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of the 191st Regular Session
of the
GENERAL SYNOD

REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

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Vol. LXXVII
The Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod

Appendix I—Directory and Financial Reports

Beginning on page iv of this volume is an index to both the ACTS AND PROCEEDINGS and to the DIRECTORY AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS (Appendix I).

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ACTS AND PROCEEDINGS

THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA CONVENEDED IN ITS ONE HUNDRED NINETY-FIRST REGULAR SESSION ON THE MILWAUKEE CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN IN MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN, ON SATURDAY, THE FOURTEENTH DAY OF JUNE, A.D. ONE THOUSAND NINE HUNDRED AND NINETY-SEVEN, AT 2:00 P.M., CENTRAL TIME, AND ADJOURNED ON FRIDAY, THE TWENTIETH DAY OF JUNE, A.D. ONE THOUSAND NINE HUNDRED AND NINETY-SEVEN AT 12:20 P.M., CENTRAL TIME.

THE THEME OF THE SESSION OF THE GENERAL SYNOD WAS GOD'S PEOPLE TRANSFORMED: RENEWED IN MIND AND DISCERNING AND DOING GOD'S WILL.

I. FORMATION OF THE SYNOD

OPENING OF SYNOD

The Synod opened on Saturday afternoon, June 14, 1997, with a worship service. Participants in the service included: The Rev. Anthony Vis, president of General Synod; the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen, vice-president of General Synod; the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary; the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez, executive director, Hispanic Theological Initiative and editor of Apuntes, a journal of Hispanic theology in the United States, preaching; the Rev. Dr. George Daniels, executive director, American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin, and the Rev. Jerry Folk, executive director, Wisconsin Council of Churches; The Rev. Marlin Vis, pastor, Beechwood Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, and the Rev. Phyllis Palsma, pastor, Pitcher Hill Community Church in North Syracuse, New York, presided as worship leaders for the daily worship services during the week of Synod (Monday-Friday, June 16-20, 1997). Daily worship services were held at the Kenwood United Methodist Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
WORSHIP

Saturday Afternoon
Opening Worship Service—The Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
  The Rev. Anthony Vis
  The Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen
  The Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez
  The Rev. Dr. George Daniels
  The Rev. Jerry Folk
Closing Prayer—The Rev. Dr. Lyle Vander Werff

Saturday Evening
Opening Prayer—Elder Gail Hughes
Closing Prayer—The Rev. Hezekiah Brady

Sunday Morning
General Synod participants worshiped in the following RCA churches within the bounds of the Classis of Wisconsin:

Faith Reformed Church
First Reformed Church
Hingham Reformed Church
La Iglesia de la Trinidad
First Reformed Church
Bethany Reformed Church
Hope Reformed Church
First Reformed Church
Gibbsville Reformed Church
Cedar Grove, Wisconsin
Cedar Grove, Wisconsin
Hingham, Wisconsin
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Oostburg, Wisconsin
Sheboygan, Wisconsin
Sheboygan, Wisconsin
Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin
Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin

Sunday Evening
Opening Prayer—The Rev. Tamara Entin
Closing Prayer—RCA Missionary Observer, Dr. Harvey Doornbos

Monday Morning
Worship and Communion Service—The Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Marlin Vis

Tuesday Morning
Worship Service—The Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Marlin Vis
Closing Prayer—Elder Lula Thomas

Tuesday Afternoon
Opening Prayer—The Rev. John Chang
Closing Prayer—Elder Kathleen Harrison-Otto

Tuesday Evening
Opening Prayer—Elder Irene Chen
Closing Prayer—The Rev. Lisa Tice

Wednesday Morning
Worship Service—The Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Marlin Vis
Closing Prayer—Elder Henry Vander Wiede

Wednesday Afternoon
Opening Prayer—The Rev. Shirley Heeg
Closing Prayer—The Rev. David Sikkema
Thursday Morning
Worship Service—The Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Marlin Vis
Closing Prayer—The Rev. Juan Carmona

Thursday Afternoon
Opening Prayer—The Rev. Gloria Mc Canna
Closing Prayer—Elder Jack Parmentier

Friday Morning
Worship Service—The Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Marlin Vis
Closing Prayer—The Rev. Wayne Breen

An installation service for the new officers of General Synod and a communion service were held in the Ballroom, Student Union Building on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Participants in the service included: the Rev. Anthony Vis, president of General Synod; the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen, vice-president of General Synod; the Rev. Frederick Kruithof, president-elect of General Synod; the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary; and the Rev. Timothy Mulder, moderator of the Commission on Christian Worship.
ROLL CALL OF SYNOD

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James Van Wyk, 6 Ventnor Dr, Edison, NJ 08820
Steven Whitehead, 126 Spring Lake Garden Apts, Spring Lake, NJ 07762

Classis of Passaic Valley

MINISTERS

Lewis Kain, 10 Changebridge Rd, Montville, NJ 07045
Thomas Larkin, 537 Newark-Pompton Tnpk, Pompton Plains, NJ 07444
Edward Suffern, 310 Burgess Pl, Clifton, NJ 07011

ELDERS

Robert Harris, 79 Emerson St, Clifton, NJ 07013-1303
Frances Ranton, 24 Quince Tree Ln, West Milford, NJ 07480
Carol Ziesing, 24 Graham Pl, Clifton, NJ 07013

Regional Synod of New York

John Chang, 991 Woodrow Rd, Staten Island, NY 10312

Classis of Brooklyn

MINISTERS

Barbara Alexander, 130-12 228th St, Laurelton, NY 11413
Clara Woodson, 317 Howard Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11233
ELDERS

Rose Lood, 76 Bay Ridge Pkwy, Brooklyn, NY 11209
Bertha Wright, 435 New Lots Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11207

Classis of Mid-Hudson

MINISTERS

Richard Brihn, 700 Old Apex Rd, PO Box 4373, Cary, NC 27519
Gloria Mc Canna, 1860 Rt 376, Wappingers Falls, NY 12590
William Sacher, 10 Blue Mt. Church Rd, Sangerties, NY 12477

ELDERS

Mary Ann Bahnsen, 58 Top-O-Hill Rd, Wappingers Falls, NY 12590
Ed Hawkins, 412 Rock Cut Rd, Walden, NY 12586
Donald Lee, 28 Old Whitefield Rd, Accord, NY 12404

Classis of Nassau-Suffolk

MINISTERS

Stuart Clark, 11 Mason Dr, Manhasset, NY 11030
Conrad Strauch, 1159 Udall Rd, Bay Shore, NY 11706

ELDERS

Irene Chen, 27 Bogert St, Closter, NJ 07624
Pearl Curran, 2 Abbot La, Hicksville, NY 11801

Classis of New York

MINISTERS

Gorgon Dragt, 50 E 7th St, New York, NY 10003
James Reid, 37 Rhame Ave, East Rockaway, NY 11518

ELDERS

Margaret McCants, 70 E 108th St, Apt 4B, New York, NY 10029
Cora Taitt, 1253 Arnow Ave, Bronx, NY 10469

Classis of Orange

MINISTERS

Neva Evenhouse, Box 487F, Wurtsboro, NY 12790
Kathleen Harr Brumm, PO Box 238, Grahamsville, NY 12740

ELDERS

Maynard Lancaster, PO Box 53, Cuddebackville, NY 12729
Leonard Lowe, 8524 Rt 209, Ellenville, NY 12428
Classis of Queens

MINISTERS
Herman De Jong, 21-65 41st St, Long Island City, NY 11105
Martin Wang, 20 Ln 2 Sec 2, Yang Teh Hwy Shihlin Taipei, 11106 Taiwan

ELDERS
Edry Jemmott, 80-10 Lefferts Blvd, Kew Gardens, NY 11415
Lula Thomas, 8-10 27th Ave Apt. 310, Astoria, NY 11102

Classis of Rockland-Westchester

MINISTERS
James Johnson, 28 Old Tappan Rd, Tappan, NY 10983
Nancy Sorokoff, 18 Crossbar Rd, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706

ELDERS
Jan Dyckman, 1 James St, Montrose, NY 10548
Patricia Mouquin, 2 Rockland Rd, Sparkill, NY 10976

New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Paul Fries, 17 Seminary Pl, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
David Waanders, 17 Seminary Pl, New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Western Theological Seminary

James Brownson, 101 E 13th St, Holland, MI 49423
I. John Hesselink, 101 E 13th St, Holland, MI 49423
CORRESPONDING DELEGATES

GENERAL SECRETARY EMERITUS
Edwin Mulder

COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE
Richard Bates
John Buteyn, Jr.
Donald De Vries
Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
I. John Hesselink
Carolyn Jones-Assini
Toni Macon
Linda McLane
Betty Unger
Charles Van Engen
Anthony Vis

PERSONNEL AND EVALUATION COMMITTEE
Harry De Bruyu

BOARD OF PENSIONS
Gregg Mast

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Norman Kansfield

(students)
Steven Everett
Scarlet Gorton

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Carol Myers

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dennis Voskuil

(students)
Douglas Tuttle
Amanda Walvoord

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Carol Wagner

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AGENCY
Cornelis Kors

(students)
Russell Muilenburg
Annabelle Robertson

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AGENCY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Sybrand Vander Dussen
CENTRAL COLLEGE
Thomas Iverson

HOPE COLLEGE
John Jacobson, Jr.

NORTHEASTERN COLLEGE
James Bultman

THE CHURCH HERALD
David Dethmers
Christina Van Eyl

REFORMED CHURCH WOMEN'S MINISTRIES
Harriet Debbink
Sherry Vander Eyk

AFRICAN-AMERICAN COUNCIL
Oliver Patterson

AMERICAN INDIAN COUNCIL
Bernice Mast

COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES
Jhonny Alicea-Baez

COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES
Samuel Kwon

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Donald Cronkite

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Timothy Boeve

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Timothy Mulder

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Russell Paarlberg

COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Sophie Mathonnet-Vander Well

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Donald De Vries

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Audrey Den Herder

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
James Brownson

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Carole Walker
ROLL OF GENERAL SYNOD

REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY
Jan Ooms
Kathy Sikkema

REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA
Rita Harding
Carole Vande Koppel

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST
Doris Brumels
Deborah Swanson

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES
Edith Ryken
Phyllis Williams

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND
Marlys Ritzma

REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA
Lin Hart
Jill Russell

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS
Carol Gunter
Ruby Tsai

ECUMENICAL DELEGATES

CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA
Larry Van Essen

EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH
James Perrson

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
Guy Edmiston, Jr.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH U.S.A.
Lewis Lancaster

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF KOREA
Chong Soon Park

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
John Thomas

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE

PARLIAMENTARIAN
Lucas De Koster
WORSHIP LEADERS
Phyllis Palsma
Marlin Vis

CHAPLAIN
Alan Baker

JOINT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
OF THE LUTHERAN-REFORMED CHURCHES
Lynn Japinga

TASK FORCE TO REVISE DISCIPLINARY AND JUDICIAL PROCEDURES
John De Koster

TASK FORCE ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF REFORMED CHURCH
WOMEN'S MINISTRIES WITH THE RCA STRUCTURE
Sherry Vander Eyk

TASK FORCE ON STANDARDS FOR THE PREPARATION FOR THE
PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY IN THE RCA
Vernon Hoffs

OFFICIAL OBSERVERS

CENTRAL COLLEGE
Timothy Kuhn

HOPE COLLEGE
Katherine Barnes
Peter De Jong

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE
Dawn Huibregtse
Jason Robertson

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL MISSIONARIES
William De Boer
Harvey and Margaret Doorenbos
James Harrison
Louis and Nancy Scudder
Vernon and Carla Sterk
Martin Wang (World Mission Program Associate)

SEMINARIAN SEMINAR
Michael Beckerink (WTS)
Ann Weathers-Callendar (NBTS)
Brenda Clark (WTS)
Susan Curtis (NBTS)
Stephen Eckert (NBTS)
Paul Erickson (TEA)
Bonnie Fee (NBTS)
Suzanne Hodges (TEA)
Dwayne Jackson (NBTS)
Young Jin Kang (NBTS)
John Kenny (TEA)
Seong Chan Kim (NBTS)
Togom Kipkoech (WTS)
Brad Kruithof (TEA)
David Powers (WTS)
Rebecca Riekse (WTS)
Mary Wisner (WTS)
Robert Wondergem (TEA)
MINUTES AND JOURNAL

The Acts and Proceedings of the 190th regular session of the General Synod were read by title.

During the Friday morning meeting, the General Synod approved the journal of actions for the meetings held on Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and authorized its officers to approve the journal of actions for the meeting held on Friday morning.

RULES OF ORDER

The Rules of Order were read by title, and copies were placed on the secretary’s table.

TELLERS

The following tellers were appointed:

- Michael Beckerink
- John Buteyn, Jr.
- Ann Callender
- Audrey Den Hender
- Stephen Eckert
- Bonnie Fee
- Suzanne Hodges
- John Kenny
- David Powers
- Rebecca Riekse
- Betty Unger
- Mary Wisner

AGENDA AND SCHEDULE


In addition to the prescribed agenda, the schedule provided for the following presentations, forums, programs, and activities:

Pre-General Synod Workshops—Saturday morning

The pre-General Synod workshops were designed to provide an opportunity to learn about the life, mission, and organization of the Reformed Church in America. The following four workshops were offered:

1. RCA Family Finances: The Economics of Our Life Together.
2. Evangelical and Ecumenical: Seeking Fellowship for Mission with the Whole People of God.
General Synod Theme—Saturday afternoon through Thursday afternoon

The General Synod theme was “God’s People Transformed: Renewed in Mind and Discerning and Doing God’s Will.” The Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez was the featured speaker on Saturday afternoon, Sunday afternoon, and Monday evening. Gonzalez is executive director of the Hispanic Theological Initiative and editor of Apuntes, a journal of Hispanic theology in the United States.

On Saturday afternoon, General Synod participants met in plenary session. This session began with an opening worship and communion service. The Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez preached the sermon.

On Saturday evening, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Van Eck, former director of Bible Translation and Utilization for the National Council of Churches, led the General Synod in a litany for dedication of Bibles. All Synod delegates were given a Bible as a gift.

On Sunday afternoon, General Synod participants met in the First Reformed Church of Oostburg, Wisconsin. The Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez presented the keynote address on the General Synod theme. His address was based on Acts 10.

On Monday evening, the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzales presented another keynote address on the General Synod theme. His address was based on Acts 16. The Rev. Dr. Timothy Brown, Henry Bast professor of preaching and director of church vocations; the Rev. Dr. William Brownson, former president and broadcast minister for Words of Hope; and the Rev. Ben Patterson, chaplain at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, presented a recitation of the first eight chapters of Romans.

On Tuesday afternoon, Donald Hammon, director of education and small group ministry at the Church of the Chimes in San Jose, California, presented a Bible study model for small-group, experiential Bible study.

On Wednesday afternoon, Jayne Youkman, chaplain at St. Mary Living Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, presented a Bible study model for a form of contemplative, reflective Bible study.

On Wednesday evening, General Synod participants met in plenary session and viewed the video, Turning Points: The Dangerous, Liberating, Holy, Transforming, Everyday Stories of People Engaging the Bible.

On Thursday afternoon, the Rev. Lisa Tice, RCA chaplain in the U.S. Air Force, presented a Bible study model as a form of technological, didactic Bible study.

Cantata—Sunday morning

Following worship in area RCA churches (see p. 2), General Synod participants were transported to Oostburg, Wisconsin. The choir of First Reformed Church in Oostburg, Wisconsin, presented the cantata, From Sea to Shining Sea. The First Reformed Church congregation then served lunch to the General Synod participants.

Picnic—Monday evening

Prior to Monday evening’s theme program, New Life Community Church of Milwaukee hosted a picnic for General Synod participants.
Mission Program and Reception—Tuesday evening

American Indian Ministries

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To request Policy, Planning, and Administration Services and Mission Services, in consultation with the American Indian Council, to include in the 1997 General Synod meeting an appropriate observance of the one hundredth anniversary of the Reformed Church in America’s involvement in ministry with Native Americans (MGS 1996, R-5, p. 418).

A program on Native American ministry in the Reformed Church in America was presented. Nola Aalberts, supervisor of American Indian Ministries, presided. The program included:

1. Introductions of former RCA missionaries who served in American Indian ministries.

2. A video on RCA American Indian ministries.

3. Representatives from the RCA American Indian congregations in Macy, Nebraska; Winnebago, Nebraska; Dulce, New Mexico; Mescalero, New Mexico; Apache, Oklahoma; and Lawton, Oklahoma, giving greetings.

4. Raymond Nauni, chair of the American Indian Council Executive Committee presenting a history of American Indian Ministries in the RCA and leading the Synod in a Comanche song.

5. A tribute to the late Mildred Cleghorn, former member of the General Program Council and of the American Indian Council Executive Committee, concluding with Thurman Cook, world mission program associate, offering a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of Mildred Cleghorn.

6. Kenneth Mallory, past secretary of the American Indian Council, receiving a plaque for his years of service as secretary of the council.

Oklahoma City Bombing

The Rev. Bruce Menning, director of Mission Services, introduced the Rev. John Dabney, pastor of Our Lord’s Community Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Rev. John Dabney addressed the Synod and expressed appreciation for the financial support received from RCA members to assist victims of the April 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City.

Work Project in Enid, Oklahoma

The Rev. Richard Vander Voet, coordinator for RCA volunteer services, Reformed Church World Service, and disaster response, introduced the Rev. Alfred Baldwin, pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma and his wife, Vicki. The Rev. Alfred Baldwin addressed the Synod and expressed appreciation for the financial support received from the RCA and the RCA volunteers who traveled to Enid, Oklahoma, to assist in the rebuilding of the First Missionary Baptist Church building destroyed by a fire set by an arsonist.
The Rev. Kenneth Zorgdrager, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Asia and the Pacific, introduced the video, *Sayuri's Joy*. Synod then viewed this video on RCA mission in Japan. (See p. 167 for a brief description of this two-part video.)

**Reception**

Following the Tuesday evening program, a reception was held for all participants in the mission program. A cake, commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of American Indian Ministries, was served.

**Ecumenical Breakfast—Wednesday morning**

On Wednesday morning, delegates were provided information on Lutheran-Reformed relations and the *Formula of Agreement*. The *Formula of Agreement* is between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ and the intention and purpose of the formula is to assist these four denominations of Reformation heritage to enter into full communion. This proposal for full communion was presented to the 1997 General Synod by the Commission on Christian Unity and adopted (see R-2 p. 186, see also the *Formula of Agreement* document, pp. 192-201). The following resource persons provided information: Bishop Guy Edmiston, Jr. of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Rev. Lewis Lancaster of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Rev. John Thomas of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the Rev. Douglas Fromm, the Rev. Timothy Boeve, the Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter, the Rev. Dr. Lynn Japinga, and the Rev. Dr. Paul Fries of the Reformed Church in America.

**Ecumenical Greetings—Wednesday morning**

The General Synod received greetings from the Rev. Chong Soon Park of the Presbyterian Church of Korea. The Rev. Sang Hak Kim of the Presbyterian Church of Korea served as interpreter.

**Ecumenical Luncheon—Wednesday noon**

On Wednesday noon, there was an ecumenical luncheon. The Rev. Larry Van Essen of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Rev. Lewis Lancaster of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Rev. John Thomas of the United Church of Christ, Bishop Guy Edmiston, Jr. of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Rev. Chong Soon Park of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, gave greetings. (The Rev. James Persson of the Evangelical Covenant Church was unable to attend this luncheon. He was introduced to the General Synod on Saturday evening.)

**Dinner Cruise or Dinner Theater—Thursday evening**

Following the Thursday afternoon meeting, Synod delegates and guests attended either a dinner cruise in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or a dinner theater performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHRISTIAN ACTION

Moderator: Carol Jackson (R S of Albany)

Ministers:
Donald Christensen (Central California)  
John Daniels (Southwest)  
James DeBruyne (West Sioux)  
John Delger (Lake Erie)  
James Hibma (Central Iowa)  
Dennis Hietbrink (East Sioux)  
Alvin Honken (Cascades)  
Richard Kooistra (Wisconsin)  
James Reid (New York)  
Clyde Rensink (Illinois)  
Lee Roggen (Southwest Michigan)  
William Sacher (Mid-Hudson)  
Jack Van Holst (British Columbia)

Elders:
Mary Ann Bahnsen (Mid-Hudson)  
Maynard Batie (Chicago)  
Charles Fronek (Illiana)  
Jack Glass (Zeeland)  
Kathleen Harrison-Otto (Albany)  
John Kalkwarf (Pleasant Prairie)  
Randy Smit (Chicago)  
Jimmie Stevenson (Illiana)  
Steven Whitehead (New Brunswick)  
Nancy Zahrt (Minnesota)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

Moderator: Rick Oppenhuizen (Southwest Michigan)  
Vice Moderator: Pacia Ferrell Vanvlas (Schoharie)

Ministers:
Richard Brihm (Mid-Hudson)  
Curtis Bush (West Sioux)  
Timothy Dieffenbach (North Grand Rapids)  
Folkert Faber (South Grand Rapids)  
Daniel Haggar (Minnesota)  
Brice Hoyt (Central Iowa)  
James Johnson (Rockland-Westchester)  
Barbara Nauta (Red River)  
Phyllis Palsma (Montgomery)  
Roy Paterik (Central Plains)  
Bill Wensink (Ontario)

Elders:
Ronald Adams (Illinois)  
Fran Baron (R S of the Great Lakes)  
Laverne Boss (South Grand Rapids)  
Edgar De Vries (East Sioux)  
Edry Jemmott (Queens)  
Michael Peterson (Central Iowa)  
Guenther Scharnowski (Minnesota)  
Fran Schell (New Brunswick)  
Cora Taitt (New York)  
Adrian Vander Stuis (Holland)  
Elmer Veldheer (Zeeland)  
Theodore Vonk (Southwest Michigan)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHRISTIAN HERITAGE AND COMMUNICATIONS

Moderator: Harold Brown (Florida)
Vice Moderator: Neva Evenhouse (Orange)

Ministers:  
Jack Dabney (Red River)  
Virgil Dykstra (Pleasant Prairie)  
Thomas Larkin (Passaic Valley)  
Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell (Albany)  
Stanley Seagren (Wisconsin)

Elders:  
Phillip Arnold (Florida)  
David De Witt (North Grand Rapids)  
Jan Dyckman (Rockland-Westchester)  
Donald Dykstra (South Grand Rapids)  
James Finney (North Grand Rapids)  
Erwin Gamber (California)  
Daniel Herrick (Columbia-Greene)  
Wayne Klinger (Dakota)  
William Lickel (Wisconsin)  
Milton Mosko (Delaware-Raritan)  
Marion Schouten (Cascades)  
Lula Thomas (Queens)  
Nida Thomas (Schenectady)  
Marcia Thompson (Lake Erie)  
James Van Wyk (New Brunswick)  
Marvin Vant Hoff (Wisconsin)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Moderator: Stephen Norden (Lake Erie)
Vice Moderator: George Brown (North Grand Rapids)

Ministers:  
Todd Buurstra (Zeeland)  
Juan Carmona (Rochester)  
William De Boer (Rocky Mountains)  
Herman De Jong (Queens)  
Paul Fries (New Brunswick Seminary)  
Shirley Heeg (Muskegon)  
David Risseeuw (New Brunswick)  
Norman Schouten (Central Iowa)  
Lewis Scudder (Holland)  
Conrad Strauch (Nassau-Suffolk)  
Edward Suffern (Passaic Valley)  
Arthur Vander Meulen (Canadian Prairies)

Elders:  
Irvin Boersen (Muskegon)  
David Collier (California)  
Abe De Groot (East Sioux)  
Susan Hanyen (Brooklyn)  
Ed Hawkins (Mid-Hudson)  
Marion Heusinkveld (Dakota)  
Gail Hughes (British Columbia)  
Leonard Lowe (Orange)  
William Mc Kay (Ontario)  
Henrietta Timmer (Dakota)  
Alfred Vande Waa (Zeeland)  
Richard Weerstra (Holland)  
Bertha Wright (Brooklyn)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Moderator: Barbara Alexander (Brooklyn)
Vice Moderator: Mark Lemmenes (Zeeland)

Ministers:  Elders:

David Armstrong (Southwest Michigan)  Donald DeGraff (Illiana)
John Chang (R S of New York)  Irene Euron (Montgomery)
Marvin Jacobs (Southwest)  Robert Harris (Passaic Valley)
John Kotun (Rochester)  James King (Southwest Michigan)
Carl Regnerus (Northern Michigan)  Karl Kruger (Schoharie)
Nancy Sorokoff (Rockland-Westchester)  Donald Lee (Mid-Hudson)
Robert Vander Aarde (Cascades)  Glenda McKinley (Holland)
Samuel Vander Schaaf (Montgomery)  Edward Van Kampen (Albany)
Arthur Vanslageren (Ontario)  James Vander Kodde (South Grand Rapids)
Marlin Vis (Holland)  Wilma Winkels (Muskegon)
Paul Zoschke (Wisconsin)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHURCH ORDER

Moderator: Carol Myers (Holland)
Vice Moderator: Patricia Hayes (Schenectady)

Ministers: Elders:

Paul Akers (Central Plains)  Thomas Barter (Pleasant Prairie)
Leroy Ausema (Northern Michigan)  Pearl Curran (Nassau-Suffolk)
Judith Broeker (Greater Palisades)  John De Koster (West Sioux)
Mary Fitzgerald (Greater Palisades)  Elmer Essink (Central Plains)
John Hiemstra (Greater Palisades)  Robert Friberg (British Columbia)
Samuel Laswell (Columbia-Greene)  James Lemkuil (Wisconsin)
Larry Schuyler (Holland)  John Mouthaan (Northern Michigan)
R. Van Rathbun (Wisconsin)  Raymond Nanni, Jr. (Red River)
Michael Vanden Berg (Canadian Prairies)  Chadwick Ray (Central Iowa)
Herbert Remmerde (West Sioux)  Leon Smith (Schoharie)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHURCH VOCATIONS

Moderator: Barbara Pillette (Delaware-Raritan)
Vice Moderator: Philip Schuiling (Rocky Mountains)

Ministers:

Susan Crane (Schoharie)
Scott DeBlock (Schenectady)
Leon Draayer (California)
Verlyn Hemmen (Minnesota)
Earle William Kennedy (East Sioux)
Cornelis Kors (California)
Sidney Mauldin (Illiana)
Gloria McCanna (Mid-Hudson)
Richard Miller (Delaware-Raritan)
J. David Muyskens (New Brunswick)
Mical Pugh (Florida)
David Schutt (Central California)
Philip Sornsen (Dakota)
Lisa Tice (North Grand Rapids)
Roger Vander Kolk (Zeeland)
Richard Veenstra (Muskegon)
David Waanders (New Brunswick Seminary)
Kenneth Zuithoff (Illinois)

Elders:

Donald De Young (Wisconsin)
Maynard Lancaster (Orange)
Frederick Nielson (Greater Palisades)
Emile Schmid (Ontario)
Deborah Swanson (North Grand Rapids)
Gary Van Genderen (Central Iowa)
Henry Vander Wiede (California)
Raymond Vinstra (Southwest Michigan)
Melvin Voss (Central Iowa)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EVANGELIZATION AND CHURCH GROWTH

Moderator: Eugene Pearson (California)
Vice Moderator: Janet Vincent (Schenectady)

Ministers:

De Wayne Breen (Chicago)
Timothy Bush (Dakota)
Stuart Clark (Nassau-Suffolk)
Robert Gysen (Illiana)
James Ikerd (Zeeland)
Jerry Johnson (Minnesota)
Thomas Kragt (South Grand Rapids)
Clarence Liang (Illinois)
Curry Pikkaart (North Grand Rapids)
Dennis Redeker (Pleasant Prairie)
Douglas Scholten (California)
Mark Schwarz (California)
Stephen Swift (British Columbia)
Eugene Voss (South Grand Rapids)

Elders:

Kenneth Anspach (Illinois)
Mark De Kock (R S of the Heartland)
Otto Hammer (Canadian Prairies)
Maurice Klinger (Rocky Mountains)
Patricia Mouquin (Rockland-Westchester)
Winnie Phillips (Cascades)
Milton Roorda (Florida)
Mary Turpin (Central California)
John Tebben (Minnesota)
Carol Ziesing (Passaic Valley)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Moderator: Mark Kraai (RS of the Mid-Atlantics)
Vice Moderator: Jack Leenhouts (Holland)

Ministers:

Hezekiah Brady (Illiana)
Tamara Entín (Columbia-Greene)
James Mascow (Wisconsin)
Raymond Ortman (New Brunswick)
David Sikkema (Central Iowa)
Ronald Sikkema (RS of Canada)
Bruce Van Dusseldorp (RS of the Far West)

Elders:

Elizabeth Allen (Columbia-Greene)
John Bos (California)
Thurman Cook (Central Plains)
Roy Cooper (Zeeland)
Timothy Essenberg (Muskegen)
Ivan Heslink (Rochester)
Lawrence Hinders (Illinois)
Kenneth Jagel (Delaware-Raritan)
Robert Nordling (Rochester)
Jack Parmentier (Rocky Mountains)
John Sharp (Zeeland)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THEOLOGY

Moderator: Scott Brown (Delaware-Raritan)
Vice Moderator: Frederick Kruithof (Southwest Michigan)

Ministers:

Mark Bergsma (South Grand Rapids)
Dawn Boelkins (Holland)
James Brownson (Western Seminary)
John De Jong (California)
Victor Downing (Zeeland)
Gorgon Dragt (New York)
I. John Hesselink (Western Seminary)
Lewis Kain (Passaic Valley)
James Karsten (South Grand Rapids)
P. Keith Larson (Holland)
Christian Spoor (Illiana)
LeRoy Suess (Albany)
Martin Wang (Queens)
Jerry Worrel (Muskegen)

Elders:

Joyce Allred (Southwest Michigan)
Irene Chen (Nassau-Suffolk)
Lola Cole (South Grand Rapids)
James Fyre (Lake Erie)
Shirley Hermann (Montgomery)
Richard Oliver (Central California)
Walter Studdiford (Delaware-Raritan)
Stuart Swenson (Illiana)
Gary Te Stroete (West Sioux)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON WORLD MISSION

Moderator: George Beukema (R S of Mid-America)
Vice Moderator: Clara Woodson (Brooklyn)

Ministers:
David Bast (South Grand Rapids)
Kathleen Hart Brumm (Orange)
Harold Hiemstra (Chicago)
Thomas Hoogendoorn (East Sioux)
Terry Nyhuys (Holland)
Arlin Vande Zande (Dakota)
Lyle Vander Werff (West Sioux)

Elders:
Rosalie Attocknie (Red River)
J. Calvin Bruins (Southwest)
Henry De Good (Northern Michigan)
Kenneth Funk (Canadian Prairies)
John Kooima (West Sioux)
Howard Langstraat (East Sioux)
David Laughlin (California)
Jeffrey Levine (California)
Margaret McCants (New York)
Frances Ranton (Passaic Valley)
Gary Robinson (Wisconsin)
Robert Rose (South Grand Rapids)
Arthur Schmid (Southwest)
Samuel Siau (Greater Palisades)
Dorothy Wellinghorst (Greater Palisades)

II. AGENDA OF GENERAL SYNOD

DISPOSITION OF COMMUNICATIONS

The general secretary noted that all communications received by the General Synod were referred to appropriate committees.

