in the Holy Spirit for guidance, we shall be open to his counsel, willing to converse with any church, ready to cooperate with all Christians, committed to participate in councils of churches on all levels, prepared to merge with any church when it is clearly the will of God, eager to heal the brokenness of the Body of Christ in all ways known to us, until all are one, so that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son as Savior and Lord.

Adopted by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 1966

Minutes of General Synod, 1966, pp. 246-47
AN AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

We believe
that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of us all,
who is above all and through all and in all.

We remember
that this one God did make from one family
all the peoples of the human race
now scattered across the face of the earth.

We confess
that our sin has separated us from God
from one another,
from the earth and all living things,
and even from ourselves.

We give thanks
that Christ, who is our peace,
has broken down the dividing walls of hostility,
has created one new humanity in the place of many,
has reconciled us all to God in one body through the cross, and
has given us all access in one Spirit to the Father.
Blessed be his name for ever and ever!

We affirm
that this mystery of reconciliation,
hidden in the eternal purpose of God,
realized in Jesus Christ and
guaranteed by the Holy Spirit,
is being made known through the church.

We rejoice
that we are members of this body, gifted by Christ,
gathered in love,
growing in peace,
for the sake of the world.

We confess
that we have not lived at peace among ourselves;
that we have separated ourselves from other Christians;
that our pride and fear and indifference have hindered the search for unity.
We trust that in spite of our failures and shortcomings
the church is one in Spirit;
that the unity of the church is sign and instrument
of the unity of humankind;
that God will achieve the unity of all creation
in the new heaven and the new earth.

WE REJOICE IN THE GIFT OF UNITY:
ALREADY REALIZED IN JESUS CHRIST.
WE ACCEPT THE TASK OF UNITY:
BEING MADE VISIBLE IN THE CHURCH.
WE BELIEVE THE PROMISE OF UNITY:
TO BE FULFILLED IN THE NEW CREATION.

THEREFORE

We covenant to demonstrate our unity in Christ by
maintaining the bonds of peace,
speaking the truth in love, and
bearing one another’s burdens.

We pledge to seek the unity of the church through
communing with other Christians in worship and work,
cooperating with other Christians in councils of churches,
and uniting with other Christians in faith and order.

We promise to serve the unity of the world by
proclaiming the gospel of peace and reconciliation,
sharing the earth’s goods with the poor and hungry, and
seeking justice among the nations.

Until the unity which God now sees
may be clearly visible to all
so that the world may know that Christ was sent
to demonstrate the perfect and everlasting love of God.

Adopted by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, 1981

Minutes of General Synod, 1981, pp. 146-147