PRESENTATION AND REFERRAL OF NEW BUSINESS

No items of new business were presented.
REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

THE WORLD’S NEED FOR A PEOPLE IN MISSION

It is hard to believe that my year as president of the General Synod has come to an end. It has been a busy, exciting, fulfilling year, and it passed by so very quickly.

I must begin with some words of gratitude. Thank you, Deanna, my faithful and supportive wife and friend, for your encouragement and patience during this time of frequent absences. Thank you, Abbie, Aaron, and Andy, for your love, understanding, and affirmation. Thank you, Meredith Drive Reformed Church, for graciously giving me the space needed to do this “president thing.”

I am grateful and honored that the denomination into which I was baptized as an infant fifty years ago, the Reformed Church in America, saw fit to call me to this significant responsibility. I care deeply about the Reformed Church in America. I salute its past, enriched by faithful women and men, who, entrusted with the good news story of Jesus Christ, proclaimed it winsomely and boldly throughout the world. I embrace its present, in which I see faithful RCA members and pastors seeking new and fresh ways to tell and live out the story of Jesus in a culture increasingly characterized by disbelief, cynicism, and ill will. And I look forward to its future, in which we RCA folk will rededicate ourselves, all of our energies, and all of our resources to:

- proclaiming and living out the good news story of Jesus—both in our local communities and beyond;
- that others also may choose to worship God, acknowledge Jesus Christ as personal Savior and living Lord, and seek to serve him with us in the world.

I believe in tomorrow! I believe there is a rich and vital tomorrow for the Reformed Church in America. Isaiah’s words give me reason to hope. The Lord says:

See, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (Isa. 43:19).

I believe God is breathing new life into the Reformed Church in America. I see revival on the horizon; it may already be here! I believe God is raising up leaders who can help us look to tomorrow and refocus on the primary mission of the church. I am looking forward with eager anticipation to tomorrow’s report of the general secretary as Wesley Granberg-Michaelson shares with us a statement of mission and vision that establishes a powerful and refreshing direction for our future together. I hear the Spirit of the living Christ saying to the Reformed Church in America, I am not yet finished with you. Not even close!

Listen and you, too, will hear Jesus saying: “Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting” (John 4:35).

A key question I have been asking as I have moved among you during this past year is: What will it mean to be and do denomination in the twenty-first century? While I do not profess to know the complete answer to that question (for I cannot see into the future any farther than you can), I am certain that tomorrow will not be the same as yesterday. If we are to be faithful, we must be open to the always fresh, transforming, and renewing winds of God’s Spirit. I am convinced beyond doubt that if the Reformed Church in America decides to stay with the status quo—clinging to the same old ways and the same old forms, and doing what it has always done in the ways it has always done them—the RCA, along with other mainline denominations, will continue to decline in numbers and, far more significantly and importantly,
will become increasingly irrelevant in its witness and presence for Jesus Christ in this North American culture and throughout the world.

However, I am exceedingly hopeful! I believe that we in the RCA today are ready to refocus and reposition ourselves as a people in mission. We have always been at our best when we have looked beyond ourselves to the world and to the masses of lost and broken people who still need to hear the gospel, who still need to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and who still need to experience the love, compassion, and ministry of those who claim to be Jesus’ people.

Today those masses are increasingly at our very doorsteps. Many of us are hearing Jesus in fresh ways saying: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Our general secretary has been reminding us that our “Mission is One,” that we have a responsibility to share and live out the story of Jesus with those close to us and those far from us, with those across the backyard fence and those across the great waters. Our Lord did not establish these as missions to be in competition with one another, but as missions that complement, fulfill, and depend upon one another.

So, I thank you, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, for your clarifying and visionary leadership. You are right: Mission is One!

And mission is what we in the Reformed Church in America must be about once again. Mission must be our highest priority; mission must be our primary focus for the twenty-first century; mission must determine and drive our vision. The theologian Emil Brunner is credited with saying that “the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” God calls us to be a people in mission, a people telling the story of Jesus with passion and conviction, a people living the story of Jesus with compassion and concern for the least and the lowest, the last and the lost, and a people inviting others to join us in this incredible journey of faith.

Therefore, I offer my first proposal for your consideration and action:

P-1.
To declare the Reformed Church in America a “missionary denomination” for the twenty-first century; and further,

to declare North America a primary mission field for the Reformed Church in America in the first two decades of the twenty-first century; and further,


to encourage every congregation of the RCA to think of itself as a “mission station” and to think of its members as missionaries called to bear witness to the good news of God in Jesus Christ in the midst of a disbelieving culture; and further,


to encourage each of the forty-six classes to set aside a special and significant period of time over the next twelve months, preferably in a retreat setting, to work together as congregations in understanding what it means to become “mission stations,” to develop ways to support one another, and to hold one another accountable in achieving this goal; and further,


to instruct all staff, units, agencies, task forces, commissions, and committees of the General Synod to vision, plan, strategize, prioritize, and act in ways consistent with these declarations.**
Sisters and brothers, what I am proposing is already happening in classes and congregations throughout the Reformed Church in America; from the Regional Synod of Albany to the Regional Synod of the Far West, from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Orlando, Florida. The grassroots of the RCA is where the grassroots should be, out front calling the General Synod and its staff to come alongside. So, let's join the parade! Who knows—the grassroots may even let us lead them if we will listen to God's Spirit speaking through God's people.

MAY WE ALL BE ONE FOR THE SAKE OF MISSION

If the Reformed Church in America is to move forward as a people in mission, I hope we can do so together. More than that, I believe it is the desire of our Lord's heart that we do so together.

It was the night before the cross, Jesus had every reason to be preoccupied with the trouble and suffering that would soon be upon him. Yet, as he bowed before the Father in prayer, he was concerned for his disciples and for those who would believe as a result of their witness. It is by no means a stretch of the meaning of the scriptural passage to say that Jesus prayed for us that night. And he is still praying for us! You remember his words:

I ask...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...that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me (John 17:20-23).

Friends, Jesus' prayer for our oneness sprang from a heart that cares for the world: "so that the world may believe" and "so that the world may know." Our Lord's prayer is a prayer for a people in mission.

A bit earlier that same evening Jesus said to his disciples:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Sisters and brothers, there is pain in the Reformed Church in America that must be addressed if we are to move forward together in mission for the sake of a lost and broken world that greatly matters to God. Indeed, the pain in the midst of the RCA must be faced in an open spirit of confession and repentance, dialogue and reconciliation, and as an act of humility and obedience before God.

We have hurt one another in the RCA far too often. We have failed to obey Christ's command that we love one another for the world's sake. We are all guilty! "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

We have questioned the faith, the sincerity, the integrity, and the compassion of those with whom we disagree. We have forsaken Christ and followed the world's journey into insensitivity and incivility by taking on the self-righteous exclusivism of the ideological right, with its mean-spiritedness; or the arrogant elitism of the ideological left, with its equally destructive, but perhaps more passive-aggressive, demonstrations of anger and hostility. We speak words of contempt and disdain toward one another's preferences in liturgical style and worship music. Some of us devalue smaller churches and their pastors, while others of us are suspicious of larger churches and their pastors. We compare up and covet; or we compare down and condescend. We make snap judgments about one another's lifestyles, beliefs, and even value to the kingdom, based upon the region of the denomination in which we live, the seminary from which we graduated, or the congregation in which we minister. We compete for position and we caucus for power. We choose to distrust our leaders; and sometimes our
leaders choose not to listen to the rest of us. We who are ordained, white, and male stand by in silence while our ordained colleagues who are nonwhite or female are denied full participation and the opportunity to use their gifts and express their passion for the gospel to the greater glory of God. We all claim to honor the Word of God, but too often we listen to that Word only when it suits our fancy, or confirms our experience, or affirms our pet interests and beliefs, or props up our traditions, or protects our sacred cows. And we are all so very sure we are right!

If I have not just described sin to you, then I'm not sure I know what sin is any more. We have all sinned! Not some of us. Not many of us. Not even most of us. But all of us. We need to confess our sin to one another in the presence of God. A friend of mine is right, I think, when he says that we in the Reformed Church in America cannot be healthy apart from intimate and trusting relationships with one another. It is time, perhaps past time, for us to look across the dividing walls we have built out of pride or fear and to say to one another, in the words of the great missionary E. Stanley Jones, “Sister...brother, you belong to Jesus; I belong to Jesus; we belong to each other.”

It is time to stop the pain. It is time to put our arrows back in their quivers. It is time to stop hurting one another and to begin treating one another with respect. It is time to agree that, if we are to honor Jesus by living together as his body, we must value one another, be sensitive to one another, and somehow choose to live this common life we share mutually accountable to one another for the sake of the gospel. Sisters and brothers, if the world is to recognize the gospel we proclaim as authentically of Jesus, then the world must see self-giving, forgiving, and healing love permeating all arenas of our life together in the Reformed Church in America.

I am sure there will be a call to prayer floating among us during the days of this 191st regular session of the General Synod. At least, I hope so! Most likely it will be a call to come pray early in the morning at an hour when the same among us will just be rising. I present to you the following offer:

If those of you whom God leads to issue that call will set aside one morning early on in the week, dedicated to prayers of confession and repentance and prayers for reconciliation and healing within the RCA, I will see to it, as the presiding officer of this 1997 General Synod, that an appropriate notice of time and location for these morning prayers is communicated to all participants at this General Synod, encouraging attendance. I will be there; and I believe the vice-president and the general secretary will choose to attend as well.

Because I believe the health and mission of the RCA in the twenty-first century depends upon our better knowing, understanding, and caring for one another across regions and across those other boundaries or barriers we have established, I propose:

P-2.
To instruct the general secretary and the next president of General Synod to send a joint communication to the vice-president of consistory and the chair of the board of deacons of every RCA congregation, encouraging them to provide the time and financial resources so every RCA clergy person can attend the 1998 Spring Sabbath in St. Louis, Missouri.**

P-3.
To instruct the general secretary to convene each year for the next three years a gathering of fifteen to thirty RCA ministers (a new group each year) in a retreat-type setting; and further,
to instruct the general secretary to convene these three groups from differing perspectives, from across regional boundaries, and from diverse age groups, in order to have times of worship, prayer, reflection, dialogue, and play together, and for the purpose of experiencing one another as sisters and brothers in Christ who belong to one body of Christ, who are united by one Spirit, and who are committed to the mission of the church of our one Lord.***

OUR NEED TO AFFIRM ALL WHO ARE GIFTED FOR MINISTRY

I cannot move on without taking a moment to address the pain of our female ministers and lay sisters who are consistently denied the full participation in ministry given to their brothers in pulpit and pew. For over twenty-five years the RCA has ordained women to the offices of elder and deacon, and for nearly twenty years the RCA has ordained women to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. But, sadly, the RCA has not gone far enough in making good use of the highly gifted women with whom it has been blessed by God, many of whom are the brightest and the best in its midst. If it is sinful for a person to ignore the gifts that God has given a person, I wonder, is it not equally sinful when the whole body ignores and fails to use the gifts for mission and ministry that God has given to the whole body?

In the Gospel of Matthew we read:

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labors are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:35-38).

Friends, a people serious about mission in the twenty-first century will eagerly receive from the Lord of the harvest all of those workers whom the Lord calls and to whom the Spirit gives gifts for mission and ministry, regardless of their gender. Surely, to do less is to sin against the Giver and to grieve the Spirit.

P-4.
To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with Reformed Church Women’s Ministries and the Commission for Women, to plan and implement for the 1998 General Synod a special celebration of the ordination of women to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and sacrament.***

OUR NEED TO IDENTIFY AND ENLIST TOMORROW’S LEADERS IN MISSION

Two years ago the Rev. Harold Korver, then president of General Synod, devoted his entire president’s report to “A Prescription for Leadership Recruitment in the RCA” (MGS 1995, pp. 25-31). I am deeply grateful to Harold for putting this issue before us. I am also grateful to the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America that worked so diligently for several years to redefine the RCA’s standards for the preparation of ministers. The task force’s report will be presented later this week (see the Report of the Task Force on Standards...in the Church Vocations section) and will be one of the most significant pieces of business we will deal with at this General Synod.
Tonight I would like to revisit Harold Korver’s concern for leadership recruitment. It is a concern that I, along with so many of you, continue to share.

In January 1997 a group of twelve RCA pastors, along with two denominational staff members and a group facilitator, met for what was called a “Summit on Church Revitalization.” The task of this Church Revitalization Team is to engage in a study of revitalized RCA churches for the purpose of identifying principles and developing specific strategies that may be implemented by regional synods, classes, and congregations throughout the RCA. The team is making excellent progress, and a final report will be presented at the 1998 General Synod.

The twelve pastors at the summit were a diverse group from across the RCA. Yet, eleven of the twelve pastors shared one common experience—each had been used of God to turn around and bring renewed life and health to a congregation that had plateaued or had been in serious decline.

The Rev. Charles Morris, pastor of Colts Neck Reformed Church in Colts Neck, New Jersey, prepared a brief summary document of this initial January 1997 summit meeting. Let me share with you a couple of excerpts from this summary document (emphasis mine):

> Throughout our time together the issue of leadership continually resurfaced as one of the key components of revitalization... The role and model that leaders provide informs everything that happens in healthy congregations: how things are managed; the discovery of purpose/mission; the empowerment of persons to exercise their gifts as spiritual leaders; the importance of prayer and worship; and the nurturing of community.

About six months ago I approached a pastor friend whose congregation has come alive in fresh and exciting ways under his leadership. I asked him to give me his immediate response to the following question: What is the key to church revitalization? Without hesitation, he replied, “The Holy Spirit and visionary leadership!”

Leadership! Leadership! Leadership! It seems to be an omnipresent theme these days. If the Reformed Church in America is to move forward together as a people in mission, two things need to happen.

First, we ministers who have been in ministry for five, ten, fifteen, twenty years or more need to open ourselves to constant retraining and retooling, revisioning and refocusing for the ever-changing face of the mission landscape of tomorrow. Those of us who choose to ignore this reality probably ought to begin making plans to retire or to change careers or to work honestly with our consistories to plan the slow, inevitable, and painful death of our congregations.

I believe the Reformed Church in America must become more proactive in coming alongside its pastors: to provide opportunities for theological reflection and spiritual formation, to assist pastors in understanding contemporary issues of gospel and culture, and to expose pastors to cutting-edge thinking in the practice of ministry. We need to create a denomination-wide culture in which pastors come to understand that life-long learning is not an option. It is an absolute expectation of those whom the church calls into leadership.

I envision a yearly seminar experience paid with continuing education dollars already provided by congregations, and I envision this seminar to be held somewhere in the southern United States in January. I also envision this seminar to be planned under the guidance of our Office of Ministry and Personnel Services, utilizing appropriately gifted RCA seminary personnel, RCA pastors, and others from outside of the denomination who are on the cutting edge of ministry and who have much to offer.
Of course, a side benefit of such an event is that it could result in the development of many clergy relationships across regional and other types of boundaries.

P-5.
To instruct the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee of the General Synod Council to prepare plans for an annual denominationally sponsored continuing education opportunity for RCA ministers in order to provide community building with other RCA ministers, to provide opportunities for theological reflection and spiritual formation, to help in understanding contemporary issues of gospel and culture, and to expose them to cutting edge thinking in the practice of ministry.**

Second, to provide quality leadership in the RCA, there is a need to identify, enlist, and call a large cadre of gifted, courageous, and committed young people from within our midst to become the missionary pastors with vision that tomorrow’s church will demand. We can no longer sit around waiting for young people to “feel” called. We must, in the name of Christ, call them! Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book, Where Resident Aliens Live, say:

In particular we must be a people willing to call to the ministry those we believe to have the courage and the humility to act with authority...[Their description of leadership!?] Without such people, the church will lose its way, forgetting the story that makes it possible to be a disciplined body of people against the false stories of the world...

The truth of it is that the best and the brightest are not coming to seminary today. That should not be surprising, given the loss of the church’s social power and status. Those of talent look elsewhere for success.

Yet we know that God has given us people of talent, and we as the church must call them into the ministry whether they want to or not. We must say, “You have the gifts, and we need you.” That is a true call, since it’s not a matter of whether you really “want” to be in the ministry” (Where Resident Aliens Live, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, pp. 65-66).

I have some good news for you tonight. The Reformed Church in America has some very bright and highly talented people in its seminaries today. But not nearly enough of them! More good news: all three RCA colleges are currently experiencing forms of profound spiritual renewal. Good things are happening in the spiritual lives of many, many, students at Central, Hope, and Northwestern Colleges.

At Central College about 225 students gather every Thursday evening, packing the chapel for fellowship, inspiration, and nurture. I’m told that a variety of Christian groups on campus are coming together in a new spirit of fellowship and cooperation. Recently the mother of a Central College student excitedly told me that her son, whom she often had to drag along to church, now attends church in Pella every Sunday morning and returns for worship nearly every Sunday evening.

At Hope College, where chapel attendance is voluntary, one thousand to twelve hundred students pack the chapel every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. Hundreds of Hope College students also meet in small groups every week to open God’s Word and pray with and for one another. One hundred twenty Hope students attended the InterVarsity-sponsored mission conference in Urbana, Illinois, over the past 1996 Christmas break, and another 170 students went on mission trips throughout the world during the past 1997 spring break.
At Northwestern College, my alma mater and the place where my two oldest children attended, 130 students donated their 1997 spring break to go on mission trips. An additional seventeen students will spend their 1997 summer in service at mission stations throughout North America and the world. On a Sunday evening in February 1997, hundreds of students converged on Northwestern’s chapel for a special time of praise and prayer. The event, which was student-initiated and student-led, began at 9:00 p.m. and ended around midnight. One student described the happening this way:

There are a lot of people here who see through the masks we all put on, and last Sunday night the masks were torn away and we came together as a community of believers. People shared their problems, their joys, and their concerns, and prayed for one another. It was awesome! It was all about getting REAL before our peers and ultimately before God. All I can say, Dad, is that God was there and it was awesome.

Folks, generation X—whatever you want to call them or whatever they want to be called—is ready to come alongside the rest of us and lead a missionary church into the twenty-first century. Indeed, we cannot do it without them. The coming century is theirs far more than it is ours. We need to identify from among our young people those who are spiritually gifted for visionary, mission-driven, pastoral leadership. We need to tell them we want them; we need to tell them we need them; we need to tell them we believe God is calling them into ministry and that there is no higher calling. We need to help them understand what a true call is; it is not primarily something you “feel,” but something you discern with the help of godly Christian friends, parents, pastors, mentors, and advisors.

P-6.
To instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a task force consisting of a student and the chaplain from each RCA college, a representative from each RCA seminary, and three additional persons; and further,

to instruct the task force to develop a denomination-wide strategy for calling forth those committed and appropriately gifted RCA youth and children needed by the Reformed Church in America to serve as missionary pastors in the twenty-first century, for report to the 1998 General Synod.”

CONCLUSION

Finally, I remind you of the words of Paul to the Christians in Rome: “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16). And to the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

Sisters and brothers, the story of Jesus is our story. The story of Jesus defines who we are, how we are to live with one another, and what our mission is in the world. Ultimately, the story of Jesus—what we believe about Jesus and how we experience Jesus—is the only “glue” that can hold us together and give our common life purpose, meaning, and direction. As we minister in a changing world and journey together into the uncertainties of a new century and millennium, let us do so remembering that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Friends, Jesus Christ did not come to preach a Gospel; Jesus Christ came so there might be a Gospel to preach. Let us remain faithful to his story, a story that has been handed down, often at a great price, from one generation to the next for the nearly two thousand years that the church has been in existence.
While it is true that in a pluralistic age and culture God calls us to sensitively, tolerantly, and respectfully enter into dialogue with others who do not share our story, who do not know or understand our story, or who have different stories, let us, nonetheless, remain faithful to our story. Religious dialogue in a pluralistic setting does not mean that we must rewrite our story, or even defend it. Let us simply tell the story, “the old, old story of Jesus and his love,” and trust the Spirit to produce the harvest. *A missionary church knows the story; a missionary church loves the story; a missionary church guards the story; a missionary church tells the story; a missionary church lives the story; and a missionary church invites others into the story. In the words of Walter Brueggeman, this story is “the definitional story of our life, and it thereby authorizes people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways”* (*Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 10).

So, what will it mean to be and do denomination in the twenty-first century? I believe it means that as a people sent forth by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Reformed Church in America must choose to follow Jesus Christ in mission to a lost and broken world so loved by God. I believe God is calling us “back to the future.” I believe God is calling us to reclaim our heritage and once again be a people in mission:

A people with a common faith in a common Christ, commonly confessed.

A people who are one in our faith in the one Christ, who is the one and only Savior sent from the one, true God.

A people with a story to tell—a one-of-a-kind, absolutely unique story—the precious, life-transforming story of Jesus Christ.

A people led by persons, male and female, from every racial and ethnic group imaginable, who are gifted by God, who are filled with God’s Spirit, and who are passionate in their desire to impact the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is only one way I can end my report to you, and that is with these words of Jesus:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Respectfully submitted,

The Rev. Anthony D. Vis

**Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-1 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Evangelization and Church Growth and the Advisory Committee on World Mission; P-2, P-3, and P-5 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations; and P-4 and P-6 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Education and Discipleship.**
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY

INTRODUCTION

Three years ago I stood on a platform much like this one in Pella, Iowa, and accepted God's call to be general secretary of this historic and faithful denomination (MGS 1994, R-17, p. 66). I pledged then to provide spiritual and moral leadership to this expression of God's church. Central to this task would be the discernment of vision to direct us in our future life and witness. I promised that this vision would not come from some imported, artificial agenda, but from you, the members of this church, as we listened together to God's Spirit (MGS 1994, pp. 61-66).

My priority has been to go out among you, asking questions, listening to your stories, sharing in your prayers. I asked presidents of classes to send me directly a copy of his or her annual state of religion report, so that I could better understand the contexts of our ministries—all of our ministries. And I prayed with many of you, asking for God's Spirit upon us, that together we might discern the will of God for the RCA into the twenty-first century.

OUR PERSPECTIVE

The Rev. William de Forest, president of the Classis of Schenectady, began his report this year with a "Peanuts" cartoon. What was right for Schenectady is also appropriate for us. Charlie Brown and Lucy are on a cruise ship. As they stand on the deck, Lucy says, "Life is like a cruise ship, Charlie Brown. Some people take their deck chairs to the front of the ship so they can see where they are going. Other people take their deck chairs to the back of the ship so they can see where they've been. Which kind of person are you, Charlie Brown?" He answers, "I'm the kind of person who can't get my deck chair open."

It is time we open our deck chairs—free ourselves from internal preoccupations and look outside ourselves—to see where we've been and to envision where God is beckoning us to go. Much of it will be joyful; some of it is painful. All of it is held in God's hands; gently, carefully, and grounded in God's grace. This evening I want you to hear what I believe God is leading the RCA to discern and now do. It is about who we are. And who we are called to become.

Vision and Biblical Faith

Why is vision so essential for the church today? To answer that question, we must begin where the church must always begin—in the transforming content of Scripture.

The story of the Bible is the account of God's faithful initiative to redeem his people, calling them forth into a new community. Continually, God's Spirit instills vision—vision that reaches out beyond normal human boundaries, vision that challenges our narrow-minded anxieties, vision that enlarges our hearts, vision that calms our fears with a holy fear of God's presence, vision that expands our faith in the sovereign power of God's grace and love.

At the General Synod Council (GSC) meeting in January 1997, the Rev. Shari Brink and the Rev. Gregg Mast preached to GSC from biblical accounts of God calling forth a people with a vision for a new land and a new future. A biblical vision, we heard is "a compelling and sustaining picture of God's most desirable future." It places a people deeply in touch with God's clearest intentions for them. And it brings them to the brink, asking them to follow, to walk through the Red Sea, or cross the Jordan, or go through Samaria, or go to the ends of the earth.
A biblical vision also places the church face-to-face with the culture in which it lives and prays and witnesses. In every place and time the church stands in need of discerning how it should live out Christ's presence in the midst of its particular culture.

For the early church the crucial test was breaking down the barriers between Jew and Greek. In Acts 11 Peter received a vision convincing him of the new humanity made possible through the saving work of Christ. Paul worked to nurture, challenge, and extend the church in response to this radical, reconciling vision.

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ," he wrote to the Galatians. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28). Vision given by the Spirit calls us into a community unfamiliar to our normal experience.

Luther and Calvin were stirred by a vision that would return the church to the people and would again give them direct access to the grace of God. The Scripture, God's Word, was placed directly in their hands and hearts.

Those who began the Reformed Church in America were inspired by a vision that carried them across troubled waters to place the roots of the church in a foreign soil and new land.

Gospel and Culture

Today we must take up the task of Peter and Paul, of Luther and Calvin, of the first clergy in New Amsterdam, and of Van Raalte: discerning anew how we must live out Christ's presence amidst this culture; right here, right now. To do that, we must boldly and honestly say what we see around us.

Come with me to South Dakota. About two dozen RCA congregations minister faithfully there, several in rural areas of the state. This spring a group of these churches prepared a joint celebration of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, only to discover that the regional YMCA had planned a basketball tournament for those evenings and Easter weekend. The majority of kids in their churches from fifth to twelfth grade were involved.

The president of the Classis of Dakota, the Rev. Arlin Vande Zande, in reflecting on this episode, wrote:

When the people of Judah were in captivity in Babylon, their question became, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Increasingly that seems to be the question facing Christians in American society ... Malls and stores are open on Sunday morning. Hockey, dance, and gymnastics clubs and the like schedule events with no regard to the church calendar.

Remember, this was written in South Dakota, not Los Angeles or New York City.

How many of you were raised in places where the church had influence over your community's social values and over its calendar?

Now, how many of you are in congregations that experience competition on Sundays from soccer matches, Little League, kids' birthday parties, or other events?

I recall a story from the Classis of Lake Erie. Young children new to a church gathered in the sanctuary by a communion table with the words, "In Remembrance of Me." One of them asked, "What is that?"
Another pastor told of a child looking at a cross on a table and asking, "Why do you have an addition sign standing there?"

The Gallup organization has studied church attendance since 1939. Last year 38 percent of Americans regularly attended church services (including synagogues and other places of worship). That is the lowest level in half a century, decreasing from almost 50 percent in the 1950s.

The Changing Face of Culture

Other changes have also dramatically diversified the face of North American culture in the last few decades. In January 1997 I sat in an office on the tenth floor of the Tower of Hope at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, sharing with its pastoral staff. The Rev. Juan Carlos Ortiz, pastor of the church’s eleven-hundred-member Hispanic congregation, said:

In about fifty years California will have a majority Hispanic population. We will have a Hispanic governor, Hispanic senators, and other leaders of society. What is the church doing today to prepare those children who take on these future roles in our society? Does the church understand the multicultural future before us?

Let me ask you two other questions:

How many of you live in a community with a significant number of people from at least two racial/ethnic groups?

Now, how many of you are worshiping in congregations that have more than one race or culture in your midst?

According to the 1996 census, 13 percent of the people in the United States are African-Americans, 11 percent are of Hispanic origin, 4 percent are Asian-American, and 72 percent are white. Further, from 1980 to 1990, Hispanic-Americans increased by 53 percent, African-Americans by 13 percent, Asian-Americans by 107 percent, and white Americans by 6 percent. The percentage of our population born in foreign lands has doubled since 1970, and now is at 8.8 percent. These trends are continuing, creating what one authority has described as "the dawning of the first universal nation." Even formerly homogeneous communities and small towns are being transformed.
In February 1997, at a classis meeting in rural north central Iowa, the Rev. Anthony Vis and I heard how the population in those communities is changing. There the Rev. Gary Hegstad, president of the classis, asked:

Are we reaching out only to those who are similar to us, simply so we will be able to maintain the ministry and church life we enjoy? Or are we reaching out to others who may be culturally and religiously different in background than ourselves, to meet the spiritual needs that they have?

You listened yesterday to our president, the Rev. Anthony Vis, and you know what those stories and statistics are telling us. Each of our 952 congregations now lives as a place of mission amidst a foreign and disbelieving culture. As a pastor in the Classis of Delaware-Raritan put it, "We compete strenuously with a culture that finds us irrelevant." Or, I might add, doesn't even find us.

Our task, like those before us, is to recover a vision for mission that can convey the grace and love of Jesus Christ to the culture around us: in our case, a widely diverse, secularized society that believes in the myth of self-sufficiency. It is not, it will not be, an easy task.

**The State of the RCA Today**

There is another necessary component to moving forward in mission. We stand in need of fresh vision because the Bible calls us, the Reformed Church in America, its classes, congregations, and members, to a new future. The Bible calls us, and to answer that call we first need to take a close look at who are. We need to be honest with ourselves!

Forty years ago the typical RCA congregation was in a middle-class neighborhood of America, or in a stable and prosperous rural town. Especially in the Midwest, members were largely of Dutch background. The community encouraged church attendance; it was a means of belonging. The men worked; the women stayed home; children played in school playgrounds—safely. The men ran the church, were the ministers, and served on consistories; the women taught the children in Sunday school, served coffee, and organized potlucks. It was that way because society was that way.

(Synod viewed a video that shows scenes of life in the Reformed Church in America from forty years ago.)

Indeed, mainline Protestant churches, which included the RCA, were seen as foundational building blocks for the culture. So it made sense that in 1958 the president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, laid the cornerstone for the Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. That building, made possible in part through the generosity of the Rockefeller family, was to be the headquarters of nearly all the major Protestant denominations, including the RCA.

In that year confessing members of the RCA totaled 219,360, comprising 124,381 families, and they worshiped in 881 congregations.

We didn’t have to think much about church growth. It happened more or less automatically as couples had children—usually three. Denominational loyalty seemed to be genetic—almost as if people had inherited a denominational gene. For kids who went to college—often an RCA college—or for those young people who moved away and started families, the natural step was to seek out and join an RCA congregation.

Mission was overseas, except perhaps for Brewton, Alabama; Jackson County, Kentucky; and American Indian reservations. American culture, it seemed, was mostly Christian already.
As we’ve already said, society is radically different today; the whole landscape has changed. Have we?

Let me ask you some other questions:

How many of you were born in a rural setting? Those of you standing who live today in a city or suburban area, please be seated.

How many of you live within fifty miles of your birthplace?

Now, how many of you were born/baptized as an infant into the RCA?

How many have been “adopted” into the RCA, either as new Christians or from some other church background?

Next, how many of you belong to congregations that have grown in membership over the past ten years?

How many are in congregations that have fewer members than ten years ago?

A decade ago the RCA was comprised of 138,725 families. Today we have 119,733 families, a decrease of 14 percent.

Confessing members have decreased from 213,000 to 186,000. Total membership has slipped from almost 350,000 to 310,000.

It’s true that some churches are caught in areas of shrinking demographics; people are simply moving away. It’s also true today that people are more likely to attend than to formally join. And we know that faithfulness in ministry cannot be measured just by numbers.

Yet, the fact is that in nearly every region of the RCA, total membership over the last decade has shown a decline. Even in those areas that are more stable, such as the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes and the Regional Synod of the Heartland, population growth means RCA congregations are shrinking in relation to society.

What about all our new churches? You know that we have been committed to planting ninety-eight new churches by 1998. And I can announce today that we will reach that goal, through the committed efforts of so many of you. To date we have attempted to start ninety-two new churches in this period, and seventy-seven are functioning—a success rate of 83 percent, which is exceptional.

But we will have also closed as many churches in that period as we have successfully planted. It reminds me of a scene from Lewis Carroll’s book, Through the Looking Glass, which was used in one of the classis’ state of religion reports. Alice is running hand in hand with the queen at a breathtaking speed. She says, “Are we not there yet? Why, in my country if we ran this fast for this long we’d be where we are going!” To which the queen replies, “My dear, in my country we have to run this fast and for this long just to stay where we are!”
Let me put it simply. In the long run, if present trends continue, we won't.

Church growth is no longer automatic or hereditary. Denominational loyalty is no longer a given. Societal recognition is rarely given. Today, congregations must earn the right to be heard. Authentic witness, an embracing community, creative outreach, a healing ministry—these are the qualities of congregational life that draw people to the church and introduce them more and more often, for the first time, to the person of Jesus Christ.

In scores of RCA congregations, this is happening. Fruitful ministry is being blessed and is multiplying. Hurting people are being reached and healed. The gospel is being freshly proclaimed, and people's lives are being transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

This happens when we open our eyes and turn our hearts to the world around us. We unfold our deck chairs and ask for a vision for mission—a vision that inspires congregations to a new vitality of ministry; a vision that transforms our classes from biannual business meetings to communities of nurture and support; a vision that engages our regional synods and becomes a focus for all their work; a vision that directs the personnel and financial resources of the General Synod.

A VISION

To this end I have focused my efforts since that day in Pella, Iowa, three years ago. A season of listening and discernment has borne fruit. The General Synod Council has gone on three retreats in the past three years—and worked in a focused way this year—to affirm a statement of vision for the Reformed Church in America.

Now listen and look with me at the vision statement. It is in three parts. First, two sentences that summarize the central mission or purpose of the RCA for our time, followed by a statement of vision; and a concluding part, on living out the vision.

(Synod viewed a video on the General Synod Council's vision development process.)

OUR MISSION

The RCA is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

VISION

Imagine...

Laity and pastors unleashed, hungry for ministry; congregations mission-minded and inviting, authentic and healing, growing and multiplying, alert to the opportunities around them.

Imagine...

Classes and synods as communities of nurture and vision—accountable, responsible, sustained by prayer, alive to the Spirit.
Imagine...

A denomination, locally oriented, globally connected, that prays in many languages and beholds the face of Christ in every face; a denomination renewed and renewing, raising up leaders, always directing its resources toward the front lines of ministry.

Imagine...

Hurts being healed, the lost being found, the hungry being fed, peace healing brokenness, hope replacing despair, lives transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.

Imagine...

The Reformed Church in North America.

LIVING OUT THE VISION

This vision will be lived out...

By congregations focused for ministry—creative, confident, healing, and radically attentive to the world outside its doors.

By consistories selected more for ministry than for management, attuned to the Spirit, eager and equipped to serve.

By pastors open to dream, prepared to lead, willing to risk.

By classes that are empowering and proactive, living in communion, each accountable to all, and all to Christ.

By synods and staff that funnel resources to the local church and keep us connected to the larger church.

By all the people of the RCA, a network of relationships, a fellowship that celebrates its gifts and confesses its failures, and where the ministries of all are valued and cherished.

To live out this vision by consistories, classes, synods, and staff, our decision-making will be transformed by a pervasive climate of worship, discernment, and biblical reflection.

We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.

Statements of vision are compelling only when we covenant to go where the words send us—to claim the challenge and to accept the risks—to pray for and with each other along the way—to sacrifice ourselves and our resources. We don’t need just words. We need clear direction. We need to mobilize ourselves for faithful action.

This past April I offered to the General Synod Council specific recommendations for our future. Much work has gone into these ideas since that meeting. Let me offer my proposals now to you. I encourage you not only to embrace this statement of vision, but to approve the necessary steps that begin to live this out. In other words, let’s get down to work.
PROPOSALS

Classis

We begin with the classis. This is the crucial point of connection and mutual accountability for our congregations, and it should be the place that nurtures pastors in their ministry.

Consider, for example, the Classis of Greater Palisades. The classis is comprised of thirty-nine churches in New Jersey. They try to do their work orderly and well. I met with them in March 1997, listening to their concerns. One pastor explained: “When we gather, we only have time to do the business of the classis. There’s no opportunity to focus on our vision or on new directions for evangelism or on other crucial issues.” Then another pastor, who has served faithfully and well, looked at me and said, “I’ve been in this classis for four years. I only have acquaintances here—no friends.”

How often have I heard similar words in classes throughout the U.S. and Canada! Far too many of our classes are places of competition and suspicion rather than of nurture. They are mired in the tedium of immediate business and do little to inspire vision or to undergird the ministry of pastors and their congregations. Many have lost the sense of being what their name means—a “fleet” of different sizes and functions, but all sailing together in a common mission.

Yet there is hunger for classis to be that community of fellowship and encouragement that we all so deeply need. The Rev. Thomas Dekker, president of the Classis of Chicago, said this in his report:

How can we take a structure already given to us—classis—and transform it into an experience that will be more than the conducting of necessary business—an experience of renewal, challenge, and growth for us as individuals and churches? Dare we dream that classis could be an exercise we welcome in our crowded lives, rather than a task to be endured and tolerated?

Why not? This is beginning to happen, as some classes are holding retreats and creating space to reflect on where their congregations are called in renewal and mission. In the Classis of Queens a small group of pastors committed themselves to take part together in a focused and demanding eight-month program of spiritual direction, holding each other accountable to regular disciplines and personal sharing. Similar initiatives have begun in California.

The point is this: classis is not a meeting. It is a community, a living network of relationships designed to link our ministries in common nurture and mission.

I have become convinced that our ability to move into the future depends on a focused commitment of our denomination’s resources at the classis level. I have instructed our General Synod staff to redirect their energies to this effort. The Rev. Anthony Vis and I, along with our GSC committee/unit directors and regional synod executives, have begun exploring how best to coordinate programs and resources with our classes toward sustaining and revitalizing congregations, supporting pastors and students for ministry, planting new churches, and discerning missiological work.

We must ask each classis what it needs from the wider fellowship and resources of the Reformed Church in America to strengthen their life. Further, each classis needs to begin the twenty-first century with a clear statement of its vision for ministry and mission.
Therefore, with your support in the year ahead, I will ask each classis to answer these questions:

What can the classis do best?

What do you need as a classis from the rest of the Reformed Church in America to assist you in the task of equipping congregations for ministry?

Responses from the classes will become the basis for my report and recommendations to the General Synod next year. By that time I will have visited nearly all of our classes and had the opportunity to listen and learn what can best assist their role in the life of the denomination.

In addition, to orient each of our classes toward their future ministry, I offer this proposal:

P-1. To request each classis to prepare by the 1999 General Synod a special “state of religion” report, as required by the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1, which reflects on its context for ministry and includes a statement of vision for its ministry and mission over the next five years.**

To this end, I will ask the General Synod Council to make available resources to assist classes, where necessary, to carry out this process.

Evoking the Gifts of the Laity

At the 1993 General Synod in Vancouver, British Columbia, president Beth Marcus made the case for renewing the role of the laity in the life of the Reformed Church in America (MGS 1993, pp. 30-35). One of her recommendations included a fresh initiative to energize the role of deacons—both in how we understand their tasks from a biblical perspective and how we can put this into practice. The diaconal training program that has grown since that time has received an enthusiastic response throughout the church.

The opportunities for lay leadership in our congregations are endless. Using these opportunities is essential if we are to respond to the vision before us. Strengthening lay leadership must be a denominational priority.

Therefore I offer this proposal:

P-2. To hold a denominational “festival” for the ministry of the laity by the year 2000 in order to undergird the efforts to evoke the gifts of the laity as the Reformed Church in America looks forward to ministry in a new century.**

Such a festival will be in the tradition of the Festival of Evangelism held in Detroit, Michigan, in 1970; the Mission Festival held here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1971; and the Family Festival held in Estes Park, Colorado, in 1972.

Further, I will form a “laity advisory group” to see that the perspectives and needs of the laity receive focused attention in programs and policies of the denomination.
Faith Formation

Every congregation, as Calvin wrote, is to be a “school,” calling every member to ministry and forming each one in faith and discipleship. In a disbelieving culture, faith formation will be the path to renewal of congregational life and witness.

In recent years we've done much as a denomination to help congregations with their educational efforts. New initiatives such as the Children and Worship ministry are thriving; the TRAVARCA audiovisual library is among the best of such church resources in North America; and we are strengthening denominational efforts to support ministry with youth. At this General Synod you will experience our new focus on adult faith formation and biblical literacy.

Yet, we have only begun. Therefore I have instructed the Rev. Jeffrey Japinga, director of Congregational Services, to place a top priority on sharing resources and experiences that enable congregations to call forth the gifts of the laity.

The Structure of Consistories

After attending a classis meeting in the Midwest last year, I listened to the reflections of one of our regional synod staff:

When one becomes an elder or a deacon, the first question should be, “Are you willing to grow in Christ?” Then, out of that commitment, can you discern where God is calling your congregation in mission and ministry?

He was right. The emphasis today should fall on the consistory’s responsibility to foster congregational ministry and mission, rather than on more narrow administrative tasks. I remember an elder in a classis meeting saying to me, “A lot of our consistories are spending their time discussing the color of the drapes and whether to get a new copy machine.” In another classis, one member put it this way: “We need to be more than a social club that sings hymns.”

Consistories should be the place where a congregation’s vision is tested, where its mission finds direction, and where its ministry is empowered. To do so, more flexibility is needed in how we structure our consistories. Thoughtful reflection and revision of those sections of the Book of Church Order (BCO) dealing with consistories and congregational life is in order.

Therefore, I offer this proposal:

P-3.
To instruct the moderator of the General Synod Council, in consultation with the general secretary, to appoint an ad hoc group of no more than eight persons, including representatives of the Commission on Theology and the Commission on Church Order, and other clergy, elders, and deacons, to review those sections of the Book of Church Order (BCO) dealing with the election, tasks, and responsibilities of consistories; and further,

to instruct this ad hoc committee to draft BCO revisions that will allow greater flexibility in the method of consistory selection and will emphasize the consistory’s calling to give spiritual leadership in the ministry and mission of congregations, for report to the 1998 General Synod.**
Mission

Simply put, mission is the intentional crossing of boundaries in word and deed for the sake of proclaiming the gospel.

The RCA’s mission in the twenty-first century must be rooted in and emerge from our congregations’ sense of call. Congregations will be engaged locally, yet connected globally in concrete expressions of God’s mission. Living out our vision means that a fresh sense of mission will become the driving force for our congregations and our life together as a denomination. New forms of mission partnerships are being explored in Russia, South Africa, and Asia. Mission Services, under the leadership of its new director, the Rev. Bruce Menning, is implementing our commitment, made at the 1995 General Synod, that “Mission is One” (MGS 1995, pp. 33-39).

New Church Development

The planting of new churches is integral to the mission of the RCA and to each of its congregations.

In the future we need to utilize a variety of effective models for cities, racial/ethnic congregations, and multi-ethnic churches, while acknowledging both our fruitful and ineffective past efforts. An overall plan for new church development from 1998 on (as called for by the 1996 General Synod—MGS 1996, R-10, p. 369) is already being developed and will come to next year’s General Synod. Its implementation will require an unleashing of resources and the linking of commitment from classes, congregations, regional synods, racial/ethnic councils, seminaries, and the General Synod Council.

(Synod viewed a video on new church development.)

Church Revitalization

We estimate that about one-half of all RCA congregations are located in neighborhoods that are in transition or soon will be in transition. Other congregations struggle with dwindling membership and stagnating congregational life. The challenge of congregational revitalization is one key to our vision for the future. The Rev. Anthony Vis has given his leadership as president of General Synod in this area.

This momentum needs to continue. Lessons learned from already revitalized congregations need to be celebrated and shared throughout the denomination. The group of pastors called together by Tony at the Revitalization Summit are preparing recommendations for the 1998 General Synod. The General Synod Council, along with classes and regional synods, need to be ready with a willingness and with resources for coordinated efforts at revitalization.

(Synod viewed a video on church revitalization.)

Urban Ministry

The city is the growing global context to which God is calling us for mission and ministry. The RCA must turn its eyes and heart again to the city and must ask how it can express faithfully a wholistic gospel in the places that draw multitudes crying for the salt and light of God’s people. The urban ministry consultation in Hoboken, New Jersey, in April 1997, brought fresh direction and commitment to the RCA’s ministry in our cities.

A denominational team has been assembled. By next year Mission Services will have a full-time person to mobilize our work in urban ministry. To accomplish this challenge, we are raising an endowment to undergird our future commitment to urban ministry. Will you
support God's call to us to re-enter our cities worldwide? Will your congregations? I challenge you personally to respond to this call.

(Synod viewed a video on urban ministry.)

A Multicultural Future

The racial and ethnic diversity of the Reformed Church in America is a gift of the Holy Spirit, intended to prepare us more fully to be the sign of Christ’s presence within a hurting and broken world. It is the responsibility of the whole church—congregations, classes, and regional synods—to work together in becoming a genuinely multicultural fellowship.

For too long we have left this task to our racial/ethnic councils and then marginalized them in a bureaucratic ghetto that restricts their ability to fully utilize their gifts and perspectives within the whole life of the church.

Living in unity as one body in Christ means repenting from and resisting ongoing racism wherever it occurs. This is the responsibility of the church as a whole. Therefore I call upon the General Synod to establish a commission that will oversee our commitment to be a multicultural and multi-ethnic fellowship.

With a commission on multicultural life in place, the expertise, counsel, and energy of the racial/ethnic councils can be rightly redirected to new church development, church revitalization, evangelism, urban ministry, and global mission. This is where the church so deeply needs the full participation of all its members, and especially those of minority ethnic groups.

Multicultural ministry will develop as classes, synods, and the racial/ethnic councils work closely together. Further, the work of the racial/ethnic councils should be accountable to and coordinated with the work of the General Synod Council.

Therefore, I offer these proposals:

P-4.
To instruct Policy, Planning, and Administration Services of the General Synod Council, in consultation with the racial/ethnic councils and the general secretary, to develop a plan that will focus the work and resources of the racial/ethnic councils on the tasks of new church development, church revitalization, evangelism, urban ministry, and global mission; and further,

to clearly define the work of the racial/ethnic councils as ministries accountable to, within the framework of, and coordinated by the General Synod Council.**

P-5.
To establish a Commission on Multicultural Life, for the purpose of monitoring the Reformed Church in America’s commitment to be a fully multicultural fellowship, united in Christ, and to be an advocate for institutional transformation toward this end; and further,

to adopt in first reading the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part 1,
Article 5, for recommendation to the 1998 General Synod for approval (additions are underlined):

New Section 7 (existing sections 7-10 to be renumbered 8-11)

Sec. 7. Commission on Multicultural Life

a. Membership

The commission shall have nine members. The membership shall include at least five persons from among the African-American, Pacific and Asian American, Hispanic, and American Indian constituencies of the Reformed Church in America. At least one-half of the membership shall be laypersons.

b. Responsibilities

1. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multicultural and multi-ethnic life.

2. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multicultural and multi-ethnic church.

3. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multicultural and multi-ethnic objectives.**

The Gifts of Women

In today's context we cannot afford to deny the gifts of leadership offered by women of the church. Equipping every congregation for ministry and mission today can happen only if the leadership gifts of women are recognized, affirmed, and empowered. Special attention needs to be given to enabling opportunities of pastoral ministry for women seminarians. The RCA’s leadership at all levels should call the denomination to utilize all those whom the Spirit has gifted and empowered to build up the life of the body of Christ. I commend again to you the words and recommendation of our president, the Rev. Anthony Vis, in addressing this issue yesterday.

The Role of Large Congregations

The contribution of innovative leaders and of large congregations in the life of the RCA needs careful attention as we look to a new century. Let us explore how their gifts and capacities can be used to enhance our common mission, implement denominational goals, and provide opportunities for training and resource sharing. Therefore, I will convene a dialogue with pastors of such churches to explore these possibilities.

Our Ecumenical Calling

Jesus Christ is the only head of the church, and that church is united in one body. Our theological heritage is a gracious, ecumenical Calvinism. Our Reformed vision of the church continually propels us to express the unity that already exists in Christ. Our particular calling
in this time is to be a church that is both evangelical and ecumenical, seeking fellowship for
mission with the whole people of God. Any vision for a church that is truly reformed will
press us persistently and persuasively to live out our commitment to the unity of the church—
not just spiritually, but concretely and incarnationally.

HOW WE PROCEED

These, then, are the twelve crucial areas that require our attention if we are to begin
implementing the vision we have been given.

Our statement of vision calls for “our decision-making [to] be transformed by a pervasive
climate of worship, discernment, and biblical reflection.” And then it concludes, “We will
no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.”

This may, in fact, be our most important underlying challenge. Our vision is focused not
simply on what we are called to do, but on how we are called to live and work together. It
often seems that our assemblies—consistories, classes, regional synods, and the General
Synod, along with the General Synod Council—gather to adjudicate disputes, transact
business, and approve budgets. Worship sometimes seems like bookends—an opening and
closing prayer. Biblical, theological reflection is sparse. The sharing of our stories, our
pilgrimage of faith in Christ, is neglected. And the work of spiritual discernment can seem
absent. Discussion, deliberation, and debate all come easier for us than discernment.

Can we explore other ways to do our work and live our life together as a denomination? I
believe so, deeply. And we are already doing so. The General Synod Council has
experimented with meeting annually in a retreat setting. Here at General Synod we have
integrated worship and biblical reflection into the fabric of our business. Some classes are
beginning to explore new settings and ways for building up their life together.

Thoughtful, concerted attention must be given to these questions in the future, and many
more experiments should be attempted. Let me be clear. The style of deliberative debate and
decision-making, in business sessions guided by Robert’s Rules of Order, is built on the
assumption that the church makes decisions like the government and other organizations in
society. It is largely a product of eighteenth-century enlightenment political thought, and of
a time when church life and the surrounding culture fit very comfortably together.

In some situations today our way of working still serves us well. And often we are free to
act informally in other styles. Yet we need a fresh and intentional discussion of this issue.
If we are truly committed to being a multicultural fellowship, and if we are actually willing
to have our mission shape our structures and style, then we will need to open ourselves to
fresh ways of making decisions, discerning directions, sharing our life, and enabling
ministry. The members of our senior staff and I have already begun exploring ways to
implement some of these changes. My hope and strong expectation is that we will enlarge
our discussion around these questions in the year ahead as we move to implement our vision.

Now what will you do?

First, each advisory committee of this General Synod will have the opportunity to respond
to the vision statement at the outset of your meetings on Monday. On Tuesday morning, June
17, the statement will be presented to you for your approval.

But that is just the beginning. A vision statement merely adopted by General Synod and
printed in the “Orange Book” will change little, if anything. But a vision statement shared
with the church, with every consistory and classis, with every commission and racial/ethnic
council, with every agency and institution, could change everything.
Therefore I make these proposals:

**P-6.**
To instruct the general secretary to communicate this statement of mission and vision to each RCA pastor, congregation, classis, regional synod, agency, institution, and affiliated body of the Reformed Church in America; and further,

to urgently request the above to prayerfully reflect on the statement of mission and vision and then to act on the statement faithfully according to their discernment of the leading of God’s Spirit.**

**P-7.**
To instruct the General Synod Council to audit all of its present programs and commitments in light of the statement of mission and vision; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to identify, manage, and prioritize the resources necessary to implement this vision; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to evaluate how the Reformed Church in America is implementing the statement of mission and vision, for report to the 1999 General Synod.**

Let me ask that you, as members of the General Synod, personally commit yourselves to be the ambassadors of this vision in your place of service, so that you ask the questions, offer the prayers, and suggest the actions needed for its implementation.

CONCLUSION

We are a church called in our identity to be reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God. In that spirit we can welcome the gift of new vision, expecting that it will open paths for renewed ministry and mission as we look toward a new millennium. We do so knowing we are grounded in enduring biblical words that form and reform the life of the body of Christ:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

**Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-1, P-6, and P-7 were referred to the Committee of Reference; P-2 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Education and Discipleship; P-3 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Order and the Advisory Committee on Theology; and P-4 and P-5 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Order.**
The General Synod Council (GSC) has served the Reformed Church in America since July 1, 1993. The Book of Church Order (BCO) states:

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. Its responsibility is to implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies; to support, strengthen, and correlate the work of the several boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1).

Specific responsibilities for GSC are defined in the Bylaws of the General Synod (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6). To carry out these responsibilities, GSC held stated meetings on October 8-10, 1996, January 22-23, 1997, and April 8-10, 1997; thus, fulfilling the requirement of three stated meetings prescribed in the Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 5.

The Bylaws of the General Synod also authorize the General Synod Council Coordinating Committee to serve as the Committee of Reference during the sessions of the General Synod (Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6j). As such, this committee receives referrals from the General Synod and formulates and presents appropriate resolutions to the General Synod. It also receives and acts upon applications for leaves of absence from the sessions of General Synod.

The GSC report is presented in two ways. First, matters of general nature to be heard and acted upon directly by the General Synod are reported here. They are identified by "#" in the outline below. Second, other matters of the seven General Synod Council committees are reported through appropriate advisory committees as indicated by the parenthetical note following the title of the item in the outline below. Referrals from the General Synod of 1996 are dealt with throughout the report.

**Ad Interim Administration**

- # Regional Synod Minutes
- # Ad Interim Appointments
- # Debt Reporting
- # Revisions of Consistorial Report Form

**General Synod Meeting**

- # Referral of Business
- # Communion Offering
- # Seating of Delegates
- # Dates and Sites

**Policy and Planning**

- # Amendments to the Book of Church Order
- # Amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod
Budget

# 1998 General Synod Operational Budget

# Other 1998 General Synod Assessments

# Total 1998 General Synod Assessments

Supervision

# Personnel and Evaluation Committee

Other

# 1998-2000 Denominational Themes

# Purposes and Responsibilities of Regional Synods and Classes

# Classes and Regional Synod Stated Clerks Consultation

# Staff Consulting Group

# Council of Unit Representatives and Regional Synod Executives (COURSE)

# 1996 Statistical Report of the RCA

# Appointment of General Synod Treasurer and Assistant Secretary

Report of the Board of Directors

# Annual Report

From the General Synod Council Committees

1. GSC Congregational Services Committee

   Office of Social Witness (Christian Action)

   Office of Hunger Education (Christian Action)

   Office of Congregational Services (Christian Education and Discipleship)

   Office of Diaconal Ministries (Christian Education and Discipleship)

   Office of Christian Worship (Christian Worship)

   Task Force on the Relationship of Reformed Church Women's Ministries with the RCA Structure (Christian Education and Discipleship)

2. GSC Evangelism and Church Development Services

   Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund (Church Order/ Evangelization and Church Growth)

   Office of Evangelism and Church Development Services (Evangelization and Church Growth)
Office of Congregational Evangelism (Evangelization and Church Growth)
Office of New Church Development (Evangelization and Church Growth)

3. GSC Finance Services Committee
Office of Finance Services (Financial Support)
General Synod Assessment Formula (Financial Support)

4. GSC Ministry and Personnel Services Committee
Office of Ministry and Personnel Services (Church Vocations)
Pastoral Care of Clergy and the Clergy Family (Church Vocations)
Classis Chaplains (Church Vocations)
Clergy Divorce and Remarriage (Church Vocations)
Procedural Steps to Ordination (Church Vocations)
Spring Sabbath

Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America (Church Vocations)

5. GSC Mission Services Committee
Office of Mission Services (World Mission)
Changes in Missionary Personnel (World Mission)

6. GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee
1997 General Synod Theme (Christian Education and Discipleship)
RCA Archives and Office of Historical Services (Christian Heritage and Communications)
Necrology (Christian Heritage and Communications)
Task Force to Revise Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (Church Order)
Review of Commissions (Church Order)

7. GSC Stewardship and Communication Services Committee
Office of Stewardship and Communication (Christian Heritage and Communications/Financial Support)
RCA Foundation (Financial Support)
Perspectives (Christian Heritage and Communications)
Committee of Reference

# Referrals
# 1998 General Synod Assessments
# Leaves of Absence
# Resolutions

AD INTERIM ADMINISTRATION

Regional Synod Minutes

The GSC received and found to be in good order the 1996 minutes of the regional synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantic, and New York.

Ad Interim Appointments

To the General Synod Council:


To the Commission on Nominations:

The Rev. Ronald Van Der Werff, representing the Regional Synod of Mid-America, to fill the unexpired term of the Rev. Charles Doornbos, Class of 1999.

To the Commission on Theology:


To the Central College Board of Trustees

Mark De Cook, to redesignate his term, Class of 2002 to Class of 2000.

Donald Vogel, to redesignate his term, Class of 2002 to Class of 2000.

To the New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees:


R-1.
To approve the ad interim appointments. (ADOPTED)

Debt Reporting

A special Committee on Church Funding recommended to the 1976 General Synod that procedures be developed for an annual review of the debt situation in each local church and classis. The General Synod adopted a procedure which called for review of church debt by the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod.
Each classis is mailed a report form to be completed and returned by March 15 to the regional synod and to GSC.

At its April 1991 meeting, the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) expressed concern about the present format of the form and by consensus requested the treasurer to present revisions of the form to the October 1991 GSEC meeting.

At its October 1991 meeting, GSEC approved the following revised questions:

1. Does the classis itself have any debts? If so, please complete the following—type of loan indebtedness, purpose, current principal balance of borrowed funds, and delinquency balance.

2. Has the classis cosigned or guaranteed any loans for which it has contingent liability? If so, describe each.

3. Is there a committee in the classis that watches the debt obligations of local churches within the classis? If so, what is the name of the committee?

4. Utilizing the information provided in Section IV, Addendum B, of the annual consistorial report form, please provide a listing of the current indebtedness of each church within your classis, following the suggested format on the reverse side of the form (name of the church, total borrowings [mortgages, notes, etc.], and delinquency amounts [if any]).

5. What arrangements have been made for the classis or the churches with delinquencies to become current in their financial obligations?

Indebtedness reports were received from twenty-nine classes. Of these, seven reported churches that are delinquent in their financial obligations. In all cases it appears that church indebtedness is being adequately monitored.

Reports have not yet been received from the classes of California, Cascades, Central Plains, Chicago, Columbia-Greene, Holland, Illinois, New Brunswick, New York, Passaic Valley, Pleasant Prairie, Queens, Red River, Rochester, Schenectady, South Grand Rapids, and Wisconsin.

Revisions of Consistorial Report Form

No revisions of the 1996 Consistorial Report Form were made.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod has been assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the Workbook.

R-2.
To approve the assignment of General Synod's business as presented in the General Synod Workbook. (ADOPTED)
Communion Offering

Upon recommendation of the president of General Synod, GSC designated the 1997 General Synod communion offering for Spring Sabbath scholarships for pastors of small membership churches.

Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a).

The general secretary reported on classes payments of 1996 and 1997 General Synod assessments at the General Synod meeting.

Dates and Sites

1997 General Synod

Upon recommendation of GSC, the 1995 General Synod accepted the invitation from the Classis of Wisconsin to host the 1997 meeting of the General Synod within the bounds of its classis. The classis is appreciative for this opportunity to host the 1997 General Synod as a celebration of 150 years of Reformed Church in America ministry in the state of Wisconsin. The 1995 General Synod also set the dates of June 14-20 for the 1997 meeting of the General Synod (MGS 1995, R-3, p. 49).

1998 General Synod

Upon recommendation of GSC, the General Synod also in 1995 accepted the invitation of Hope College and Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, to host the 1998 meeting of the General Synod on their respective campuses. The 1995 General Synod also set the dates of June 6-12, 1998 for the 1998 meeting of the General Synod (MGS 1995, R-4, p. 49).

At its October 1996 meeting, GSC reviewed evaluations of the 1996 General Synod meeting. A number of General Synod delegates expressed concern about the length of General Synod meetings. GSC then approved the schedule for the 1997 General Synod meeting and reduced the length by one-half day on Friday to an adjournment time of 12:30 p.m. rather than later Friday afternoon or evening.

At its April 1997 meeting, GSC again discussed the length of General Synod meetings. It was determined to reduce the length from the current six and one-half days to five days. This reduction in the length of the General Synod meeting will result in a savings of $36,000 in operating costs for the 1998 General Synod meeting and similar savings in subsequent years.

As noted above, the 1995 General Synod set the dates of June 6-12 (Saturday through Friday) for the 1998 General Synod. Reducing the number of days for the 1998 General Synod meeting requires a revision of dates for this meeting.

R-3.
To revise the dates for the 1998 General Synod meeting from June 6-12 (Saturday through Friday) to June 5-10 (Friday through Wednesday) for the 1998 General Synod meeting. (ADOPTED)
1999 General Synod

At its March 1996 meeting, GSC reviewed an invitation from the Classis of Dakota to host the 1999 meeting of the General Synod within the bounds of its classis. Upon recommendation of GSC, the 1996 General Synod accepted the invitation of the Classis of Dakota to host the 1999 meeting of the General Synod on the campus of Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The 1996 General Synod also set the dates of June 12-18 for the 1999 General Synod meeting (MGS 1996, R-3, p. 62). Upon review and evaluation of the revised five day schedule following the 1998 General Synod meeting, a possible revision of dates for the 1999 General Synod will be recommended at the 1998 General Synod for adoption.

POLICY AND PLANNING

Amendments to the Book of Church Order

The Government

The General Synod in 1996 adopted and referred to the classes for approval five amendments to the Book of Church Order. The amendments are recorded in the 1996 Minutes of General Synod, pp. 234-39, 243-44, 244-47, 287, 401. Due to an oversight, the amendment of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 1 and Section 2 of the BCO (MGS 1995, pp. 261-62) to clarify that the M.Div. degree is the "regular course of seminary instruction" was not sent to the classes in 1995 for approval. This amendment was sent with the BCO amendments adopted by the 1996 General Synod.)

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<tr>
<th>Proposed Amendments</th>
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<th>Disapproved</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Clarification of Enrollment in the Master of Divinity Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>(MGS 1995, pp. 260-62) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sections 1 and 2)</td>
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<td>2. Deacon Representation at Classes Meetings</td>
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<td>23*</td>
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<td>(MGS 1996, pp. 233-39) (BCO, Preamble, second paragraph and Government by Elders paragraph) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Sections 1 and 3) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Sections 1 and 2) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 6)</td>
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<td>3. Temporary Classis Membership of Ministers from Other Denominations</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>(MGS 1996, pp. 242-44) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 15)</td>
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<td>4. Clarification of Installation of Assistant and Retired Ministers Under Contract</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>(MGS 1996, pp. 244-47) (BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1 and 8)</td>
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</table>
Proposed Amendments  

Approved  Disapproved  

(BCO, Chapter I, Part I, Article 2, Section 4)  
(BCO, Chapter I, Part I, Article 3, Section 2)  
(BCO, Chapter I, Part II, Article 7, Sections 1, 4, and 9)  
(BCO, Chapter I, Part II, Article 13, Section 9)  

5. Revised Procedure for Requesting Regional Synod Special Sessions  
(MGS 1996, pp. 287-88)  
(BCO, Chapter I, Part III, Article 4, Section 2)  

6. Additional “Constitutional Inquiry” Question  
(MGS 1996, pp. 399-402)  
(BCO, Chapter I, Part II, Article 7, Section 1a)  

R-4.  
To declare amendments 1, 3, 4, and 5 to have been approved by the classes for incorporation into the 1997 edition of the Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)  

*The proposed amendment for deacon representation at classes meetings (#2) failed to receive the required two-thirds approval of the classes and will therefore not be incorporated into the 1997 edition of the BCO.  

**The proposed amendment for an additional “constitutional inquiry” question (#6) also failed to receive the required two-thirds approval of the classes and will therefore not be incorporated into the 1997 edition of the BCO. However, there was a clerical error in the wording of the proposed addition in the booklet distributed to the classes during this past year.  

The 1996 General Synod voted:  

To amend the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1a, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):  

a. Are the doctrines of the gospel preached in your church in their purity in conformity with  
   i. the Word of God?  
   ii. the Standards of the Reformed Church in America?  
   iii. the truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind?  

The wording of the addition in the booklet distributed to classes stated:  

iii. the truth that divine redemption from sin is only through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind?  

The words “by grace” were inadvertently omitted. (The Minutes of the General Synod 1996, p. 401, has the correct wording.)  

At its April 1996 meeting, GSC recommended that the 1997 General Synod resubmit this proposed amendment #6 to the classes for vote and report to the 1998 General Synod.
R-5.
To resubmit to the classes proposed amendment #6 (approved by
the 1996 General Synod for recommendation to the classes, MGS
1996, R-2, p. 401) for vote by classes and report by the General
Synod Council to the 1998 General Synod.

Upon a motion from the floor, Synod

VOTED: To refer R-5 to the Advisory Committee on Theology; and further,
to direct the Advisory Committee on Theology to prepare a
recommendation on R-5, for report at this General Synod on
Wednesday, June 18, 1997.<

On Wednesday, June 18, 1997, the Advisory Committee on Theology recommended:

R-6.
To resubmit to the classes proposed amendment #6 (approved by
the 1996 General Synod for recommendation to the classes, MGS
1996, R-2, p. 401) for vote by classes and report by the General
Synod Council to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: R-6 avoids any suspicion that the clerical error might have affected the vote of
classes on amendment #6 during the past year.

R-7.
To direct the Commission on Theology to prepare a new confession
of faith that will address the major challenges and opportunities
the Reformed Church in America faces as it confesses Jesus Christ
as the only Lord and Savior in its mission in a secular, pluralist,
post-modern context, for report to the General Synod in the year
2000; and further,

to support this effort with annual funding of $12,800 ($11,000 plus
$1,800 basic service cost) from the General Synod Operational
(Assessment) Budget. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The Report of the General Secretary emphasizes the dramatically new situation the
church faces today (MGS 1997, pp. 41-46). This calls for a new confession.

2. A new confession with RCA constitutional status is intended to provide a comprehensive
and proactive way to unify the RCA.

(A motion was made and supported to divide the two paragraphs of R-7 into two separate
motions. The motion LOST.)

Amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod and Special Rules of Order of the
General Synod

The 1996 General Synod approved in first reading for recommendation to the 1997 General
Synod the following amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod and Special Rules of
Order of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order:
1. Chair of the Personnel and Evaluation Committee or Another of its Members to be Corresponding Delegate at General Synod—BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 8, Section 14 (MGS 1996, R-9, p. 266).

2. Reduce Membership Size of Commission on History from Seven Members to Six Members (General Secretary will no longer have Formal Membership Status on Commission)—BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 5a (MGS 1996, R-10, p. 267).

R-8. To declare the above amendments approved by the 1996 General Synod in first reading to be incorporated into the 1997 edition of the Bylaws of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

BUDGET

1998 General Synod Operational Budget

The General Synod Operational Budget provides funds for the expenses of the General Synod meeting, General Synod officers, denominational staff, commissions, the Church Herald and other publications, racial/ethnic councils, maintaining ecumenical relationships, and such other work as the Synod directs.

The General Synod Operational Budget is funded almost entirely by a per-confessing member assessment on the classes.

At its April 1997 meeting GSC reviewed requests for the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget totaling $4,234,970.

During the General Synod meeting, one item calling for an addition to the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget was presented and approved (see Report of the Committee of Reference, p. 428 for a listing of this item). After making the necessary adjustments in the proposed 1998 General Synod Operational Budget, R-9, R-10, and R-11 were presented to the General Synod for adoption (see pp. 68-69).

1998 GENERAL SYNOD OPERATIONAL BUDGET

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>I. General Synod Meeting</td>
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<td>Meeting Expenses</td>
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<td>Printing and Postage</td>
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<td>Insurance</td>
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<td>General Synod Video</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$389,370</strong></td>
<td><strong>$321,500</strong></td>
<td><strong>$301,500</strong></td>
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II. Staffing Costs (General Synod Council Units)

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<td>Contract Staff</td>
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<td>Fringe Benefits</td>
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<td>Professional Development</td>
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<td>Staff Travel</td>
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### III. Committees/Commissions/Task Forces

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<td>Commissions:</td>
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<td>Christian Action</td>
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### IV. Publications

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<td>Perspectives</td>
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<td>Loose-leaf Liturgy (Reprint)</td>
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<td>$1,021,400</td>
<td>$1,021,900</td>
<td>$1,021,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### V. Ecumenical Delegations & Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCC Delegation</td>
<td>$7,146</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran/Reformed Studies</td>
<td>2,547</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### General Synod Council


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Request</th>
<th>Recommended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian Reformed Church</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel of Ecumenical Appointees</td>
<td>17,904</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive Speaking</td>
<td>3,215</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23rd General Council Meeting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC Church Relations</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC Assembly</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecumenical Contingency</td>
<td>2,691</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Alliance of Reformed Churches</td>
<td>12,650</td>
<td>13,575</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada Council of Churches</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$64,099</td>
<td>$46,275</td>
<td>$50,200</td>
<td>$50,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### VI. Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Request</th>
<th>Recommended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Expenses</td>
<td>$5,550</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral Coverage</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological Education</td>
<td>20,790</td>
<td>10,400</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminarian Seminar</td>
<td>10,394</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Program</td>
<td>47,500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Relief</td>
<td>43,051</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral Services</td>
<td>29,729</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplains Conference</td>
<td>13,179</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in Ministry Events</td>
<td>1,076</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Assistance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards TF Follow-up</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Contingency</td>
<td>1,038</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Service Costs*</td>
<td>$509,580</td>
<td>$460,285</td>
<td>$521,670</td>
<td>$522,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$681,887</td>
<td>$556,685</td>
<td>$629,170</td>
<td>$630,450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL                                            | $4,120,603 | $4,102,340 | $4,234,970 | $4,244,250 |

* The 1998 basic service costs of $522,950 represent contributions toward the operations of the following offices:

- Office of Finance: $151,950
- Office of Information Systems: $115,370
- Archival Office: $34,910
- Personnel Office: $31,220
- Stewardship and Communications: $189,500

**NOTE: ASKINGS**

It is important to note that the assessment amount requested does not meet all funding requirements for the denomination. The assessment amount covers primarily administrative and operational costs. The assessment does not cover the General Synod mission program or the program element of GSC unit budgets.

Also, it is important to note that the RCA contribution for membership in the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) is not paid from General Synod assessment income. Instead, each church has been asked to make contributions to pay for ecumenical membership in these two agencies in the following amounts:
Actual | Budget | Proposed
---|---|---

NCC | $30,505 | $31,500 | $32,500
WCC | $25,000 | $30,000 | $31,500

R-9.
To approve the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget of $4,244,250, and further,
to set the 1998 per-confessing-member assessment for the General Synod Operational Budget at $22.77.* (ADOPTED)

*Based on 1996 confessing membership of 186,435.

(The 1997 General Synod Operational Budget assessment was $21.91 per confessing member.)

Other 1998 General Synod Assessments

In addition to the General Synod Operational Budget, the General Synod has authorized other assessments to insure adequate funding for denominational concerns.

$1.50 to provide sufficient retirement income for clergy who retired prior to 1973 (no increase).

* $3.25 to provide unified funding for the administration of theological education ($3.14 in 1997).

$4.75 TOTAL

*At its October 1995 meeting, GSC voted to designate the 1997 General Synod assessment for the administration of theological education at 13.4 percent of the 1997 General Synod operational budget assessment and the Board of Pensions General Fund budget assessment. At its October 1996 meeting, GSC again voted to designate the 1998 General Synod assessment for the administration of theological education at 13.4 percent of the 1998 General Synod operational budget assessment and the Board of Pensions General Fund budget assessment. GSC also voted to maintain this same percentage of 13.4 percent annually until a review is requested. (Using the 13.4 percentage, $22.77 is the total amount of the assessment for the General Synod operational budget and $1.50 is the assessment amount for the Board of Pensions General Fund. $22.77 plus $1.50 equals $24.27. $24.27 multiplied by 13.4 percent equals $3.25.)

R-10.
To fix the 1998 budget for other General Synod assessments (sufficient retirement income and theological education administration) at $4.75 per confessing member. (ADOPTED)

(The 1997 General Synod assessment amount for the above two items per confessing member was $4.64.)

Total 1998 General Synod Assessments

The total assessment for General Synod concerns in 1998 is $27.52 ($22.77 plus $4.75) per confessing member. This is an increase of approximately 3.65 percent over the 1997 total of $26.55 ($21.91 plus 4.64) per confessing member.
R-11.
To fix the total 1998 General Synod assessment budget at $27.52 per confessing member. (ADOPTED)

SUPERVISION

Personnel and Evaluation Committee

The Personnel and Evaluation Committee is comprised of four members from the General Synod Council. The present members are Harry De Bruyn, chair; the Rev. Gregg Mast; Nancy Miller, and the Rev. John Elliott, Jr.

The committee has four principal accountabilities:

1. Oversight and evaluation of the general secretary.

2. Review and recommendation to GSC of personnel policies, including salary ranges and benefits for denominational staff.

3. Review and recommendation to GSC of salary ranges and benefits for missionaries.

4. Review and approval of salaries as provided in V-4.c of the GSC Handbook.

The Personnel and Evaluation Committee functions within the policies approved by GSC. Among these policies are salary classifications that reflect the degree of responsibility carried by staff members filling the respective positions. Information concerning the classification of specific positions is available from the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services. A broad sketch of the classifications with salary ranges (including housing allowances) in effect in April of the current year appears below:

**SALARY RANGES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASSIFICATION</th>
<th>low</th>
<th>mid-point</th>
<th>high</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(80%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(120%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>$68,640</td>
<td>$85,800</td>
<td>$102,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>61,780</td>
<td>77,220</td>
<td>92,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIA</td>
<td>51,480</td>
<td>64,350</td>
<td>77,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIB</td>
<td>42,900</td>
<td>53,625</td>
<td>64,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Associates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>$29,010</td>
<td>$34,130</td>
<td>$39,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>23,310</td>
<td>27,420</td>
<td>31,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretarial and Office Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIA</td>
<td>20,090</td>
<td>23,630</td>
<td>27,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIB</td>
<td>17,230</td>
<td>20,270</td>
<td>23,310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Special circumstances may warrant hiring below the sixth range.

OTHER

1998-2000 Denominational Themes

On January 29-30, 1993, a group of denominational staff and Reformed Church Women’s Ministries (RCWM) members met to discuss a unified denominational theme for 1996-98. The theme chosen was “God’s People Transformed,” with the following three subthemes:
1996—God's People Transformed: A Living Sacrifice
1997—God's People Transformed: Renewed in Mind
1998—God's People Transformed: Discerning and Doing God's Will

GSC approved the 1996-98 theme at its January 1994 meeting. This theme began with the RCWM Triennial in July 1995.

On December 18-19, 1995, another group met to discuss a denominational theme for 1999-2001. The theme chosen was “God’s Spirit Upon Us,” with the following three subthemes:

1999—God's Spirit Upon Us: Proclaiming
2000—God's Spirit Upon Us: Celebrating
2001—God's Spirit Upon Us: Rebuilding

GSC approved the 1999-2001 theme at its January 1996 meeting. GSC also requested the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services and the executive director of RCWM to appoint and facilitate a Unified Denominational Theme Implementation Team with representation from RCWM, regional synods, and RCA program and communications staff.

At its June 28, 1996, meeting, this team discussed the beginning date for the 1999-2001 theme. The team agreed that the 1999-2001 theme will not begin at the 1998 RCWM Triennial, but will begin instead at the 1998 General Synod. (Subsequently, however, it was decided to introduce the 1998 theme at the spring 1997 regional synod meetings.) GSC, at its October 1996 meeting, approved this revision and the 1998-2000 themes as follows:

1998—God's Spirit Upon Us: Proclaiming
1999—God's Spirit Upon Us: Celebrating
2000—God's Spirit Upon Us: Rebuilding

Because of this revision, GSC, at its October 1996 meeting, also instructed the 1997 General Synod Theme Planning Committee to incorporate the 1997 and 1998 themes together (see pp. 143-44).

**Purposes and Responsibilities of Regional Synods and Classes**

In response to an overture from the Classis of Greater Palisades, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To direct the moderator of the General Synod Council, in consultation with the general secretary and the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, to appoint a task force comprised of eight persons with representation from the General Synod Council, the General Synod Council unit directors, regional synod executives, and stated clerks of classes; and further,

to direct this task force to conduct a review of the purpose and responsibilities of regional synods and classes; and further,

to direct this task force to take into account the following:

1. The historical evolution of responsibilities of regional synods and classes within the RCA church order and the relationship of these assemblies and their responsibilities to each other and to the General Synod and the General Synod Council;
2. The purposes and programs that are most appropriately assigned to regional synods and classes without violating the prerogatives of the General Synod; and

3. The need to develop a coordinated and integrated funding strategy for the work of the RCA carried out through the General Synod, the regional synods, and the classes;

and further,

to direct this task force to report to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-4, p. 427).

The Council of Unit Representatives and Regional Synod Executives (COURSE) and representatives from classes and GSC will discuss the purposes and responsibilities of regional synods and classes at its September 1997 meeting.

A full report will be presented to the 1998 General Synod.

Classis and Regional Synod Stated Clerks Consultation

GSEC, at its January 1992 and October 1992 meetings, authorized the secretary for General Synod operations to annually bring together the stated clerks of classes and regional synods. Funding for this annual stated clerk’s meeting is provided by the General Synod assessment budget, with the understanding that transportation expenses for this meeting are provided by the classes and regional synods.

The annual gathering of stated clerks will be June 12-13, 1997 on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To be discussed at this gathering will be coping with crises in classes and congregations and the role of the stated clerk in these crises, the format of classes meetings, caring for specialized ministers, and records management (dealing with “paperwork”). The stated clerks will also be alerted to particular issues coming before the 1997 General Synod, be provided additional background information and details on proposed amendments to the Book of Church Order, and be updated by the general secretary, the director of Ministry and Personnel Services, the insurance coordinator, and the secretary for General Synod operations on ways to further facilitate cooperation, communication, and information between the General Synod, classes, and regional synods.

Staff Consulting Group

The Staff Consulting Group was organized at the Consultation on Funding in 1973 and approved by the General Synod in that same year. The membership consists of the general secretary, the Administrative Council (the directors of the seven GSC committees/units, the secretary for General Synod operations, and the secretary for the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries), the regional synod executives, the RCA seminary and RCA college presidents, the director of the Theological Education Agency, the executive director of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries, and the editor of the Church Herald. The president of General Synod is invited to participate as an observer.

The Staff Consulting Group met on November 19, 1996, in Chicago, Illinois. The primary focus of this meeting was “The City—Challenge to the Church: Exploring the Future of the RCA’s Ministry in the City.” The Staff Consulting Group also discussed funding appeals by congregations beyond the boundaries of their respective classes. A proposed amendment to the Book of Church Order to limit such appeals was forwarded to the Commission on Church Order by the Staff Consulting Group. At its February 1997 meeting, the Commission on Church Order agreed that the policy and procedure for funding appeals by RCA congregations should not be elevated to a constitutional status by adding an amendment to
the Book of Church Order. The commission, however, sent a communication to the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee, suggesting that the committee consider an amendment to the GSC Handbook to clarify the policy and procedure for funding appeals by RCA congregations.

Council of Unit Representatives and Regional Synod Executives (COURSE)

The Council of Unit Representatives and Regional Synod Executives (COURSE) was organized in 1993. The membership consists of the general secretary, the Administrative Council (the directors of the seven GSC committees/units, the secretary for General Synod operations, the secretary for the Council for Pacific and Asian America Ministries), and the regional synod executives.

COURSE met on June 19, 1996, in Chicago, Illinois; September 4, 1996, in Holland, Michigan; and April 10, 1997, in Hoboken, New Jersey. Discussed during the past year at these meetings was the work of the 1996 General Synod, RCA on-line computer services, the relationship of the regional synods to the classes and the denomination, the purposes and responsibilities of regional synods and classes, representation of the regional synod executives on the General Synod Council, assignment of the general secretary and the directors of the seven GSC committees/units to a specific regional synod to attend its meetings, the proposed 1998-2000 denominational theme, the criteria established by the $9.8 by '98 Grant Committee, regional synod involvement in urban ministries, the Report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the RCA, and the vision statement and process introduced at the April 1997 GSC meeting.

COURSE also attended a special seminar, "Reinventing the Middle Judicatory: Strategic Planning," held January 15-16, 1997, at the Geneva Camp and Conference Center in Holland, Michigan. Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute led the seminar.

1996 Statistical Report of the RCA

SUMMARY OF THE STATISTICAL REPORT OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA FOR THE YEAR ENDING 12/31/1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>Increase Or (Decrease)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Churches</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>949</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Church Households</td>
<td>124,334</td>
<td>120,636</td>
<td>119,733</td>
<td>(903)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Confessing Members</td>
<td>189,338</td>
<td>187,255</td>
<td>186,435</td>
<td>(820)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Inactive Members</td>
<td>43,634</td>
<td>43,451</td>
<td>42,978</td>
<td>(473)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Baptized Members</td>
<td>83,154</td>
<td>82,096</td>
<td>81,235</td>
<td>(861)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Total Membership</td>
<td>316,126</td>
<td>312,802</td>
<td>310,648</td>
<td>(2,154)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Adherents</td>
<td>43,517</td>
<td>41,116</td>
<td>41,612</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Average Worship Attendance</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Received on Confession</td>
<td>8,112</td>
<td>8,367</td>
<td>8,315</td>
<td>(52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Received on Certificate</td>
<td>4,903</td>
<td>4,865</td>
<td>4,886</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Transferred</td>
<td>4,080</td>
<td>4,072</td>
<td>3,881</td>
<td>(191)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Deceased</td>
<td>2,953</td>
<td>3,004</td>
<td>3,082</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Other Removals from Roll</td>
<td>6,842</td>
<td>5,888</td>
<td>6,238</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Infants Baptized</td>
<td>4,680</td>
<td>4,639</td>
<td>4,513</td>
<td>(126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Adults Baptized</td>
<td>1,132</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>1,118</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. New Membership Class</td>
<td>11,769</td>
<td>11,918</td>
<td>11,864</td>
<td>(54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Other Educational Programs</td>
<td>89,607</td>
<td>92,381</td>
<td>92,975</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19a. RCA Assessments</td>
<td>$7,957,511</td>
<td>$8,903,535</td>
<td>$9,100,798</td>
<td>195,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19b. RCA Contributions</td>
<td>$12,223,851</td>
<td>$13,170,360</td>
<td>$13,268,186</td>
<td>97,826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Other Contributions</td>
<td>$8,479,849</td>
<td>$8,788,310</td>
<td>$9,820,416</td>
<td>1,032,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Congregational Purposes</td>
<td>$156,835,405</td>
<td>$168,537,018</td>
<td>$188,579,609</td>
<td>20,042,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$185,496,616</strong></td>
<td><strong>$199,401,223</strong></td>
<td><strong>$220,769,009</strong></td>
<td><strong>$21,367,786</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organized**

Harvest Community Church, Wichita, Kansas (1/96), Classis of Central Plains
Westview Church, Clive, Iowa (1/96), Classis of Central Iowa
Emmaus Christian Fellowship, Langley, British Columbia (3/96), Classis of British Columbia
Fourth Corner Community Church, Bellingham, Washington (3/96), Classis of Cascades
Iglesia Reformada La Senda, Downsview, Ontario (5/96), Classis of Ontario
Monocacy Valley Church, Frederick, Maryland (6/96), Classis of New Brunswick
New Church of Greater New York, Roslyn Heights, New York (10/96), Classis of Nassau-Suffolk
New Song Community Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa (10/96), Classis of Pleasant Prairie
Grace Community Church, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia (11/96), Classis of British Columbia

**Disbanded**

Trinity Reformed Church, Amsterdam, New York (2/96), Classis of Schoharie
Taiwanese Trinity Christian Church, Ridgewood, New York (6/96), Classis of Queens
Netherwood Reformed Church, Plainfield, New Jersey (9/96), Classis of New Brunswick
First Reformed Church, Rochester, New York (10/96), Classis of Rochester
Good News Community Church, Wyoming, Michigan (11/96), Classis of South Grand Rapids

**Change of Status to Mission Church**

Christ the King Community Church, Kamloops, British Columbia (3/96), Classis of British Columbia

**Appointment of General Synod Treasurer and Assistant Secretary**

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V, Section 5.01).

R-12.
To appoint Andrew Lee treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)
In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod may elect or appoint such other officers as the needs of the corporation may from time to time require (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V, Section 5.01). In order for the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell, director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, to have authority to sign legal documents for the corporation of the General Synod, it is necessary to approve the following recommendation.

R-13.
To appoint the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell assistant secretary of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)
REPORT OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Board of Directors hereby submits its annual report. This is the 177th year since the incorporation of General Synod by a Special Act of the Legislature of the State of New York in 1819. The General Synod of 1993 and the General Synod of 1994 authorized the members of the General Synod Council to serve as the Board of Directors.

In previous years this report was comprised primarily of the financial summary of the previous fiscal year and reports on the various investment programs of the church. These reports are now in the Financial Support section (see the Report of the Office of Finance in the Financial Support section).

LONG-RANGE AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

When it was formed in 1993, the General Synod Council was charged with responsibility “to initiate studies and evaluations of policy, strategy, and long-range planning within the denomination and to submit to the General Synod any recommendation considered useful for the development, effectiveness, and efficiency of the life, work, and organization of the Reformed Church (Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 2, Section 6).

GSC began a process of long-range planning in its first year of operation. In April 1994 GSC instructed the Administrative Council (comprised of the general secretary, the seven GSC committee/unit directors, the secretary for General Synod operations, and the secretary for Pacific and Asian American ministries), in consultation with the GSC Coordinating Committee, to review the January meeting format of GSC so that up to one-third of its time (one meeting of the three GSC meetings per year) was spent on long-range planning for the mission and witness of the Reformed Church in America. Beginning in January 1995 GSC has met annually in January in a retreat setting. In a context of worship, prayer, discussion, and personal and corporate reflection, GSC, at its January meetings, has devoted itself to its long-range and strategic planning responsibilities and to more intentionally linking these responsibilities to establishing implementation timelines, objectives, and financial projections for its work.

Following its January 1996 retreat, GSC recognized that the future shared mission and witness of the congregations and classes of the Reformed Church in America required a more thorough and fundamental review and discussion than the first steps initiated in 1995. GSC, at its March 1996 meeting, directed the general secretary and the moderator of GSC, in consultation with the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, to appoint a steering committee for long-range planning. Members of this GSC Steering Committee for Long-Range Planning are:

- Shari Brink
- Vernon Hoffs
- Nelson Hyman
- Carolyn Jones-Assini
- Gregg Mast
- Helen Monsees
- Stephen Norden
- Sara Smith
- Anthony Vis

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson serves as an ex-officio member. Kenneth Bradsell serves as staff resource person for this steering committee.

Building upon the work begun in 1995 and 1996, GSC met again in January 1997 in a context of worship and reflection for a careful and intense process of discernment of God’s intent for the future mission of the Reformed Church in America. By the conclusion of this January 1997 meeting, GSC discerned the outlines or “brush strokes” of the future work of the RCA.
The general secretary then outlined the following four areas as critical to the life and future of the RCA:

1. The mission of the RCA is rooted in its congregations.
2. The cultures (United States and Canada) in which the RCA is engaged to do ministry are cultures of disbelief in need of amazing grace.
3. The congregations and wider assemblies of the RCA are called to be communities of healing.
4. The RCA reaffirms its commitment to being a fellowship that proclaims one gospel, one Lord, and one faith.

At this same January 1997 GSC meeting, the GSC Steering Committee for Long-Range Planning requested:

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, in consultation with persons he selects, to find a place to reflect for the purpose of developing and refining a more energetic draft of a vision/mission statement and for the purpose of developing projected strategic directions for the longer range mission and witness of the Reformed Church in America, for report to the GSC Steering Committee for Long-Range Planning prior to the April 1997 GSC meeting, for report then to the April 1997 GSC meeting, and for report to the 1997 General Synod.

In response to the above request, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson selected the following persons to meet on retreat with him:

- Anthony Vis, President of General Synod
- Charles Van Engen, Vice President of General Synod
- Shari Brink, Copastor of Colt’s Neck Reformed Church in Colt’s Neck, New Jersey, member of the General Synod Council, and member of the GSC Steering Committee for Long-Range Planning
- Mary Clark, Chairperson for the 1995 Reformed Church Women’s Ministries Triennial Committee
- Louis Lotz, Pastor of Morningside Reformed Church in Sioux City, Iowa, member of the General Synod Council, and past president of General Synod
- Gloria McCanna, Associate pastor of New Hackensack Reformed Church in Wappingers Falls, New York, and moderator of the Commission for Women

The above group met March 17-19, 1997, at St. Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and developed a four part statement: 1) a concise mission statement, 2) a picture of vision, 3) a description of living out that vision, and 4) a section on implications and directions.

This statement was then presented to the GSC Steering Committee for Long-Range Planning on April 1, 1997, for comment, feedback, input, and editorial changes, as well as discussion about the future process of implementation.

The GSC, at its April 1997 meeting, then reviewed the statement and voted to recommend to the 1997 General Synod for adoption the following mission/vision statement.
Upon a request from the general secretary, the General Synod advisory committees on Monday, June 16, 1997, reviewed, discussed, and prepared responses to the mission/vision statement.

On Monday evening, June 17, the Committee of Reference reviewed the responses received from the advisory committees. In response to several suggestions by the advisory committees, the Committee of Reference recommended:

R-1.
To adopt the following revised mission/vision statement for the Reformed Church in America (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

**STATEMENT OF MISSION STATEMENT AND VISION**
Reformed Church in America

**MISSION STATEMENT**

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

**VISION**

Imagine...

Laity and pastors unleashed, hungry for ministry; congregations mission-minded and inviting, authentic and healing, growing and multiplying, alert to the opportunities around them.

Imagine...

Classes and synods as communities of nurture and vision—accountable, responsible, sustained by prayer, alive to the Spirit.

Imagine...

A denomination, locally oriented, globally connected, that prays in many languages and beholds the face of Christ in every face; a denomination renewed and renewing, raising up leaders, always directing its resources toward the front lines of ministry.

Imagine...

Hurts being healed, the lost being found, the hungry being fed, peace healing brokenness, hope replacing despair, lives transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.
Imagine...

The Reformed Church in North America.

LIVING OUT THE VISION

This vision will be lived out...

By congregations focused for ministry—creative, confident, healing, and radically attentive to the world outside its doors.

By consistories selected more for ministry than for management, attuned to the Spirit, eager and equipped to serve.

By pastors ministers of Word and sacrament open to dream, prepared to lead, willing to risk.

By classes that are empowering and proactive, living in communion, each accountable to all, and all to Christ.

By synods and staff that funnel resources to the local church and keep us connected to the larger church.

By all the people of the Reformed Church in America, a network of relationships, a fellowship that celebrates its gifts and confesses its failures, and where the ministries of all are valued and cherished.

To live out this vision by consistories, classes, synods, and staff, our decision-making will be transformed by a pervasive climate of worship, discernment, and biblical reflection. We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.

Upon a motion from the floor to amend R-1, Synod

VOTED:  To adopt the following mission/vision statement for the Reformed Church in America:

STATEMENT OF MISSION AND VISION
Reformed Church in America

MISSION STATEMENT

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.
VISION

Imagine...

Laity and pastors unleashed, hungry for ministry; congregations mission-minded and inviting, authentic and healing, growing and multiplying, alert to the opportunities around them.

Imagine...

Classes and synods as communities of nurture and vision—accountable, responsible, sustained by prayer, alive to the Spirit.

Imagine...

A denomination, locally oriented, globally connected, that prays in many languages and beholds the face of Christ in every face; a denomination renewed and renewing, raising up leaders, always directing its resources toward the front lines of ministry.

Imagine...

Hurts being healed, the lost being found, the hungry being fed, peace healing brokenness, hope replacing despair, lives transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.

Imagine...

The Reformed Church in America, engaging the world.*

LIVING OUT THE VISION

This vision will be lived out...

By congregations focused for ministry—creative, confident, healing, and radically attentive to the world outside its doors.

By consistories selected more for ministry than for management, attuned to the Spirit, eager and equipped to serve.

By ministers of Word and sacrament open to dream, prepared to lead, willing to risk.

By classes that are empowering and proactive, living in communion, each accountable to all, and all to Christ.

By synods and staff that funnel resources to the local church and keep us connected to the larger church.

By all the people of the Reformed Church in America, a network of relationships, a fellowship that celebrates its gifts and confesses its failures, and where the ministries of all are

*Addition is in light-face type.
To live out this vision by consistories, classes, synods, and staff, our decision-making will be transformed by a pervasive climate of worship, discernment, and biblical reflection. We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by inserting in the first paragraph the words “together with the church catholic” following the words “Holy Spirit.” The presenter of this motion along with the supporter of this motion agreed to the following motion as a friendly amendment and Synod DID NOT VOTE on this motion.)

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by inserting in the first paragraph the words “as part of the church catholic” following the words “Reformed Church in America.” The motion LOST.)

(A motion was made to amend R-1 by inserting in the imagine section the words “in North, South, and Central America” following the word “America.” The motion was NOT SUPPORTED.)

(A motion was made to amend R-1 by inserting in the imagine section the words “throughout the U.S., Canada, and the world” following the word “America.” The motion was NOT SUPPORTED.)

(A motion was made to amend R-1 in the next to last paragraph by inserting the words “by the saving grace of Jesus Christ” following the word “transformed.” The motion was NOT SUPPORTED.)

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by deleting the sentence “We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business” following the words “biblical reflection” and inserting the sentence “We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business” as a separate, one sentence, final paragraph at the very end of the mission/vision statement. The motion LOST.)

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by deleting the sentence “We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business” following the words “biblical reflection.” The motion LOST.)

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by deleting the sentence “We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business” following the words “biblical reflection” and inserting the sentence “Let us do the age-old great commission in the new way for the new day!” The motion LOST.)

With the adoption of the above mission/vision statement, the task of long-range and strategic planning for GSC will now enter a phase in which the primary focus is directed on implementation and evaluation. During this phase the work of discernment and visioning on behalf of the General Synod, the classes, and the congregations of the Reformed Church in America will continue for GSC. (See the Report of the General Secretary for further comment and recommendations on the RCA mission/vision statement guiding the mission and ministry of the RCA into the twenty-first century.)

REVIEW PROCESS FOR GENERAL SYNOD OPERATIONAL BUDGET

In March 1995 the General Synod Council requested its Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee to develop a deliberate review process for the continuation, discontinuation, or revision of each part of the General Synod budget supported by assessments. The 1995 General Synod affirmed GSC for taking this initiative and requested
GSC to present a full report on the review process to the 1996 General Synod (*MGS 1995, R-5*, pp. 348-49). A full report on the review process was then presented to the 1996 General Synod (*MGS 1996*, pp. 387-90). At its October 1996 meeting, GSC approved the inclusion of this review process in its GSC *Handbook* and began implementation of the process in November 1996. The review process is:

**Review Process for the General Synod Operational Budget**

(Assessments)

**A. Annual Review Process for Already-Approved Assessment Budget**

1. Annually, at the fall meeting of the General Synod Council, unit directors shall review with their committees the projected expenditures for the assessment budget already approved by General Synod for the upcoming budget year. Any modifications anticipated because of staffing changes, realignments of portfolios, or changes in program and mission that affect the assessment budget shall be reported by the unit directors to the treasurer and to the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services by November 1.

   a. If adjustments can be managed within the assessment amount already approved by the General Synod, the treasurer shall report the adjustments in the expense budget from assessments to the general secretary and unit directors.

   b. If, in the judgment of the RCA’s treasurer and the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, the anticipated adjustments cannot be managed within the assessment budget approved by the General Synod, they shall advise the general secretary and shall request that the unit expense budgets from assessments be placed on the agenda for discussion and decision for the November meeting of the Administrative Council.

   c. The general secretary and unit directors shall determine the expense reductions that shall need to be implemented prior to the start of the new budget year so that expenses to the assessment budget do not exceed anticipated revenue.

**B. Annual Review Process for the New Budget Planning Cycle**

1. Annually, at the fall meeting of the General Synod Council, unit directors shall review with their respective committees the anticipated expenditures from the assessment budget for the next budget planning cycle (the budget planning cycle that gets underway in December/January for the following budget year). Unit directors and GSC committees shall consider mission and ministry programs that are in place, new programs slated for implementation, General Synod referrals that will require staff time and budget expense, and other initiatives (theme programs, special events, etc.) that will impact staffing and programmatic costs.

2. As part of the process outlined in number 1 above, unit directors and GSC committees shall consider on a regular review cycle (three to five years) all of the programs and projects carried out through a unit, and the staff assignments/administrative allocations from assessments for these programs. Unit directors and GSC committees shall consider if and how the program and staff/administrative assignments are fulfilling current and/or anticipated mission and ministry priorities for the church. Unit directors and GSC committees are responsible to plan for the orderly phasing out or redesign of obsolete programs, projects, and administrative functions, and to use this review process as a means to evaluate staff assignments and position descriptions.
3. Annually, by December 15, the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services and the RCA treasurer shall meet with each of the directors of GSC units receiving assessment funds to review assessment needs for the next budget planning cycle. (By December 15, 1995, for example, there was a review of anticipated assessment requests for the budget year beginning January 1, 1997.) The conference with each unit director shall include a review of staffing, administrative, and program needs in order to meet present ministry objectives; to respond effectively to General Synod referrals; and to participate effectively in cooperative work with regions, classes, ecumenical partnerships, and other GSC staff. Programs, projects, and administrative functions subject to discontinuation or redesign shall also be reviewed.

4. Annually, prior to the staff budget meeting (February), unit directors with responsibility for budgets funded with assessment income shall meet with the general secretary, the treasurer, and the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services. They shall:

   a. Review the needs anticipated by GSC units and project the assessment income that will be available to support the budget in the following year.

   b. Review the proposed use of assessment resources to support ongoing and developing ministry, mission, and administration; and to assist with the orderly redesign or phaseout of current programs, projects, or administrative functions.

   c. Reach consensus on the use of assessment revenue in the next budget planning cycle.

5. Unit directors shall communicate with staff in their units no later than the annual staff budget meeting (February) what the anticipated assessment allocation will be for the next budget cycle, and shall advise their staff to plan expense budgets for program and administrative accordingly.

6. The director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services shall report annually through the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee at the spring GSC meeting on the projected use of the assessment for the General Synod Operational Budget for the next budget cycle. The report shall include information about plans for the orderly phasing out or redesign to meet present and future needs of the RCA’s ministry and mission programs and projects, and administrative functions funded through the General Synod Operational Budget (MGS 1996, pp. 387-90).

In its report to the 1996 General Synod, GSC noted that “significant reductions were made in several ongoing operations after an evaluation of spending trends and actual costs assigned to accounts in prior years” (MGS 1996, p. 390). GSC also noted staff anticipated “full implementation of parts A and B by fall 1996” (MGS 1996, p. 390).

The full review process was implemented in the fall of 1996. Using the review process has resulted in the following: 1) a realignment of RCA staff within the administrative and information systems, 2) significant changes in the denomination’s records management and archival programs, and 3) a reduction in the number of meeting days for the 1998 General Synod. (GSC, at its April 1997 meeting, also reviewed a proposal to reduce the number of GSC meetings per year from three to two. Using the annual review process, this proposal will be considered again at a future GSC meeting.)
In the administrative area, GSC affirmed the projections of RCA staff that significant savings in the cost of meetings and associated travel will be realized in 1997 by the consolidation of all meeting and planning functions for General Synod, General Synod Council, commissions, task forces, and other committees and staff meetings being coordinated by one person in the Office of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services. This change was implemented in December 1996.

The relative success of the review process for the General Synod operational (assessment) budget will become apparent when the 1997 General Synod reviews and adopts the proposed 1998 assessment budget. The proposed 1998 assessment budget (prepared by GSC at its April 1997 meeting) reflects an increase of approximately 3 percent while the average costs for items in the operational budget (paid by assessments) continue to rise at a rate of approximately 5 percent annually. The majority of these cost increases are fixed charges for items such as employee benefits, utilities, rents, office supplies, and travel. As for staffing, there is an ongoing realignment of staff positions, but staffing levels remain constant. Salaries and wages are monitored closely and are held within projected cost of living adjustments.

The above “B-2” of the review process moves beyond the assessment portion of the budget into the mission budget of the RCA. Using the review process in this mission area, even in its initial implementation, was helpful. Using the review process, the GSC Congregational Services Committee implemented significant changes in the denomination’s youth ministry program. Using the review process, the GSC Evangelism and Church Development Services Committee proposed significant changes to give greater focus to new church development and church revitalization, and to also sustain support for evangelism in existing RCA congregations.

The review process, integrated with the implementation phases of the strategic and long-range planning initiatives presented in the reports of the president and general secretary to this 1997 General Synod, will continue to effectively monitor the assessment amounts in upcoming years.

DENOMINATIONAL STAFF OFFICES

In 1978 the RCA initiated a plan to deploy its denominational staff into regional offices across the RCA in order for staff to be more responsive and accessible to the majority of RCA congregations. Denominational staff were deployed to offices from New York to California, serving alongside regional synod staff. In the early 1980s however, during a period of program and staff reduction, some regional denominational staff offices were closed and others experienced significant reductions in staff.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, deployment of denominational staff resumed with the reopening of the offices of education and evangelism in the Midwest. There was also a decision to consolidate print production, distribution, and audio and video resource development into an office in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area.

By 1997 the administrative work of the three GSC program committee/units (Congregational Services, Evangelism and Church Development Services, and Mission Services) are located in offices in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Lansing, Illinois; and Orange City, Iowa. Distribution and production services, the Church Herald, and Reformed Church Women’s Ministries are located in the RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids. Administrative offices of the General Synod and the General Synod Council, communications, stewardship, personnel (including insurance and pensions), finance, and two racial/ethnic council offices are located in the Interchurch Center in New York City.
At its April 1997 meeting, GSC approved a plan to consolidate into one location in the area of Los Angeles, California, a West Coast RCA regional office. This office will include denominational staff from the General Synod Council, staff of the Regional Synod of the Far West, staff of the Classis of California, and staff of the Theological Education Agency. This West Coast RCA regional office will reduce the operating costs of all four of these entities and will provide for the RCA a useful and very accessible meeting space in a key region for church growth and revitalization. In January 1997 GSC transferred the Office of Evangelism and Church Development Services, and its director, the Rev. Bruce Laverman, to the West Coast. Nola Aalberts, a Mission Services staff person, also is located on the West Coast. The secretary for General Synod operations, the Rev. David Schreuder, divides his time between the RCA office in New York City and the West Coast. The new facility will also contain a guest office for denominational staff needing a place to work when they are on the West Coast.

Also at its April 1997 meeting, GSC affirmed steps initiated by GSC staff and the Regional Synod of Mid-America staff to establish a joint committee to locate a more suitable office site in the Chicago, Illinois, metropolitan area for denominational and regional synod staff. GSC and the Regional Synod of Mid-America have affirmed their commitment to continuing to serve the RCA from shared office facilities. It is their hope to find a more suitable location to better serve the ministry needs of RCA congregations throughout this region of the RCA, and also to provide a more adequate and centralized meeting location for denomination and staff, including meetings of GSC, commissions, task forces, etc. GSC is also committed to locating additional denominational staff in the new office in the metropolitan Chicago area. No specific office location has been identified at this time.

GSC also endorsed a plan to consolidate RCA office space on the eighteenth floor of the Interchurch Center (475 Riverside Drive) in New York City. Existing unoccupied offices and offices used only on a part-time basis will be released permanently. Space formerly needed for print production (now done at the RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids) will be redesigned to accommodate present staffing needs. The space reduction will further reduce the long-term administrative costs of the denomination while sustaining a strong denominational center accessible to the large concentration of RCA congregations in the metropolitan New York City area.

Taken together, these offices will provide strong denominational regional centers in areas of present RCA congregational strength. These RCA offices will also be located in key areas of predicted population expansion in the northeastern corridor, the Chicago/Great Lakes area, and the West Coast region into the twenty-first century.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS/COMPUTER OPERATIONS

Regardless of its mission, business, or product, no organization operating at the end of the twentieth century can ignore the importance of its electronic information and communications systems for sustaining required administrative tasks and for carrying out its work with those it seeks to support and serve. The Reformed Church in America has recognized for many years the important role that information systems and computer operations play in its ongoing life and mission. From the mundane but critical tasks of processing financial data and keeping track of mission commitments to the processing of RCA Distribution Center orders, TRAVARCA rentals, and the maintenance of names and addresses for mailing the Church Herald, the RCA information systems and computer operations office is a vital and essential link in the life and mission of the RCA.

In mid-1996 the RCA Office of Information Systems and the RCA Office of Communications teamed together to launch the RCA web site. The RCA web site was introduced by the general secretary at the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 54-55). During the past year,
this web site has continued to be developed and expanded. Using the RCA web site, it is now possible for RCA members and others to learn about RCA beliefs and current RCA mission work, programs, and resources. Using the RCA web site, it is also possible to communicate directly with RCA staff and other key RCA leaders. Plans are being implemented now to provide to every RCA congregation, classis, and regional synod "customized" space on the RCA web site in which to insert weekly worship and program information. Within the upcoming year, it may also become possible on the RCA web site to register for meetings such as General Synod; to complete, transmit, and recover information from consistorial reports and minister or church profiles; and to order resources. (The RCA's Internet address is http://www.rca.org.)

In April 1997, the information systems staff completed a twelve-month redesign and reprogramming of the "often-complained-about" name and address data base of the RCA. This redesign and reprogramming will improve accuracy in mailings and will reduce the mailing and distribution costs for RCA mission and program offices, including Church Herald mailings. This project is also the foundation of other projects. One of these projects is the design and implementation of a new contribution management program for individual contributors and for RCA congregations. This project will vastly improve the ability of the RCA to provide receipts promptly and accurately.

In order to carry out these and other anticipated projects that will enhance the RCA's ability to support the work of its congregations and its mission worldwide, responsibility for the Information Systems department was transferred from GSC Finance Services to GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services. The department is now directly responsible to the administrative center of the RCA and is supervised by the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services. The department also now works directly alongside the operations of the Office of the General Synod and the General Synod Council.

The department also is undergoing a complete redeployment of responsibilities within its staff and is experiencing significant staff changes. GSC, at its January 1997 meeting, adopted a plan to move away from a brief experiment in leadership under codirectors who shared technical and program development and all new project management responsibilities. Instead, GSC approved position descriptions that allow present staff to give primary focus to technical and programming aspects and to emerging electronic communications functions. GSC then approved a position description for a full-time manager of information systems who will coordinate and supervise information systems staff and help GSC plan and implement longer-term information systems development needs. The information systems staff that numbered six in the spring of 1996 was reduced to three by the fall of 1996, through one retirement, one resignation, and one termination. It is anticipated that by the time the 1997 General Synod meets, a new manager of information systems will have been appointed. Current staff vacancies within the department will not be filled until the manager has had time to assess the long-term information systems needs of the RCA.
Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The general secretary received two formal letters of appeal. Received on May 26, 1997, was an appeal of a decision made by the Regional Synod of Mid-America concerning a decision of the Classis of Chicago not to sponsor a ministry at O'Hare airport near Chicago, Illinois. Received on June 6, 1997, was an appeal of a decision made by the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes concerning a decision of the Classis of Southwest Michigan to admonish and rebuke one of its pastors.

The Book of Church Order (BCO) states:

If less than thirty days remain before the next regular session of the judicatory to which the committee is to report and the committee determines that it is unable to prepare an acceptable report, it shall immediately record this determination and the reasons therefor with the clerk of such judicatory and request permission to delay its report until the next session. The clerk shall promptly confer with the officers of the judicatory who shall promptly rule upon the request (BCO, Chapter 2, Part II, Article 3, Section 3).

The Commission on Judicial Business requested a delay not to present a report to this 1997 General Synod due to its inability to meet and prepare a report on these two appeals in such a short amount of time prior to the 1997 General Synod meeting. The general secretary conferred with the officers of the General Synod on June 14, 1997, and the officers ruled to grant this delay.

The Commission on Judicial Business scheduled a July 8, 1997, telephone conference call to begin its work on these two appeals. A report from the Commission on Judicial Business on these two appeals will be presented at the 1998 General Synod meeting.
REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN ACTION

Report of the Commission on Christian Action


GAMBLING: A PERSVATIVE BLIGHT ON SOCIETY

In 1976 and 1981 General Synod called on the church to oppose state lotteries and casino gambling (MGS 1976, R-6, p. 187; MGS 1981, R-4, p. 65). Since then, opportunities to participate in gambling have increased exponentially, and the moral and economic costs to society have proliferated. Gambling has become an addictive and detrimental part of this culture, as people seek easy answers and easy money instead of hard work and community responsibility. Too many individuals and too many governments have become addicted to the false promises of gambling. It is time to renew the call for RCA congregations and individuals to work against this scourge of society.

Legalized gambling is a major growth industry in the United States and in Canada. When General Synod last spoke on this issue, only New Jersey and Nevada were active in the industry. But in 1994, U.S. citizens gambled away $482 billion, compared with $17.4 billion in 1974. Canadian citizens spent more than $20 billion in 1995. All states except Hawaii and Utah now have some form of legalized gambling. Twenty-three states permit casino gambling, and thirty-seven states have lotteries; several others have authorized riverboat gaming and betting on horse and dog races. Just over half of the Native American reservations in the United States have casinos, which bring in nearly $1.5 billion per year. Canadian provincial governments offer lotteries with sales exceeding $5 billion per year, and in 1995 the Canadian government netted $4.6 billion in gambling revenues.

In the early years the primary role of the government was to regulate this small industry. Now, however, government is more likely to act as promoter than as regulator. For example, in 1994 the government-run and government-supported state lotteries in the United States spent $350 million in advertisements to entice consumers to fatten the coffers of the gambling industry and the state governments.

Why should the RCA speak out on this issue? Previous statements by General Synod point to the inconsistencies between gambling and the biblical message. Gambling distorts one’s view of the sovereignty and providence of God, it encourages greed and covetousness, it reflects a deficient perspective on work, and it promotes poor stewardship of resources.

Furthermore, gambling has devastating societal impacts. It is a cruel and regressive tax whose burden falls disproportionately on low-income families. When governments and culture promote gambling, the biblical call for justice is undermined. Various reports indicate there may be eight million compulsive or problem gamblers in the United States, including nearly one million teenagers. Estimates in Canada range from six hundred thousand to 1.2 million problem gamblers. In Iowa, 1.7 percent of adults reported a gambling problem in 1989 before the state approved riverboat casinos; in 1995 that number had jumped to 5.4 percent, an increase exceeding 300 percent. Problem gamblers have higher rates of criminal activity. Deadwood, South Dakota, for example, reported a 162 percent increase in criminal cases in the two years following the approval of gambling.

State, provincial, and local governments, like substance abusers, have become addicted to gambling revenues. Beginning with promises to use this revenue for noble purposes like
education, governments have had to commit increasing portions of their revenues for
advertisements to lure more gamblers, for additional law enforcement, and for dealing with
the family, workplace, and community consequences of compulsive gambling. Some states
also promised that gambling revenues would allow cuts in other taxes; this could result in
an even more regressive revenue base. Using ignoble means to achieve noble ends is not a
proper ethic for individuals or for governments.

Through the persistent work of many individuals, groups, and churches (including the
Reformed Church in America), the 104th U.S. Congress approved the establishment of the
National Gambling Impact Study Commission. The gambling industry led a mighty effort
to block this commission, and it will no doubt try to influence the commission’s work. The
RCA must call on this commission to carry out its work honestly. And the RCA must call
on governments at all levels to have the courage to address the societal consequences of this
dangerous form of entertainment and revenue.

The Reformed Church in America, its congregations, and its members must continue to work
actively to root out this societal blight. The RCA must oppose the expansion of gambling
opportunities, and the RCA must support efforts to eradicate this governmental and
individual addiction. The RCA must become aware of the extent to which personal and
corporate investments rely on and benefit from gambling. The RCA must reach out to meet
the needs of compulsive gamblers and their families. Finally, the RCA must offer a message
to society that hope comes not through games of chance or luck but through the grace and
mercy of our sovereign God.

R-1.
To instruct the general secretary and encourage regional synods,
classes, and RCA congregations to write letters to national,
provincial, state, and local officials in support of public policies
that restrict gambling opportunities and in opposition to the
further expansion of gambling in this society. (ADOPTED)

R-2.
To establish a Reformed Church in America policy that prohibits
the investment of denominational funds in gambling-related
companies; and further,

to instruct the general secretary to initiate a thorough review of the
Reformed Church in America investment portfolios whose
management is accountable to General Synod; and further,

to urge all RCA institutions, assemblies, congregations, and members
to review their own investment portfolios to achieve consistency
with this policy. (ADOPTED)

➢ The advisory committee recommended to amend R-3:

R-3.
To instruct the Office of Social Witness to keep the issue of
gambling and its negative social consequences before the RCA; and
further,

to instruct the Office of Social Witness to assist the RCA in
identifying the nature and extent of involvement in gambling of
investment opportunities that rely on gambling; and further,
to instruct the Office of Social Witness to continue to identify opportunities for RCA congregations and members to be involved in this area of public policy. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: To be fully informed, RCA members need to know how and to what extent corporations are involved in the gambling industry.<

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-4:

R-4.
To call upon RCA congregations to become educated to the issues surrounding gambling as a matter of Christian stewardship and to pray for, love, and support their members who are struggling with a gambling problem; and further,

to call upon RCA congregations to recognize that these members and their families need to be surrounded by individuals who care about them and who can offer assistance by: 1) directing them to support groups such as Gamblers Anonymous, 2) making sure the basic needs of the family are being met, and 3) encouraging the entire family to be an active part of the church body. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: Gambling raises serious stewardship issues. RCA congregations must be aware of these issues in order to effectively minister to their members, especially those who are struggling with gambling problems.<

CARING FOR CREATION: THE CHURCH AND PAPER USE


The church’s care for the earth and its concern over environmental peril needs to be global... The life-sustaining resources of creation are in peril throughout the globe. The massive consumption of our own affluent societies is severely straining the resources of the earth... We can begin caring for the earth, then, only from a posture of repentance. The restoration of God’s shalom for all of creation requires changes in our attitudes, in our values, and in our lives. If Christ’s work of redemption extends not only to us, but to all creation, then both we and the Christian fellowships to which we belong should begin to demonstrate redeemed relationships to the earth’s resources, and a commitment that they be shared justly with all people (MGS 1982, pp. 69-70).

One area where the church can begin to demonstrate a redeemed relationship to creation is in its use of paper. Both the volume of paper consumed, with the resultant depletion of the earth’s forests, and some paper manufacturing processes that produce toxic by-products, are concerns the church can address.

PAPER CONSUMPTION

Paper production has grown rapidly throughout the twentieth century, increasing its output twentyfold since 1913. Ironically, office automation has also driven growth of paper

*Addition is in light-face type.
consumption. As of 1992, for example, the world had more than nineteen million photocopiers, devices only introduced in 1948. Since 1955 world consumption of printing and writing paper, including photocopying paper, has increased sevenfold. In the United States alone, the spread of office printers, photocopiers, and fax machines spurred a near doubling of office paper consumption during the 1980s.\(^1\)

The U.S. consumes twice as much wood as other industrial countries, the equivalent of one mature tree per person per year.\(^2\) A large portion (28 percent to 40 percent) of timber supplies are used for paper production.\(^3\) The average American consumes 681 pounds of paper each year; 10,000 sheets of paper are consumed annually by the typical U.S. office worker; and 12,430 square miles of forest are harvested for U.S. pulp mills each year.\(^5\) Every year 350 million trees are cut down to make office paper.\(^6\)

Although less than 10 percent of the U.S. old-growth forests remain, they supply 15 percent of the nation's lumber and 5 percent of its paper.\(^7\) Some companies are involved in the harvesting of old-growth forests, while others are using clearcutting. Clearcutting is cheaper than selective harvesting, but it tends to reduce a once diverse living environment to a monoculture where few species can survive, and it causes soil erosion and sediment water pollution.

**PAPER PRODUCTION**

The pulp and paper industry is also a heavy user of energy and water, as well as being a major source of toxic water pollutants such as dioxin. Dioxin is the most toxic man-made substance known to science. The Environmental Protection Agency has called dioxin "the most potent carcinogen ever tested on lab animals."\(^8\) It has been the culprit in many of the worst environmental disasters, including those at Times Beach, Missouri; Love Canal, New York; and Seveso, Italy. During the Vietnam War it was known as "Agent Orange."

Dioxin is one of a larger class of compounds known as organochlorines. Organochlorines are formed when chlorine binds with carbon in organic (carbon-containing) matter in reactive environments such as industrial production processes or incinerators. Organochlorines tend to be very long-lived in the environment, and are also toxic, even in very small quantities. They tend to bioaccumulate in the fatty tissue of living organisms.

Unlike some eleven thousand other organochlorines that are intentionally manufactured for commercial sale by the world's chemical industry, dioxin is produced only as a by-product of many chemical, manufacturing, and combustion processes. Any use of chlorine in industrial processes, including incineration, chemical and plastic manufacturing, paper and pulp bleaching, or burning hazardous waste in cement kilns, results in dioxin formation.

It is only because the chlorine chemistry and its products have become so widespread that dioxin formation has become ubiquitous over the last fifty years. Virtually all chlorine-related products and processes are associated with dioxin formation at some point in their life cycle.

The three major sources of dioxin are incineration, pulp and paper manufacturing, and PVC plastic. Pulp and paper mills form and release dioxin when they use chlorine gas and other chlorinated chemicals to bleach wood pulp white. This makes the paper industry the largest source of dioxin discharges directly into waterways and one of the largest dioxin-producing sectors overall.

Human exposure to dioxin occurs through diet, with foods from animals being the predominant pathway. Over 90 percent of the persistent organochlorines people ingest come from the food they eat. Because these chemicals are stored in body fat and build up through
the food chain, the highest levels in food are found in meats, fish, and dairy products. One expert estimates that the average daily intake of dioxin is "at least fifty times greater than what EPA estimates is a virtually safe dose of dioxin." People with the highest exposures eat more fish, live near a dioxin source, or eat food produced near a dioxin source. Children are at greatest risk because their bodies are smaller in proportion to the level of dioxin exposure.

In 1994 the Environmental Protection Agency released a six-volume, twenty-four-hundred-page report, *Dioxin Reassessment*. This report states that levels of dioxin currently existing in humans have reached a body burden (level of dioxin in the human body) that may cause such adverse health effects as cancer, reproductive and hormonal disruptions, birth defects, impaired child development, diabetes, altered male sexual behavior, and immune system suppression.¹⁰

The forest products industry is sufficiently concerned that it has reduced dioxin contamination by as much as 70 per cent since a link between dioxin and paper bleaching was identified in the late 1980s. However, serious incidents of dioxin release continue to cast a shadow on such claims. In late 1990, for example, the EPA claimed that consumption of fish taken downstream from one of four Weyerhauser mills (the third largest company in the industry in sales revenues) posed a lifetime cancer risk greater than one in ten thousand. The EPA felt this risk serious enough to recommend that an advisory be put in place to avoid consumption of the fish. Weyerhauser plants located in Canada made local health authorities issue similar warnings about eating fish caught downriver from the plants. These dioxin problems are typical of the industry.¹¹

Maureen Smith, a researcher at the University of California/Los Angeles, recently compared the virgin and recycled paper industries by studying data from the U.S. government's Toxics Release Inventory. She found that switching from virgin to recycled newsprint tends to result in a 99 per cent decrease in the amount of ammonia and chlorine released into the environment. The sludges that result from de-inking processes at recycled newsprint facilities have so far been fairly toxic—but only because so many printers are still using toxic inks. These inks could be replaced with other inks that are ecologically safe, widely available, and competitively priced.¹²

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW BEHAVIORS

Part of the answer to reducing the environmental costs of paper production and consumption lies in alternative technologies. Many grades of recycled paper are now available, as are bleaching processes which reduce or eliminate dioxin emissions, printing processes which use soy-based and other less toxic inks, and "tree-free" paper made from kenaf, hemp, or agri-pulp.

But alternative technologies are only part of the solution. Caring for creation also requires people to change their behavior, particularly their patterns and levels of consumption. People can begin by becoming knowledgeable about which companies are engaged in harmful logging and paper manufacturing practices, by reducing use of paper, by using postconsumer recycled, nonbleached paper, and by recycling paper whenever possible. Eliminating dioxin emissions and reducing the environmentally harmful logging of forests requires use of unbleached paper and recycled paper. Ultimately, the answer is for everyone—industry, the government, businesses, the church, and private individuals—to change their taste for clean white paper.

If, as the report to the 1982 General Synod stated, "The restoration of God's shalom for all of creation requires changes in our attitudes, in our values, and in our lives" (*MGS 1982*, p. 70), then it is essential that these changes become part of the life and ministry of the
church. In congregations, offices, homes, and workplaces people must begin to model a redeemed relationship to creation. In terms of paper use, this may mean such mundane and everyday practices as seeking to reduce the volume of junk mail, refusing to purchase products with excess packaging, making greater use of electronic communications, photocopying both sides of paper, making use of postconsumer waste, recycled, unbleached or treefree paper whenever possible, using nontoxic inks, recycling paper and paper packaging as much as possible, or instituting an annual “paper free” day in offices and homes. The commission realizes many of these practices seem small, inconsequential, or irritating. However, as author/farmer Wendell Berry notes, it is the accumulation of such small tasks that will make the difference. He further states:

The real work of planet-saving will be small, humble, and humbling, and (insofar as it involves love) pleasing and rewarding. Its jobs will be too many to count, too many to report, too many to be publicly noticed or rewarded, too small to make anyone rich or famous.13

ENDNOTES:


3 Ibid.


7 Bielski, V., op. cit.

8 Barry, J.B., op. cit.


10 Bhagat, S., op. cit.


The advisory committee recommended to amend R-5:

R-5.
To direct the RCA Distribution Center, denominational offices, and staff to decrease the use of paper, by including:

1. Using recycled, reclaimed, or tree-free paper that is dioxin-free with non-chlorine bleach whenever practicable and possible—including printing, duplicating, correspondence, and other uses of paper.

2. Using both sides of the page for duplicating whenever feasible.

3. Seeking suppliers of soy ink or similar inks of low environmental impact for use whenever practicable and possible.

4. Using electronic technology whenever practicable and possible. *(ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-6:

R-6.
To encourage RCA institutions, congregations, classes, and regional synods to reduce paper consumption and reduce the environmental consequences of paper use, by including:

1. Using recycled, reclaimed, or tree-free paper that is dioxin-free with non-chlorine bleach whenever practicable and possible—including printing, duplicating, correspondence, and other uses of paper.

2. Using both sides of the page for duplicating whenever feasible.

3. Seeking suppliers of soy ink or similar inks of low environmental impact for use whenever practicable and possible.

4. Using electronic technology whenever practicable and possible. *(ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

R-7.
To instruct the Office of Social Witness to continue to provide study material on lifestyles and the environment; and further,

to instruct the Office of Social Witness to assist the Reformed Church in America to explore ways of making these environmental concerns part of its life of witness and worship. *(ADOPTED)*

WELFARE REFORM ALERT

The Personal Responsibility and Work Act (PL 104-193) passed in 1996 ends welfare as previously known. This legislation has far-reaching consequences that are devastating for many who are poor, many of whom are children. This so-called reform comes at a time when poverty among children is increasing. The act eliminates a federal guarantee of cash assistance to all eligible low-income mothers and children. As a result it is estimated that nearly 2.6 million people, including 1.1 million children, will be added to the poverty rolls.

*Additions are in light-face type.*
Over a period of six years, federal spending will be cut by $55 billion, and an additional $40 billion of state funds will be slashed from welfare programs.

Able-bodied recipients are required to work after two years, or else they are cut from the program. Very little account was taken of the lack of training programs and a tight job market. The new law requires 25 percent of a state's welfare caseload must be working by 1997, and 50 percent must be working by 2002. While the underlying principle of the act is to get welfare recipients into the workforce, no comprehensive job-creation plan was passed by Congress. After receiving welfare for five years, most individuals and families will be taken off the welfare rolls forever.

States can even impose a shorter time limit for benefits. States also have the option to deny cash assistance to unwed mothers under the age of eighteen. States may also deny benefits to children born to a parent receiving assistance at the time of birth. Medicaid will be denied to adults who are removed from the welfare rolls because they did not meet the work requirements. Food stamp benefits for all recipients will be cut by almost 20 percent by the year 2002. The act prohibits adults willing to work, but unable to find jobs, from receiving food stamps for more than three months in a three-year period if they do not work; women, children, the elderly, and the disabled will also be denied food stamps.

The new welfare law creates a new definition of “childhood disability,” stipulating that a medically proven physical or mental disability is necessary before a child can qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that three hundred thousand low-income children who were disabled under the old definition will be removed. CBO estimates that roughly forty thousand to fifty thousand of these children will also lose Medicaid.

Poor legal and illegal immigrants are denied various social services. The new act does not provide SSI or food stamps for most noncitizens. States now have discretion to revoke cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and Medicaid for legal immigrants who currently receive these benefits. Legal immigrants who currently receive SSI will lose their benefits at the time of their next recertification. Generally, noncitizens, except for refugees and asylum-seekers who arrived in the U.S. after the August 22, 1996, enactment date, are denied nearly all forms of aid.

The church's responsibility for advocating and caring for the poor is clear. All Christians are called upon to serve those among them who are in distress and need, but this is especially the ministry of the diaconate. The Book of Church Order states:

The board of deacons shall serve those in distress and need. The deacons shall minister to the sick, the poor, the hurt, and the helpless, shall aid the victims of the world's abuse, and shall express the social concerns of the church (BCO, Part I, Article 6, Section 2).

Commenting on John Calvin's theology, John deGruchy states:

The church had a diaconal responsibility to ensure that the poor and needy, the old and infirm, widows and orphans, and exiles and refugees were cared for and the young educated. Moreover, the church had an important role to play in helping to shape public policy, not least that of ensuring a just distribution of wealth. Calvin himself was deeply concerned about and involved in the economic and labor issues affecting society, adopting a position we would today refer to as a "mixed economy" in which there is scope for individual initiative as well as state intervention and control. Calvin would have supported the redistribution of wealth, not through revolutionary upheaval but through a system of taxation that favored social victims and the poor. The church's diaconal responsibility was not intended, then, to let the state off the hook; on the
contrary, the proclamation of the gospel and the commandment of God within the public sphere was intended to remind those in authority about their responsibility under God to those in their political care.

Central to this responsibility, and thus the substance of many of Calvin's sermons, was the conviction that a just and well-regulated government will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor and afflicted. Calvin stressed the responsibility those in authority have for the powerless and especially the poor in society. But he also insisted on the need for the church to speak out clearly on their behalf in protest against injustice done to them (John deGruchy, Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 250-251).

The Reformed Church in America has earnestly strived to meet this responsibility. The Commission on Christian Action submitted to the 1984 General Synod a paper on poverty and economic inequality that was approved for distribution to congregations (MGS 1984, R-1, p. 67). This paper, "Biblical Faith and Our Economic Life" (MGS 1984, pp. 51-68), dealt with economic inequality in the light of biblical teachings, and asserted that Reformed Christians could not simply accept as the guide in economic life the theories and practices of the American way of life which have resulted in great affluence for some and terrible poverty for others. Among the actions taken by the 1984 General Synod was a vote to:

- direct the General Program Council to consider the design and implementation of a three-year plan for Reformed Church in America churches whereby they may give substantially by means of additional offerings to the needs of the poor and the oppressed of this world (MGS 1984, p. 68).

A paper called "The Working Poor" was submitted to the 1989 General Synod. The paper called upon government, business, labor, and communities to join together to explore new ways of creating economic conditions in which people can live and work for wages that support themselves and their families (MGS 1989, pp. 64-68). This paper was a revision of a paper first submitted to the 1987 General Synod by the Commission on Christian Action (MGS 1987, pp. 63-66). The 1989 General Synod adopted recommendations that encouraged RCA churches to support an increase in the minimum wage (MGS 1989, R-2, p. 67); support expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (MGS 1989, R-4, p. 67); support local, state, and federal job-creation efforts (MGS 1989, R-7, p. 68); and design strategies to confront local, state, federal, and multinational powers with their responsibility to ensure economic justice and mercy (MGS 1989, R-8, p. 68).

The 1990 General Synod received a paper from the Commission on Christian Action that focused attention on the broader issues of economic justice and mercy in international, national, and local communities. This paper, "The Two-Tiered Society: Inequality and the Ascendancy of Capitalism" (MGS 1990, pp. 65-72), examined some aspects of capitalism and the inevitable inequalities that it produces. The 1990 General Synod voted to instruct the minister for social witness to organize regional conferences during 1991 that would focus attention on the issues of economic justice and mercy, and these conferences would develop action agendas to be presented to the 1992 General Synod (MGS 1990, R-2, p. 72).

The action agenda (MGS 1992, pp. 119-22) endorsed by the 1992 General Synod for study and use in the RCA (MGS 1992, R-8, p. 122) focused on three areas of the church's ministry with the poor: 1) Koinonia (the church as a caring community), 2) Diakonia (the church's ministry of service), and 3) Kerygma (the church's proclamation). As members of a caring community, church members were encouraged toward sacrificial giving beyond the tithe and were urged to adopt simpler lifestyles (MGS 1992, p. 121). Action agenda items for the church's diaconal ministry included encouraging each church to strive toward committing
at least one-half of its budget for ministries outside its own congregation, including a substantial portion for ministries to the needy in its own community, and encouraging each congregation to join or create an ecumenical network for ministry to the needy in their community (MGS 1992, p. 121). The church's ministry of proclamation included not only sharing the good news of the gospel with the poor, but also preaching biblical messages about the spiritual dangers of wealth and encouraging RCA members to write government leaders urging a strengthening of the social safety net for those who are poor (MGS 1992, p. 122).

In response, the 1992 General Synod voted:

To instruct the minister for social witness to provide resources that will assist congregations in implementing appropriate portions of this action agenda in their own communities” (MGS 1992, R-9, p. 123).

The 1995 General Synod took steps to urge the government to maintain the “social safety net” beneath the poor by voting to encourage RCA members in the U.S. to write their elected officials, urging them to oppose funding cuts for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) feeding program and cuts in school lunches (MGS 1995, R-13, p. 100).

The Commission on Christian Action presented a paper, “Welfare Reform,” to the 1995 General Synod (MGS 1995, pp. 71-81). The paper discussed the biblical approach to responding to poverty and noted:

Every society is plagued by poverty...[but] far from giving an excuse for throwing our hands up in the air over perpetual problems of poverty, the Scriptures insist the presence of poor people in one’s midst is always a challenge to Christian mercy and a test of social justice (MGS 1995, p. 73).

The paper further asserted:

Government does not exist only to restrain evil, to keep order, and to respond to emergencies. A biblical vision of government’s role is to remind people that it also exists to enable a social community to act together on behalf of human well-being (MGS 1995, p. 75).

The paper then stated: “Instead of just monetary aid, the poor need a more broadly based and multifaceted network of support” (MGS 1995, p. 76).

In response the 1995 General Synod voted to instruct the Office of Social Witness to keep the concerns and issues raised in the paper before the Reformed Church in America (MGS 1995, R-4, p. 81), and to instruct the general secretary to write to executive and legislative leaders in order to call attention to the principles of concern elaborated in this paper (MGS 1995, R-5, p. 81).

In light of the new welfare reform laws, the Commission on Christian Action calls upon the 1997 General Synod once again to take up the gauntlet for the poor.

R-8.
To encourage local RCA diaconal ministries to cooperate with local agencies and congregations in meeting the needs of those who may be most severely affected by welfare reform; and further,

to request the RCA diaconates to monitor the impact of the new welfare reform law on the poor in their communities; and further,

to request the RCA diaconates to communicate this information to the RCA Office of Social Witness. (ADOPTED)
R-9.
To instruct the Office of Social Witness to disseminate information regarding the effects of the new welfare reform legislation to RCA congregations; and further,

to instruct the Office of Social Witness to cooperate with other U.S. groups that are actively involved in addressing the issue of welfare reform. (ADOPTED)

R-10.
To instruct the Commission on Christian Action to prepare a paper on the effects of welfare reform, addressing how the church can respond most effectively to new welfare reform laws, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

R-11.
To urge RCA members to write to state legislators and governors, advocating that states develop welfare policies that:

1. Ensure that all eligible people, particularly children, receive assistance. State plans should assure that families qualifying for assistance receive it and are not turned away or placed on waiting lists. When necessary, a state should provide state funds to protect those people denied federally funded benefits.

2. Provide adequate benefits. States should define minimum benefit levels below which low-income people are not allowed to fall. These benefits should be adequate to provide a decent standard of living.

3. Create family-sustaining jobs. Requiring people to work means that states should create jobs that pay a livable wage and do not displace present workers. Programs should eliminate barriers to employment and provide child care, transportation, education, training, and other services that make participation feasible.

4. Exclude no child. State plans should acknowledge the responsibility of both government and parents in seeking the wellbeing of children. No child should be excluded from receiving benefits available to other siblings because of being born while the mother was on welfare or unmarried and under age eighteen. No child should be completely removed from the safety net because of a parent's failure to fulfill agreements with the government. No child should be excluded because his or her parent is not a U.S. citizen.

5. Provide adequate funding. Programs designed to help people move out of poverty cost more in the short term. Therefore, states should increase their own welfare funding.
VOTED: To refer R-11 to the Commission on Christian Action for research and development of an additional list of concerns and actions as noted in R-11 above; and further,

to use this list of concerns and actions for RCA members and congregations as suggestions in living up to their responsibilities to the poor and the vulnerable; and further,

to instruct the Commission on Christian Action to incorporate both lists of concerns into its paper on the effects of welfare reform, for report to the 1998 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. The urging of public officials and governmental units to live up to their responsibilities to the poor and the vulnerable is greatly strengthened by the RCA’s willingness to undertake similar measures.

2. It is helpful for RCA members and congregations to be informed of grass roots local and regional cooperative efforts already undertaken by church communities that can be models for their replication and support.

GENERAL SYNOD REFERRALS

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To request the Commission on Christian Action, in consultation with the African-American Council, to prepare a paper on affirmative action and diversity in the workplace, for report to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, p. 105).

The commission had a full and fruitful discussion with representatives of the African-American Council, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries, and the Commission for Women. All participants in the discussion agreed that the church needs to find ways to address not only the particular issue of affirmative action but also the broader issues of race, gender, and class discrimination in society. The commission plans to continue this cooperative work with the racial/ethnic councils and the Commission for Women and plans to bring a report to the 1998 General Synod.

As instructed by the 1996 General Synod, the Commission on Christian Action has continued to study the issue of suicide (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 87). The commission expresses its appreciation to the RCA consistory, RCA congregational Christian action committees, and RCA members who responded in writing to the paper, “A Christian Response to Physician-Assisted Suicide,” (MGS 1996, pp. 81-88) as well as to the papers, “Hope for the Family: Christian Action for Stronger Families” (MGS 1996, pp. 89-97) and “Christian Families and the Household of God: Mutual Responsibility and Accountability” (MGS 1996, pp. 97-104). The commission is gratified that the papers are stimulating discussion of these important issues in the RCA. The many helpful comments and suggestions received have benefited the commission’s work.

Finally, the commission expresses its thanks for the faithful work and witness of Dr. Robert Zwier, who is completing six years of service on the commission. He brought to the commission a keen mind, a warm faith, and a gentle spirit. The commission trusts that his many gifts will continue to be a blessing to the church at large.
Report of the African-American Council

You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace (Neh. 2:17).

The theme for the African-American Council's 1996 annual caucus was "Redeveloping and Renewing the African-American Community." An inspiring keynote address by the Rev. Dr. John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association, drew parallels between Jerusalem in a time of tribulation and today's central city neighborhoods, plagued by policies that are powerless to bring about authentic change or renewal.

As Nehemiah's people "strengthened their hand for this good work" (v. 18, KJV), the African-American Council (AAC) has strengthened its structure for the varied ministries needed in this time of job losses, deteriorated schools, cutbacks in city services, and rent increases. We have worked together to strengthen our structure by reaching beyond the boundaries of local congregations as we work regionally among our churches, with classes and regional synods.

Leadership Development

Increasingly, African-Americans are turning to community-based programs, often led by church groups, as a way to offset the educational, economic, and health issues affecting African-Americans. The AAC's educational work was enhanced by a small Leadership Assistance Grant from the $9.8 by '98 fund.

Leadership development workshops are designed not only to enhance the skills of church leaders but also to address basic education needs for all age groups. Educational work in the local community is important not only to disseminate information about the Reformed tradition, but also as a response to the demographic data regarding the educational plight of our communities. According to one report, dropout rates for young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four are as high as 50 percent in one quarter of all urban schools (The State of Black America 1996, National Urban League, Inc., p. 130). Researchers cite low expectations about the achievement potential of minority students as a major factor for high dropout rates. The education committee has encouraged the growing number of young people attending our caucus to work throughout the year and to reach out for the best possible leadership both within and beyond their congregations to develop the skills needed to negotiate the adult world. In addition to workshops on Reformed Church structure and traditions, seasoned instructors provide knowledge in practical matters such as rehabilitating inner city housing and setting up food pantries.

➢ The advisory committee recommended to amend R-12:

R-12.
To encourage Congregational Services, in consultation with the African-American Council, to explore congregation-based leadership development workshops for existing, new and emerging multicultural congregations. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: Existing congregations also need to be encouraged to explore leadership development workshops.

*Addition is in light-face type.
AAC Relations with the RCA

AAC members enjoy excellent relationships with all RCA boards and agencies, and AAC members serve on the major RCA policy making bodies. The AAC welcomes consultation and cooperation with various denominational groups, notably with the Commission on Christian Action to address the 1996 General Synod request, upon recommendation of the AAC, that the commission prepare a paper on affirmative action and diversity in the workplace for report to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-11, p. 105); and with Congregational Services on the 1996 General Synod instruction, upon recommendation of the AAC, that Congregational Services prepare a discussion guide for community dialogue with police (MGS 1996, R-12, p. 106).

Credit Unions

The AAC’s eastern region caucus made the surprising discovery that few if any of its congregations belong to credit unions that make low interest loans for individual or institutional purposes. Establishing a regional credit union would interrupt the current practice in which banking institutions redline poor neighborhoods. It would also disrupt the unethical practices of loan sharks, whose exorbitant interest rates gouge the poor, forcing them to pay higher than normal rates.

AAC Relations with the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa

The African-American Council has clearly benefited from its relationship with the RCA’s ecumenical partner, the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. The South Africans understand mission as “capacity building” among their people. They emphasize “the development of projects thought out and carried into effect by the people themselves instead of...by others” (M. Mthembu, Church Development: An Interdisciplinary Approach, The Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 1990, p. 343). The AAC’s association with South Africa has helped bring about the AAC’s newfound awareness of the community, and the regional community in particular, as the appropriate unit for its work in the United States.

Southern Normal School

The same spirit of local and global self determination that informs the new South Africa also informs the AAC’s support of RCA mission in the U.S. In November 1996 the AAC celebrated with students and staff of Southern Normal School, during their Religious Awareness Week, the eighty-five years of RCA mission on that campus. The council’s continuing support of the school is based on its awareness of the continuing need for education of the children of Alabama’s black belt and of youngsters from northern central city school districts (see also Southern Normal School report in the Mission Services section).

Report of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries

As 1997 began, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) entered its eighteenth year of ministry. At its annual consultation held in May 1997, CPAAM focused on the challenges of ministry with the theme “You Shall Be My Witnesses.” The consultation’s theme lifted up the challenge given to the disciples that we are to be witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). RCA congregations throughout Canada and the U.S. are presented with new and exciting opportunities to address the changing context for ministry in their communities and throughout the world. In the months and years ahead there is a need for continuing prayer, faithful discernment, new learnings, and creative ministry responses.
PRIORITIES

The CPAAM executive committee, after consulting with the Pacific and Asian American pastors and church representatives during the 1994-95 year, voted on the priorities of the council's work for the next five years. From 1996 to 2000 the program priorities for CPAAM are:

1. Evangelism
2. Discipleship training
3. Ministry with youth
4. Stewardship
5. Ministry with women
6. Cross-cultural interchange
7. Ministry with the elderly
8. Recruitment, training, and support of clergy
9. Church planning and development

Evangelism

Evangelism, the first priority for the council, is being addressed by several means. Undergirding all efforts to spread the good news of the gospel is prayer. Almost every Korean church has early morning prayers. Lay people are invited to join the pastor for prayer at the start of the day. Churches use the Upper Room Bible study program, prayer group evangelism, and cell (small) group meetings as a way to reach out and support the spiritual lives of members. One church has a church-wide prayer time from 9:30 to 10:00 each night, when all members are encouraged to pray. Evangelism, encouraging "each family to bring a family," a variation of "each one bring one," is used. Language classes have also served as an effective way of reaching out to the community.

Discipling the Laity

Pacific and Asian American churches are actively engaged in discipling the laity for leadership. Churches employing small groups ministry recognize that lay people are key to the success of this small group design. Lay leaders need to be equipped to lead Bible study, to pray, and to listen to the concerns of group members. Some Pacific and Asian American congregations are focusing on empowering young adults.

Youth

During the early months of 1997 the Pacific and Asian American youth representatives sought to survey youth pastors and youth sponsors to determine some of the needs and issues facing Pacific and Asian American congregations. Many of these congregations have large and active youth groups. Parents often find the generation gap to be a vexing issue. Youth find that their parents and other older members in the church do not understand them or appreciate the gifts they bring. However, one congregation has youth serve as members of the governing board. If the youth are not encouraged to participate fully in the life and witness of the congregation, the youth will leave the church when they leave home for college or career.

Pacific and Asian American churches report numerous activities to reach out to youth, and these churches support youth in their development. Instrumental bands, basketball, youth cell groups, and language classes are some of the various programs of Pacific and Asian American churches. Youth retreats were held in Vancouver, British Columbia; southern California; and Warwick, New York. Pacific and Asian American youth participated in Spectrum '96 in December 1996.
Stewardship

While some Pacific and Asian American congregations report giving at a sacrificial level, other congregations have difficulty dealing with stewardship effectively. Wills and planned giving are culturally taboo in some congregations, especially Chinese and Taiwanese congregations. CPAAM continues to seek ways to help its constituency understand Christian stewardship.

Ministry with Women

In the New York City metropolitan area a gathering of women from all the different Pacific and Asian American churches in the area was planned by Young Aie Na, representative on the CPAAM executive committee. She is working with Dr. Amy Kuo, former CPAAM executive committee representative, to continue to include Taiwanese women in future events.

Cross-Cultural Interchanges

The Korean and Hispanic pastors in southern California are planning to have another retreat. Previous retreats have proven to be highly successful and enriching for all involved. The executive director of the African-American Council preached at one of the Pacific and Asian American congregation’s English services. Spectrum ’96 provided a cross-cultural experience, both for the Spectrum ’96 planning team and for those who participated in the event. Pacific and Asian American youth went caroling at a nursing home, visiting with mostly non-Pacific and non-Asian American older adults.

Elderly

The Rev. Samuel Kwon, pastor of Eden Korean Church in Buena Park, California, reports that he frequently visits older adults at nursing homes, providing spiritual nourishment and support to the residents. They often complain that ministers who attempt to minister to them do not understand the spiritual needs of older adults. Grace Christian Church in Staten Island, New York, began a group for older adults this year. The gatherings provide spiritual uplift and fellowship for the participants.

Recruitment, Training, and Support of Clergy

During the year, members of the CPAAM have been working with various RCA classes to orient ministers interested in affiliating with the RCA. Several new pastors have joined the RCA this year. Recruitment of Korean and Taiwanese pastors continues to be an ongoing concern. Work continues on translation of the Book of Church Order into Chinese. Taiwanese pastors in the New York metropolitan area meet monthly for sharing, study, and support. Korean pastors in the east and those in the west meet bimonthly. The east coast Korean pastors have retreats together, plan joint revival meetings, and are structured to support each other and advise CPAAM on matters related to Korean ministries.

New Church Development

The members of the council and its staff continue to work with the various RCA regional synod executives to encourage church development among Pacific and Asian Americans in their respective regions. CPAAM staff participates on the Council of Field Secretaries (COFS) because of CPAAM’s interest in and priority for new church development. As the denomination casts a vision for new church development beyond 1998, CPAAM will participate in the vision-discerning process and the outlining of strategies to implement that vision. During this year an application for placement in the denominational plan for a ministry in Carrollton, Texas, was submitted to the General Synod Council and approved.
This past year has been a busy one for CPAAM congregations. Several churches are either building their church facility or adding to their present facility. Many exciting ministries are being carried out in diverse communities. The spirit among the pastors is positive. The Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries looks toward the future with great anticipation and hope.

WORK ON MATTERS REFERRED BY PREVIOUS GENERAL SYNODS

Minority Community Dialogue with Police Departments

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To urge the Reformed Church in America, its members, consistorys, congregations, and assemblies, to stand in solidarity with African-American congregations and other minority people in the effort to engage local police departments in more effective and positive dialogue between law enforcement officers and minority communities; and further,

to instruct Congregational Services, in cooperation with the African-American Council, to prepare a discussion guide for community dialogue with police (MGS 1996, R-12, p. 106).

CPAAM staff has been a participant in the conversations addressing R-12.

The 1996 General Synod also voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council's Evangelism and Church Development Services Committee and Mission Services Committee, in cooperation with the racial/ethnic councils and the Council of Field Secretaries, to develop a vision and implementation plan for new congregations from 1998 to 2005, with special attention to urban areas; and further,

to develop a variety of models for these new congregations in different economic, cultural, and ethnic settings (MGS 1996, R-10, p. 369).

CPAAM is actively engaged in this process and continues to make itself available through CPAAM staff and CPAAM members.

NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES

The Associated Press-Reuters New Service, quoting Pyongyang government officials, reported that in July and August 1996 three periods of exceptionally heavy rainfall uprooted one hundred thousand families and damaged property in 75 percent of North Korea. An estimated 1.9 million tons, or a quarter of the annual grain requirement for the country, were lost in the flooding.

The United Nations disaster assessment team reported that young children are bearing the brunt of the floods. Flour mills are idle because of the lack of electricity, and many children are forced to eat a diluted porridge of whole grain maize that is difficult to digest. A few children, seen in temporary housing, were reported by the term to be “wasted and stunted.” It was noted by a member of the UNICEF team that even if the staple grain situation were back on track, children need more than grain and rice to live on.

The United Nations reported that the most important areas for international attention are the immediate welfare of the critically affected population of one hundred thousand families. This means supplying food and restoring essential services such as medical care. The Korea
Times reports that many North Koreans have left their country and are seeking relief in China and South Korea. Refugees interviewed about the food shortage report that people are starving. Their lives are miserable. (Reported by the Korean Times, December 25, 1996 to January 28, 1997.)

R-13.
To instruct the coordinator for RCA volunteer services, Reformed Church World Service, and disaster response, in consultation with the Korean RCA congregations, to explore ways of bringing relief efforts to help North Korean refugees; and further,

to call upon RCA congregations to pray for the Korean refugees who have been forced to leave their homes in North Korea.
(ADOPTED)

Report of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

The Hispanic congregations of the Reformed Church in America are pleased to present this report through the Council for Hispanic Ministries. Hispanic congregations are growing and are developing leaders who are committed to responding to the needs of their communities. At this crucial time, the call to serve is ardent in our midst.

MISSION AND MINISTRY

The United States of America continues to grow as a nation that is diverse in arts and sciences, ethnic identities, economic formation, and languages. In this pluralistic North American society, the RCA must be ready and willing to respond to the needs of ethnic groups that are rapidly increasing in population.

The General Synod Council, through its Mission Services Committee/Unit, is responding with a strong leadership commitment, enabling mission to take place. This commitment is reflected in the position description for the director of Mission Services. Twenty-five percent of the director’s time is to be spent focusing on urban ministry. Mission Services has also formed a Metropolitan Ministries Team. One of the tasks of this team is to create awareness of urban issues. Representatives from the racial/ethnic councils, regional synods, and Mission Services are working together to design a program of Mission is One at all levels of the RCA. The Council for Hispanic Ministries is hopeful and prayerful that the Lord will guide the RCA in the direction needed for desirable growth and new mission paradigms.

The council has always been committed to Mission is One responsibilities. No entity can think in individual terms. The mission entrusted by God to proclaim the gospel is the task of the whole body of Christ. The Mission is One task, from individual RCA congregations to the General Synod, is to create affinity, fellowship, and respect, and to affirm the gifts of all people. This manifestation will revitalize the RCA, creating fresh expressions of God’s gifts and moving the RCA toward dedicated transformation. Witnessing involves working in community, having compassion, and supporting each other so that maximum contributions are made toward a vital witness. Social and economic problems have reached a point where government reforms do not provide impacting results. As Christians we are called to provide and share biblical solutions.

IMAGE CHANGE

As the issues of a pluralistic society continue to permeate more RCA congregations, there is a need for the racial/ethnic councils to help interpret through dialogue and communication the present-day meaning of unity. This task has increased considerably the work of the
rational/ethnic councils. When unity can be celebrated in complete diversity, the RCA can joyfully suspend the work of the racial/ethnic councils. It is essential that dialogue and communication be conducted in the sensitivity of God’s Spirit and with a constant openness that allows firm, intense questioning and that challenges one’s understanding of Christian practice. Through cooperation, fellowship, and understanding, deeper commitment will be reached, advancing the gospel in our communities. Hispanics are part of the “RCA family.” Hispanics are here to laugh or cry, rejoice or mourn, together with all others in the RCA in all circumstances. For that reason, the Executive Committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries is changing its image.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries has observed the need for a new vision and image change for some time. The formation of the council in 1974 (MGS 1974, pp. 87-88) came when the New York metropolitan area was experiencing difficult social and political pressures. Hispanic expression and economic growth were limited. The times were reactionary. Aggressive attitudes were common. Sensitivity and consideration by the dominant society was at a low. For example, a United Methodist Church in Spanish Harlem (110th Street and Lexington Avenue) was taken over by the “Young Lords.” Until the church addressed the needs in the surrounding community, the Young Lords would not leave. As a result, a daycare program for children was established and other programs were implemented.

Oppression and indifference imposed by the dominant society on the immigrants and poor were only superficially challenged by mainline denominations. Consequently, the advocacy roles were correctly placed in the hands of the constituencies affected. Lack of cultural understanding by mainline denominations allowed laissez-faire attitudes to dominate. Discord and turmoil stimulated the formation of the Hispanic Council, and the council challenged the Reformed Church in America to respond to the needs of Hispanics. The Hispanic Council represented an opportunity for the RCA to learn, understand, support, and embrace the cause against injustices toward Hispanics in urban areas. The desire to seek unity and fellowship provided the setting for the purpose statement of the Council for Hispanic Ministries:

The Council for Hispanic Ministries shall be the agent of the General Synod to express collectively the desire and will of Hispanics in the Reformed Church; coordinate and advocate for programs and resources that may strengthen and edify Hispanic churches; and to be a prophetic voice to the church and the world regarding the spiritual, social, political, and economic needs of the Hispanic people, here in this country and in Latin America.

In 1989 the Hispanic Council acknowledged the need to continue to advocate, but also to engage in ministry with pastors, congregations, classes, and regional synods to encourage and urge Hispanic church growth. This additional purpose was not completely new, but it was not clearly identifiable in the name and history of the council. Therefore, the council adopted a name change from the Hispanic Council to the Council for Hispanic Ministries.

God’s blessings are experienced as new Hispanic churches are started, as Hispanic pastors are ordained, and as Reformed theology is embraced by Hispanics of all nationalities. The Council for Hispanic Ministries encourages RCA congregations in all regions to increase their involvement and experience in multicultural and crosscultural ministries. The council is prepared to help RCA congregations and classes to develop and expand ministries with Hispanics in their communities. The council is available as a resource to respond to process questions for the development of these ministries.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries cannot change history, but it can impact the future. Corrections and adjustments are required, and the council and the RCA need to work together. Successful congregations in the U.S. and Canada and in all other areas of the world
have been formed by Hispanics. The ardent need for new ministries is instilled in many. Yet, implementation happens only in the light of the broader community and structure. The desired effect is to have justice, community, compassion, and social and economic improvement, and still grow spiritually. As the Council for Hispanic Ministries humbly allows for individual and systematic changes, it visualizes necessary spiritual growth and anticipates testimonies of change in Hispanic congregations and denominational meetings.

The Executive Committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries is already changing the misinterpreted and perceived aggressive image reflected during its formative and circumstantial years by re-forming, refocusing, redefining, and refining a more clear vision and purpose in order to challenge Hispanic congregations to grow and to be self-sustaining.

Today the purpose of the Council for Hispanic Ministries is:

1. To intercede before God for Hispanics and others as a people called by God.
2. To speak in the name of Lord and to proclaim the good news of our Savior.
3. To express God’s will through prayer, discipline, teaching and visioning.
4. To assist in preparing and training for mission and ministry.
5. To be a blessing to the Reformed Church in America.

The Council on Hispanic Ministries requests prayers and support from the RCA.

R-14.
To request the general secretary to write to all congregations of the Reformed Church in America and encourage these congregations to at least once a month, for the next twelve months, offer the following prayers of intercession:

1. To intercede in prayer for pastors, congregations, classes, regional synods, General Synod, commissions, agencies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.
2. To prayerfully intercede and ask the Lord to revitalize RCA pastors and congregations that find themselves struggling in a declining mode.
3. To prayerfully intercede and ask the Lord to change the hearts and minds of those that are marginally active Christians by creating in them new desires and new hearts to share more of their time and energy as disciples of Jesus Christ. (ADOPTED)

HISPANIC PASTORS VISIT REFORMED CHURCH IN CUBA

Missionaries were forced to leave Cuba after the communist takeover of the government in 1959. La Iglesia Reformada de Cuba (the Reformed Church in Cuba) was left on its own to develop mission and to keep Christianity alive under the communist government. Christians did well and survived with underground churches. Today the communist government has restored some freedom of religious expression. Prior visits were made during 1991 to 1993, with a primary focus on evangelism, in response to invitations from the Reformed Church in Cuba. These visits produced tremendous growth for the Reformed Church in Cuba. In
1994 and 1995, due to political, security, and visa problems, the Council on Hispanic Ministries was not able to visit Cuba. However, in November 1996 two Hispanic pastors and an elder spent two weeks in Cuba preaching, evangelizing, and lecturing by invitation of La Iglesia Reformada de Cuba.

After many years of limited and restricted access to hearing God’s Word, Cuba is again open to the gospel. A strong desire of Cubans to return to church is sparking a revival. Cuban people are friendly and are receiving the message of salvation with open hearts. In record Sunday school attendance numbers, adults and children are eagerly listening to biblical teachings, which are healing the atheistic sores created by communism. Sunday school teachers are instilling Christians values in young people, who must leave home by the eighth grade to attend government boarding schools.

The Cuban Reformed Church has excellent growth potential. Trained pastoral leadership is in demand. Before entering five years of Bible school training (one year more than is required in the U.S. for a bachelor of ministry degree), the aspiring student must do missionary work under the supervision of a mentor and consistory for approximately four years. After the five years of Bible school training, the student can enter a two- or three-year seminary program for a master of divinity degree.

In addition to limitations in the number of pastoral leaders, there is a problem with new church construction. The government does not issue construction permits for new church construction. The church in Cuba gets around this problem by expanding the walls of a home into a larger home dedicated for worship.

The 1994 General Synod approved the Hermandad program (MGS 1994, R-14, p. 94). This program assisted in creating a strong bonding relationship between First Church in Albany, New York, and the Reformed Church in Cuba. Members from First Church in Albany will visit Cuba in 1997 to experience ministry as it is happening under communist rule in Cuba.

DENOMINATION-WIDE SURVEY

In 1996 the Council for Hispanic Ministries conducted a survey of the number of Hispanics in the RCA. The survey was also used as an instrument to see how the council could further assist Anglo RCA congregations that have Hispanic members or Hispanic visitors in attendance.

Responses were received from 413 congregations. These responses were from California, Florida, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin. Some results of the survey are:

1. Congregations reporting no activity with Hispanics: 175
2. Congregations with Hispanics attending Sunday worship: 238
3. Congregations with Hispanic children attending church functions: 177
4. Congregations desiring to get involved with Hispanic ministries: 44 yes, 44 no
5. Congregations acknowledging they are in a transitional area: 31 yes, 16 no
6. Congregations with Hispanics moving into the area: 6 yes, 37 no
7. Consistories addressing issues of Hispanics in their neighborhood: 8 yes, 57 no
8. Consistories desiring dialogue with someone from the Council for Hispanic Ministries: 26 yes, 10 no
Although this is not a scientific survey, there are clear indications that out of the 413 congregations that responded, approximately 58 percent have adult Hispanics in attendance at Sunday worship services and 42 percent have children attending some form of ministry at the church. The council’s Executive Committee has not yet had the opportunity to fully interpret these survey results. The council presents these survey results only for general information at this time.

From the Report of the General Synod Council’s Congregational Services Committee

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF SOCIAL WITNESS

Reformed theology is noted for its affirmation of Christ’s lordship over all of life—personal and corporate. The church’s social witness is an integral part of its mission in a time of moral questioning, economic inequity, global conflict, and environmental degradation. Through its social witness ministry the church affirms that the gospel is good news, not only for the individual human heart but for all of creation. “Justification by faith cannot be separated from justice on earth” (Ad Hoc Report on World Mission, Chapter II, General Program Council, November 1980).

The Office of Social Witness is responsible for providing resources, programming, and counsel to help equip congregations and individuals in their social witness ministry. The office also represents the denomination in several ecumenical gatherings and in the wider society through public statements and through participation in forums and conferences.

Providing Resources

The RCA has a pastoral responsibility to its members to offer resources for study, prayer, and action that will offer a biblical perspective on complex social issues and encourage a faith response. The office responds to numerous requests for information and study resources. In the past year the office has made available resources on physician-assisted suicide, welfare reform, abortion, capital punishment, gambling, immigration, racial reconciliation, socially responsible investing, environmental issues, and others.

Resources produced by the Office of Social Witness include: 1) Abortion: Seeking Common Ground, a five-session adult study published by Reformed Church Press; 2) Welcoming the Stranger, a study/action resource for the church’s ministry with people from other nations and cultures; and 3) Tis a Gift to Be Simple, a resource packet for responsible living in an age of consumption. The office also communicated with each RCA congregation’s Christian Action Committee concerning new resources available.

Other resources produced by the Office of Social Witness include: 1) The City Gate, an occasional newsletter sent to each RCA congregation and to a mailing list of approximately six hundred individuals; and 2) Do Justice, Make Peace, Keep Creation, an action alert sent periodically to a network of approximately eight hundred RCA members who write their elected officials about important issues. Past action alerts have focused on such issues as immigration, gambling, and climate change. The annual peace packet sent to each RCA congregation in late summer contains study and worship resources for Peace with Justice Sunday. The 1996 packet included Bible study resources on forgiveness and peacemaking, as well as an intergenerational program, Building a Neighborhood Together.
Through its Office of Social Witness the Reformed Church in America participates in the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), a coalition of four groups (Jewish, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Evangelical), which work together in developing resources and programs for a faith-based response to environmental issues. The minister for social witness serves as the cochair of the National Council of Churches' Eco-Justice Working Group, one of the four NRPE partners. Such ecumenical cooperation makes it possible to develop more resources and programs than would otherwise be possible. In 1996, for example, the Eco-Justice Working Group published a resource packet of study, worship, and action resources sent to fifty-two thousand Protestant congregations, including each congregation in the RCA. Other activities of the working group, which are helping to equip RCA members and congregations, include an ecumenical training event, an annual public policy briefing, and a quarterly newsletter.

In 1993, in response to a report of the Commission on Christian Action on global warming (MGS 1993, pp. 98-102), the General Synod voted:

To direct the minister for social witness to continue to prepare and distribute educational materials and worship resources on environmental issues, including global warming, for study by the churches (MGS 1993, R-11, p. 102.).

In addition to the Earth Day resource packet that included a five-session study guide, It's God's World: Christians, the Environment, and Climate Change, the Office of Social Witness facilitated RCA participation in the International Petition Campaign on Climate Change endorsed by the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and drafted an article for the February 1997 Church Herald.

Caring for Creation Coordinators are being enlisted in each region of the RCA. Coordinators serve as resource and support persons for churches in their area, helping congregations in their ministries of caring for God's creation. Several RCA coordinators participated in an ecumenical training event May 15-18, 1997, in Estes Park, Colorado. Caring for Creation Coordinators also work cooperatively with the diaconal ministries team and/or social witness committee in each RCA regional synod.

Programming

The Office of Social Witness has been able to facilitate RCA participation in several events that enable church members to interact with legislators and government officials and consider how the biblical calls for justice, peace, and the well-being of creation can impact public policy. Such events enabled RCA people to express Christian social concern to leaders in government and to hear from others about how changes in public policy are affecting their lives. Likewise, it allows church members to experience firsthand the benefits and limitations of the political process. Such firsthand experience also adds insight and energy to social witness efforts in the RCA regional synods and RCA regions.

In the past year RCA members attended Briefing '97, an interfaith legislative briefing in Washington, D.C., as well as state and local public policy meetings. The Office of Social Witness and the Office of Hunger Education are making it possible for several RCA members to attend the annual Bread for the World National Gathering, scheduled for June 20-24, 1997. In addition, the Office for Social Witness made it possible for RCA college students to participate in the Christian Environmental Association's briefing in Washington, D.C., in April 1997.
Science, Technology, and the Church

The Ecumenical Roundtable on Science, Technology, and the Church is an informal gathering of denominational representatives and groups who share resources and experience aimed at assisting denominations to address faith-science concerns and the emerging theological/ethical issues of contemporary science and technology. Interest was recently expressed in forming an RCA group. To date approximately sixty persons have indicated an interest in being a part of an informal network. The minister for social witness and the Rev. Dr. Christopher Kaiser, professor of historical and systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary, facilitated an initial meeting in late April 1997 at Stony Point, New York.

Witness in the Public Square

At times the Office of Social Witness is called upon to represent (either in person or in writing) the RCA’s position on social issues in public statements and forums.

For the past few years the RCA, in cooperation with the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, has filed a shareholder resolution with Texaco Corporation concerning the company’s involvement with the government of Myanmar (Burma), a military regime accused of serious human rights abuses. The minister for social witness and other RCA representatives have had opportunity to speak at the annual Texaco stockholders meetings and to meet with corporate management to discuss the company’s responsibility to advocate for human rights in Myanmar.


General Synod Referrals

The 1996 General Synod directed Congregational Services to provide lists of resources and a study guide for discussion of the issue of physician-assisted suicide (MGS 1996, R-3, p. 87). A copy of the Commission on Christian Action report, “A Christian Response to Physician-Assisted Suicide” (MGS 1996, pp. 81-86), a list of discussion questions, and a bibliography of resources are available through the RCA Distribution Center. Also available from the RCA Distribution Center is a study guide, In Life and in Death We Belong to God: Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide, and End of Life Issues, produced by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. In response to another 1996 General Synod directive (MGS 1996, R-4, p. 87), the Office of Social Witness has available resources for developing and supporting hospice care facilities.

The 1996 General Synod, in response to a report from the African-American Council concerning fostering more effective and positive dialogue between minority communities and local police departments, instructed Congregational Services, in cooperation with the African-American Council, to prepare a discussion guide for community dialogue with police (MGS 1996, R-12, p. 106). The minister for social witness, members of the racial/ethnic councils, and RCA pastors and lay people involved in city ministries have prepared an initial draft of a study guide. Additional resources developed by the Criminal Justice Program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the National Coalition on Police Accountability are also available from the Office of Social Witness.
Hunger has a simple cure: food. And it's a cure that is available. There is enough food for everyone in the world. But as in the time of Pharaoh and Joseph, those who desperately need this food don't always have access to it. Those who are the most hungry all too often have the least amount of food. Famines have struck parts of Africa and North Korea. Reports from North Korea indicate that each person is receiving a ration of one-half cup of rice per day. Reformed Church in America missionaries in Kenya report that many Orma people are living in the shadow of death because of drought. They need food desperately.

Meanwhile, the number of hungry people in industrialized countries continues to expand as the gap between rich and poor continues to increase. In the United States, for example, the poorest fifth of the population has 3.6 percent of the wealth, whereas the richest fifth of the population has 49.1 percent of the wealth.

Children who are poor bear the brunt of hunger in the world, but especially in the United States and Canada. Child poverty is more prevalent in the United States than in any other industrialized country. The facts tell the sad story. One in five U.S. children (20.8 percent) is poor. Canada has the next highest child poverty rate of 13.5 percent. More than half of the U.S. children who live in poverty are from families where one or both parents work. Families with children account for the majority of people seeking relief from community helping agencies. Agencies braced for additional requests for assistance after March 5, 1997, when many people lost their food stamp benefits.

People simply cannot afford to buy the food they need. And yet, members of RCA congregations continue to hear the word of Jesus Christ:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matt. 25:35-36).

How can the RCA respond to this hungry world and participate in the cure? Several agencies are banding together in the United States to suggest that hunger can be cured by four specific means:

1. Increased giving to charity.
2. Improving job prospects of low-income people.
3. Adjusting national legislation to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable people.
4. Strengthening state-level advocacy.

In addition, RCA members were requested by the 1996 General Synod to "join other Christians in fasting and praying on behalf of hungry children everywhere on the first Friday of each month" (MGS 1996, R-18, p. 118).

Members of RCA congregations can participate in the cure for hunger. Giving gifts of food, clothing, and money to local agencies and giving to the RCA hunger fund of Reformed Church World Service (RCWS) is the number one means to attack hunger. Gifts to RCWS can be designated for hunger, a particular disaster, or given through the One Great Hour of Sharing or Planting Seeds of Hope programs. Materials for these programs are available from the RCA Distribution Center. Last year, RCWS contributed $63,800 in support of RCA food pantries in North America, doubling what it gave in 1995. RCWS also contributed funds to assist with urgent hunger needs in places such as Kenya, Sudan, and North Korea.
The advisory committee recommended to amend R-15:

R-15.
To urge RCA congregations to continue to give increase their offerings to Reformed Church World Services (RCWS) in order to help meet hunger and human needs. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: The initial R-15 urged status quo. The advisory committee believed strongly that an increase in giving is needed in order to meet hunger and human needs.<

In addition, members of the RCA can participate in the cure for hungry people by becoming active in local, county, and state governments. John Calvin even suggested this was a noble calling! Christians need to also be involved in national legislation efforts to weave a more secure safety net for poor and hungry people. One way to do that in the U.S. on a national level is to join Bread for the World, a nonpartisan Christian citizens' movement that seeks just public policies for poor and hungry people. Another way is to communicate with elected officials.

R-16.
To urge RCA congregations to conduct an offering of letters (either individually or collectively through an organization such as Bread for the World) in order to encourage United States and Canadian legislators to improve and expand national nutrition programs. (National nutrition programs in the U.S. include food stamps and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for women, infants, and children.) (ADOPTED)

Part of the cure for hunger lies in understanding the extent of the problem. Two hunger education resources were produced this past year to help children and adults better understand some of the symptoms and possible solutions. A three-lesson curriculum for children, Central America: Planting Seeds of Peace, was published by Reformed Church Press. A four-session Bible study for adults was published to accompany Bread for the World Institute's What Government Can Do, Hunger 1997. Both study guides are available from the RCA Distribution Center.

The news about hunger is not all bad, however. The good news is that for over fifty years Church World Service (CWS), which the RCA helped start, has been responding to hunger and needy people through relief, development, and advocacy. The Reformed Connection, a six-page folder detailing the partnership between CWS and RCWS, is also available from the RCA Distribution Center. Also, the number of hungry people in the world has actually decreased from eight hundred million to seven hundred million. Today the number of children dying from hunger or related crises has decreased from forty thousand per day to thirty-four thousand per day. So efforts at hunger relief have made a difference.

The coordinator for hunger education, Betty Voskuil, had the privilege of traveling to Nicaragua in January 1997. The coordinator viewed first-hand some of the projects CWS is involved in and supporting. It was gratifying to see development projects in raising chicken and cattle and development projects in hygiene and health, reforestation, and education programs, as well as the establishment of credit unions—all because gifts of money were sent through CWS to the RCA's partner in Nicaragua. Melanie, one of the village leaders, concluded her presentation with these words: "We pray that God will continue to bless you so that you will continue to support us in our development."

*Addition is in light-face type, deletion is stricken out.
Overtures

Oppose Partial Birth Abortions

1. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures General Synod to oppose partial birth abortions in the United States; and further,

   to instruct the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America to communicate the opposition of the Reformed Church in America to partial birth abortions (clearly a termination of life) to the president and vice-president of the United States, the U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives; and further,

   to encourage the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives to reverse their decision legalizing partial birth abortions.

Reasons:

1. The Word of God (the Bible) clearly declares the sacredness of human life (see Gen 1:26-27, Job 31:15, Ps. 127:3, Ps.136:13, and Jer. 1:5).

2. The Word of God condemns those who perform abortions (see Deut. 5:17, Deut. 27:25, and Prov. 24:12).

3. The act of partial birth abortion is the taking of a human life. The debate over such abortions has not been argued on the issue of legitimacy of life or the lack thereof. The classis believes that a God-constituted life is present.

4. No clear evidence has been shown to support the argument that partial birth abortions provide for a medically safe abortion alternative when the life of the mother is at stake.

5. Christians believe that the power to judge, to choose life or death, must be left to God, with the possible exception of righteous laws established by righteous governments.

6. Statistics indicate that the majority of partial birth abortions are done for the convenience of the mother and to limit risks for the abortionist. This is not a justifiable reason.

7. A key speaker in the U.S. congressional debate, R. Ronald Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, admitted to deliberately distorting the truth about how many partial birth abortions are done on healthy babies and mothers.

8. Three hundred medical experts, including former surgeon general Dr. C. Everett Koop, have testified that partial birth abortion is never medically necessary to protect the mother's health or her fertility.
The advisory committee recommended:

R-17.
To deny the overture. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reason: The General Synod previously has taken positions that the RCA is opposed to abortion (see MGS 1992, pp. 104-07 for summary of these previous General Synod statements and votes) in general. Overture 1 speaks to a specific type of abortion and is already covered by previous General Synod statements and votes.<br><br>No motions were made and supported in response to Overture 1 after Synod voted on R-17.<br><br>The general secretary informed Synod that he would communicate the substance of Overture 1 to the officials named in Overture 1 and to the U.S. Congress without requesting a formal recommendation and adoption by Synod. By consensus, Synod agreed to this procedure.<br><br>The advisory committee recommended:

R-18.
To encourage RCA regional synods and classes to seek through negotiation with medical associations to increase the presence and input of people of faith on hospital ethics boards to assist people in making decisions regarding difficult life choices. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The presence of people of faith on such boards assists in the creation of hospital policies which respect the faith of those having to make difficult life choices. <br><br>**Cease Human Rights Violations in South Sudan Against Non-Muslim Citizens**

2. The Classis of Cascades overtures General Synod to request the president of the United States, the U.S. secretary of state, other appropriate U.S. governmental agencies, and the media, to confront and appeal to the national government of Sudan to cease and desist in its human rights violations in South Sudan against non-Muslim citizens.

Reasons:

1. The government of Sudan, a nation about six times larger than the state of Texas, has declared *Jihad* (holy war) against the non-Muslim southern region of Sudan. The government is determined to convert the non-Muslims to Islam or wipe them out in the name of ethnic cleansing.

2. The RCA waged a successful campaign in South Africa against apartheid. Such similar efforts now might save our suffering brothers and sisters in South Sudan.

3. The world and the media have been strangely silent about the decimation of South Sudan. News has focused on Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Bosnia. The U.S. government has been willing to act on behalf of these countries. However, there is a strange silence about Sudan. The U.S. government, the church, the media, and the world seem willing to sacrifice these dear non-Muslim people on the altar of torture.
4. The Reformed Church in Sudan is partly the result of the work of RCA missionaries Harvey and Lavina Hoekstra and Robert and Morrie Swart. These two couples, along with other RCA missionaries, invested a lifetime of labor in South Sudan. A very strong and vibrant church exists in South Sudan.

5. The suffering of South Sudanese Christians is beyond description. An April 1996 report from Christ Solidarity International (CSI) says:

"Please help to bring the case of the people of South Sudan to be understood internationally," Elia ba James Surur, chairman of Sudan African Parties, requested. The shocking drawings he [Elia ba] was able to smuggle out with him document scenes of torture his compatriots have to suffer in the Sudan. The artist, Philip Lomadong, was tortured... "He was lashed with a whip until his body bled," Elia ba reported, "Then chili peppers were placed in his wound." Sadly, Philip Lomadong is now a prisoner at a military camp. We are praying for his release.

Although disturbing, we felt it necessary to print... eyewitness sketches. The story must be told! At CSI we believe it is our duty to inform the world about what is happening to Christians in Sudan. The terrorist National Islamic Front regime is waging an Islamic "holy war" against the country's Christians and other minorities, resulting in the most unspeakable human rights violations imaginable.

In southern Sudan human rights violations include mass murder, rape, torture, starvation, religious cleansing, and the abduction and slavery of children and women.

One and a half million children, women, and men have died in campaigns to "convert"—or annihilate—Christian and animist tribesmen. More than 25,000 innocent young children from the Nuba mountains have been abducted and sold into slavery—sometimes bringing only the price of two chickens.

Islamic extremists, armed by the government, raid villages—shoot the men—and enslave the women and children. They attack these families because they are Christians or members of other faiths which refuse to convert to this radical branch of Islam.

They are kept as personal property or marched north and sold into the vilest forms of servitude. They are at the sexual disposal of their owners... and are beaten, killed, or tortured if they don't "convert" to Islam, or if they try to escape.

The organization Open Doors with Brother Andrew calls the war in Sudan the "Hidden Holocaust" that has raged for nearly twelve years. Five million people have become refugees, some thrown into cruel concentration camps hidden away in the desert. Open Doors also reports:

Christian Sunday school services are bombèd, churches and Christian villages are destroyed, massacres with mass crucifixions are reported, pastors and lay leaders are murdered, and food rations are used to force Christian refugees to convert to Islam.

Yet, in twenty years the percentage of Christians in Sudan has grown from 5 percent to nearly 20 percent of the population, much of this growth because of Muslim conversions. No other nation in the world has so many Muslim converts to Christianity.
6. Even the United Nations has come down hard on South Sudan. It has banned relief flights by the New Sudan Council of Churches because communion wafers were included. ACROSS, a Christian relief agency, was forced to suspend flights because Bibles were included in its shipments.

7. According to reliable sources, soldiers of the SPLA (Sudan People’s Liberation Army) can be heard marching or running at 5:30 every morning while singing Christian hymns. Here is a dedicated body of brothers and sisters in Christ, shunned by the world, desperately in need of help from the outside world if they are to survive and also provide a bulwark of defense against Sudanese Muslim expansion in central Africa.

8. When asked, “How can we help you?” church leaders and people in refugee camps say “Pray for us. Tell all those around the world to pray for us!”

The April 1996 Christ Solidarity International report concludes:

[The church in Sudan] pleads for our prayers: for peace, that desperately needed food and medicine will get through; that God will strengthen the faith of Christians in prison; and that millions more Muslims will come to know personally the one true God.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-19.
To instruct the general secretary to request the president of the United States, the U.S. secretary of state, the prime minister of Canada, the Canadian minister for external affairs, other U.S. and Canadian governmental agencies, and the media, to confront and appeal to all parties involved in the conflict in Sudan to cease and desist in human rights violations. (ADOPTED)

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-19 by deleting the words “all parties” and inserting the words “the national government of Sudan” and inserting the words “against Christians and other people in South Sudan” following the words “human rights violations.” The motion LOST.)
REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
AND DISCIPLESHIP

Report of Central College

In an address to the faculty in January 1997, interim president Dr. Thomas Iverson discussed the Christian tradition at Central College. As he laid out a vision for the near future of the college, Iverson described the Christian tradition as the very foundation upon which every effort of Central has been and must be built.

In large measure the Reformed Church in America has been responsible for helping to build this strong foundation. Since 1916, the year Central College became affiliated with the RCA, the RCA has provided the college strong leadership, fiscal support, students, and prayers. It is because of this covenant relationship that Central has flourished and it is also the reason it is a distinct pleasure to share this report with the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE

Effective January 11, 1997, Dr. William Wiebenga announced his resignation as president of Central College. Wiebenga, who served as president since 1990, indicated his desire to pursue other professional interests. Dr. Thomas Iverson, professor of mathematics and chair of the division of natural sciences, was appointed interim president while a formal search for a new president is conducted. The search for the next president has begun in the hope of naming a successor in advance of the 1997-98 academic year.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-1. To give thanks for the leadership of Dr. William Wiebenga, who served as president of Central College from 1990 to 1997; and further,

to raise up the hope that his gifts can continue to be used to the glory of God’s kingdom. (ADOPTED)

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Central College students began the 1996-97 school year in an atmosphere of change. For the first time in twenty-five years, they experienced a return to the semester system from a three-term calendar. In addition, a new general education curriculum, which was in the planning stage for four years, was introduced. This new curriculum, called the Central Core, has added more rigor to an already demanding curriculum. It includes advanced skills development in writing, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, computing, and foreign languages. It impacts every Central College student in every discipline. The heart of these changes is the desire to better prepare students to become effective citizens in the world and to pursue careers successfully in a chosen field.

In recognition of these sweeping changes have come continuing national honors. Central College again appeared in several national college ratings publications as a “best buy” when taking into account academic excellence and affordability. U.S. News and World Report ranked Central as one of the top 150 colleges in the nation.
In support of Central College's pursuit of excellence, the Teagle Foundation this year awarded Central College a two-year $78,000 grant to help carry out its cultural awareness experiential component as a part of the new core curriculum. Under the direction of program manager and assistant professor of psychology Dr. Pam Steinke, the program is designed to provide domestic cross-cultural experiences for students who may not have the opportunity to study at one of Central's international campuses.

Central College long has recognized the value of international study and immersion in other cultures, and the Teagle grant will now make it possible to implement a program that will provide all students the opportunity to experience other cultures.

SENIOR HONORS

Among the highlights of the academic year at Central College, indicative of outstanding undergraduate achievement, are the Senior Honors Projects. These projects are arranged individually with a faculty advisor and are a culmination of outstanding college careers. This year, eight Senior Honors proposals were approved. Three of them are recognized below:

1. Michele Blau of Alexander, Iowa, "Ramifications of Public Housing in the United States and Iowa."


3. Wendy Edsall of Corning, Iowa, "The Similarities/Difference between Supervisors' Attribution and Optimism Styles and That of Subordinates in Relation to Job Satisfaction."

FACULTY

Many Central College faculty members have had an exceptional year and are involved with interesting research opportunities. Stuart Allison, assistant professor of biology, recently presented the topic, "Disturbance in Three Ecosystems: Or My World and Welcome to It" at a faculty symposium. It highlighted Allison's environmental efforts at the Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge and Prairie Learning Center, a seven-hundred-acre tallgrass prairie preserve located only a few miles from Central's campus. Allison and several of his students have been studying the impact on the natural ecosystem at the preserve since eighteen American bison were introduced into the preserve last year. They are hopeful that this research will help others across the country better manage wildlife communities.

Linda Blatt, director of the Center for Academic Excellence and associate professor of English, recently completed a sabbatical in which she crisscrossed Iowa, interviewing high school English teachers about the widening gap between what high school graduates know about reading and writing, and what they are expected to know. This comes as a result of her conviction that "it's time to retire" the age-old issue of lack of competence in reading and writing, "and get down to the roll-up-the-sleeves work of solving it." Her research shows there are several reasons for the crisis in reading and writing, and now she is working to bring high school teachers and college professors together to work out solutions.

This year marks the retirement of three cherished and outstanding colleagues from the Central College community. They include faculty members Donald Maxam, professor of sociology, and Ronald Schipper, associate professor of physical education and football coach. They announced their retirements effective at the end of the school year. The Rev. Fran De Jong, chaplain, announced her retirement effective at the end of the first semester. Each of these dear friends has provided an inestimable legacy of excellence at Central College and will be greatly missed.

**SPIRITUAL LIFE**

Campus ministries at Central College are experiencing exciting changes under the direction of interim chaplain, the Rev. Thomas Trinidad. Following the report of a campus ministries task force last year, several initiatives were launched to more comprehensively meet the spiritual needs of the students. The report identified specific suggestions for improvement. These are resulting in greater cooperation among all campus religious groups, a stronger “ministry of presence” among the students, and a more collaborative effort between campus ministries and the local Christian community.

Monday night worship has made it possible for students to attend Sunday local community worship services while maintaining a “campus church” event; the chaplain’s office and the counseling services office are sharing in various counseling opportunities, including a grief support group; the Campus Church Board has recommended a restructuring to allow every religious life group to be represented, thus promoting greater unity; and students and staff are being challenged to integrate faith with learning through many volunteer service projects.

In summary, faith pursuits at Central College abound in Christian witness, in outreach, in special events, and in the very life of the college.

**COCURRICULUM**

Cocurricular life at Central College continues with strength. Most students participate in some cocurricular activities as a portion of their college experience, including drama, student government, forensics, intramural and competitive athletics, various clubs, and music ensembles.

Central College’s mock-trial team qualified for the national tournament for the thirteenth consecutive year. The team is under the leadership of Dr. Don Racheter, professor of political science, and of Marci Tooman and Aaron Hamrock, graduates of Central College and practicing attorneys. This noteworthy achievement is particularly significant in that Central qualified two six-person teams. Of the teams that compete, only about 10 percent qualify for the national tournament.

Central College’s athletic teams recorded another outstanding year, with several team and individual accomplishments. Among them were a second place conference finish for the football team, with a 7-1 record, and a conference championship for the women’s volleyball team. Senior football player Marc Kacmarynski returned from a medical hardship year and a severe leg break to post a record-setting season. Kacmarynski was named a NCAA Division III first team All-American, set several individual records, and was a finalist for Player of the Year. Five women from the conference champion volleyball team were named academic All-Americans, including Maggie Brown, who was also the conference MVP. Two seniors from the women’s softball team, Missey Allen and Lynette Mullen, were named first team All-Americans, as was senior Rob Akers for the men’s golf team.
Central College continues to benefit from the loyal financial support of its constituencies. Central has made a transition from a series of three-year minicampaigns to a conventional and more comprehensive development program. This change has resulted in a new consistency of giving to the college on an annual basis, has uncovered major prospects with greater propensity to financially support Central, and has propelled overall giving and pledges for the three-year time period to well over $10 million.

A challenge grant from the Gardner and Florence Call Cowles Foundation this year should enable Central College to complete funding for the Center for International Studies. The new building will house all of the international study programs and offices as well as provide much-needed classroom and office space for other departments. It represents one of the most extensive building projects Central College has ever undertaken and will provide substantial support for one of the college's most reputable strengths.

Perhaps the most visible change at Central College in the past year has been the construction of a state-of-the-art dining facility. The building, slated to open for camps and activities in the summer of 1997, represents a new approach to college dining, called marché-style or European market dining. It will feature an array of serving stations situated on a faux main street, complete with a bakery, a pasta bar, a pizzeria, a Mongolian wok, and a deli. The new facility, one of only three marché-style designs in the country, will accommodate up to 650 students at one time.

Central College's commitment to cutting-edge educational technology recently received a major boost. Work has begun to develop the campus computer network infrastructure at an estimated cost of $430,000. When completed in the summer of 1997, the "backbone" will connect every campus building, allowing for easier access to a much broader range of information for students and all users.

Central College stands at the threshold of an exciting and challenging future. It is excited by the possibilities of further defining what it means to be a liberal arts college in the Christian tradition, a tradition challenged by external pressures that threaten many independent, church-related colleges. Among these pressures are unsurpassed competition for students from state supported institutions and uncontrolled expenditures for student financial assistance—resulting in exorbitant discounting of tuition and diminishing loyalties from natural affinity groups.

Central College gives thanks to God for the sustenance provided by many congregations and countless caring people from the Reformed Church in America. It cherishes the covenantal tie with the RCA that calls each to a nurturing and mutually beneficial relationship (see "The Church and its Colleges, Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities," MGS 1990, pp. 139-40). During these exciting and challenging times, it is imperative that this covenantal tie be maintained to further the cause of Christ in a rapidly changing world.
Report of Hope College

INTRODUCTION

This is the year, 1997, in which the community of Holland, Michigan, is celebrating its sesquicentennial. This is a year for remembering, with gratitude, the hardships and the faithfulness of the founders of the community who were also in large measure the founders of Hope College. The leader of those early days, Dominie Albertus C. Van Raalte, stands as a model of faithfulness, of courage in the face of the unknown, of calm in controversy, and—above all—of kindness and caring. In all these things his example remains as an inspiration for the college he founded.

CAMPUS SPIRITUAL LIFE

Over the past year attendance at the voluntary weekday chapel services and the voluntary Sunday evening service continued to increase. Hope students, numbering 125, attended the InterVarsity's Student Mission Convention at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, over Christmas break 1996; and 168 students participated in spring break 1997 mission trips.

A group of Hope faculty organized a meeting of the Veritas Forum held on campus in January 1997. This is a forum that was first held several years ago at Harvard University and has since been held at Harvard University, Ohio State University, and a number of other colleges and universities. The purpose of the Veritas Forum is to stimulate careful discussion of the truth claims of Christianity. This is necessary in an era in which there is skepticism not only about Christianity but also about the idea that there is any truth. The Veritas Forum meetings at Hope College were well attended, and there was much excellent discussion at the plenary and breakout sessions.

HAWORTH CONFERENCE AND LEARNING CENTER

In January 1996 Hope College opened the Haworth Conference and Learning Center. This is a conference facility with fifty guest rooms, a dozen meeting rooms of various sizes, and a dining facility. It is open throughout the year for conferences and meetings. The center provides lodging accommodations for conference and meeting participants as well as for visitors to Holland. The college is pleased that the first group to stay overnight in the Haworth Conference and Learning Center was the Administrative Council of the Reformed Church in America. The college hopes many other RCA groups will plan to use the Haworth Conference and Learning Center in years to come. Visitors and guests at the Haworth Conference and Learning Center have been very favorably impressed by its design, furnishings, and staff.

The Haworth Conference and Learning Center is on College Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets, and it faces the Pillar Church—the oldest church in Holland. The center and its well-landscaped grounds provide an attractive transition between downtown Holland and the Hope College campus. Linked to the east side of the Haworth Conference and Learning Center building is the Cook Residence Hall. This spacious, well-furnished and air-conditioned facility provides desirable living quarters for 180 Hope College students during the fall and spring terms; and it provides additional lodging space for the Haworth Conference and Learning Center during the summer months. The Cook Residence Hall opened for occupancy in May 1997.
ENROLLMENT

While enrollment took a slight dip in 1996, it remains near the all-time high level of the year before, and applications for fall 1997 are running ahead of previous years. The college has resolved not to grow beyond three thousand students, and the college still has a small cushion before reaching that limit.

BUILDING AND LAND ACQUISITION

In September 1996 Hope College purchased two highly attractive and useful buildings on Eighth Street in downtown Holland. These are the buildings on either side of the Knickerbocker Theater, which the college acquired eight years ago. The buildings assure room for expansion in future years and bring some additional parking to the campus. The building at 100 East Eighth Street houses the offices of the A. C. Van Raalte Institute for Historical Studies, the Hope Academy of Senior Professionals (HASP), and a number of commercial establishments as well as classroom facilities for the college. The building at 84 East Eighth Street contains attractive apartments used by Hope students, a restaurant, and two shops. Hope College pays taxes on all commercial use property it owns.

SESQUICENTENNIAL

As noted at the beginning of this report, 1997 is the sesquicentennial anniversary of the founding of Holland. The college is participating fully with the city of Holland in the celebration of this event. With a generous gift from a member of Hope's board of trustees and with the cooperation of the city of Holland, Hope College is erecting a statue of Dominie A. C. Van Raalte in Centennial Park. This statue is based on a design that was originally made for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of Holland, but funds were not then available to erect the statue. The nine-foot-high statue is cast in bronze and will be installed on a granite pedestal provided by the city of Holland. It will be located on the east side of Centennial Park facing Hope College at Central Avenue and Graves Place. This will provide a visual linkage between the city and the college, both of which were founded by Van Raalte.

In addition, the Van Raalte Institute has published a biography of Van Raalte entitled *Albertus C. Van Raalte: Dutch Leader and American Patriot*, by Jeanne M. Jacobson, Elton J. Bruins, and Larry J. Wagenaar. This volume is available from the Hope-Geneva Bookstore.

STATISTICS

Here are some numbers that help flesh out the impressions of Hope College given in earlier sections of this report.

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INTERNET

When the Class of 2000 arrived in the fall of 1996, it became apparent that they, as a group, were accustomed to using e-mail and the Internet. For many of them, the e-mail message has replaced letters to and from home. The college is very pleased, therefore, that it had accelerated its upgrading of technology during the summer of 1996. The college currently has Internet access from 210 computers which are available for student use at various locations on campus. Most of these computers have Pentium processors. They are located either in the Van Wylen Library, in Van Zoeren Hall next to the library, or in computer rooms located in student dormitories. The computers are connected to printers and support the usual range of PC functions as well as providing Internet access.

In the summer of 1996 wiring was completed in four dormitories, allowing students to connect computers in their rooms directly to the campus mainframe. This wiring will be extended to the entire campus over the next three summers. In the meantime, students can access the campus mainframe directly from their rooms via modems and phone lines.

Over the last two years the Hope College home page has undergone several transformations. Making full use of the wonders of hypertext, it is now set up to provide access to a great deal of information about the college. By contacting the home page one can read background information about the college. By clicking from the home page into the KnowHope page one can also read, for example, the latest press releases and sports information from the college or learn what events are scheduled on campus over the next several days. Sometimes visitors to the home page are invited to comment on issues under consideration at the college. Everyone is invited to visit the Hope College home page and to access information that is of interest. Hope College's Internet address is http://www.hope.edu.

1998 GENERAL SYNOD AND CHANGES SINCE 1991 GENERAL SYNOD

In 1998 Hope College and Western Theological Seminary will jointly host the General Synod meeting. The most recent meeting of General Synod held at Hope College and Western Theological Seminary was in 1991. The college is looking forward to displaying the many changes that have taken place since 1991.

Despite all the changes, there is constancy at the core. The college now has the Haworth Conference and Learning Center, the Cook Residence Hall, and the DeWitt Tennis Center. The campus has expanded to Eighth Street. But Dimnent Chapel and the pine grove are still at the center of the campus.

MINORITY PRESENCE AT HOPE

One of the purposes of the RCA's Putting People in Mission fund drive and the $9.8 by '98 campaign was to provide scholarship assistance for minority students at Hope, Central, and Northwestern Colleges. Between 1986-87, when PPIM was being planned, and 1995-96, minority enrollment at Hope College rose from 63 students to 162 students. Although the college is disappointed that the numbers declined somewhat in 1996-97, the college is pleased with the pattern of steady growth in minority student participation and is eager to have it continue at least at its recent pace. The number of minority faculty and staff has increased substantially on a percentage basis over the last ten years, although the absolute numbers are still small. The college is committed to increasing minority participation at these levels as well.
The college is committed to increasing further cultural and racial diversity at Hope because the college is persuaded that Hope provides excellent opportunities for minority as well as for majority members. The college also believes that cultural and racial diversity adds value to the educational experience of all the college’s students.

CONCLUSION

Hope College is blessed in many ways, including the strong covenant relationship with the Reformed Church in America (see “The Church and its Colleges: Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities,” MGS 1990, pp. 139-40). As one of the signs of this covenantal relationship, Hope College is eagerly looking forward to hosting, along with Western Theological Seminary, the 1998 General Synod and having the General Synod meeting on its campus.

Report of Northwestern College

Northwestern College (NWC) cherishes its covenantal relationship with the Reformed Church in America (see “The Church and its Colleges: Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities,” MGS 1990, pp. 139-40). The college community believes that this relationship is worthy of nurturing and pledges an enthusiastic effort in doing so.

The mission of Northwestern College is to provide a distinctly Christian liberal arts education of recognized quality in a primarily undergraduate, coeducational, residential environment. Every accrediting agency in the last decade has cited, as a source of major strength, the overwhelming consensus of the Northwestern College community on this mission statement. Without question, the agreement on the overall mission of the college has been a source of great joy and inspiration.

In the ensuing paragraphs a brief review is given in each major area of the college’s operation. These areas include admissions, academic affairs, spiritual life, student affairs, financial affairs, and development.

ADMISSIONS

Northwestern began the fall 1996 semester with its second largest enrollment ever—1,142 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. Nearly 90 percent of Northwestern students are residential and of traditional age. The completion of a new 204-women residence hall enabled the college to accommodate this enrollment comfortably for the first time in many years.

Given the college’s present physical plant, an enrollment of twelve hundred FTE students would be desirable. This is the size at which the college can operate most effectively and efficiently. Given the declining demographic data for the college’s geographic region, this will be a continuing challenge. Ronald De Jong, director of admissions, is serving in his twenty-sixth year at Northwestern.

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

While many would cite the enhanced campus facilities as the major change during the last decade, a case could certainly be made for the increased rigor of the academic program. The college is desirous of having students earn an education as opposed to the oftentimes more popular practice of being given a diploma. The average ACT score of entering freshmen for the fall of 1996 was nearly twenty-four, a rather unbelievable increase of more than a full point over the 1995 ACT score.
Increasingly, Northwestern College students are taking advantage of off-campus programs. Among the most attractive options are the Chicago Metropolitan Semester and the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities’ academic programs, including the American Studies Program in Washington, D.C., the Latin American Studies Program in Costa Rica, the Los Angeles Film Study Center, the Russian Studies Program, and the Middle East Studies Program. These off-campus opportunities are available at no added expense to Northwestern College students. Vice-president for academic affairs Robert Zwier is completing his ninth year as the college’s chief academic officer.

SPIRITUAL LIFE

Spiritual life continues to be a foundational component of the Northwestern College experience. Opportunities abound for spiritual growth through chapel, residence hall Bible study groups, and clubs like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Especially popular are the Christian service opportunities. The Spring Service Projects occur in ten locations throughout the U.S., from New Hampshire to California, while the Summer of Service opportunities occur throughout the world, from Belize to Ukraine. These experiences are funded by students and represent volunteerism at its very best.

Northwestern maintains an active membership in the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, a ninety-one-member organization that takes seriously a Christ-centered approach to higher education. The college also continues a consecutive string of recognitions by the John Templeton Foundation as a “character-building” institution. Indeed, the vibrant Christian dimension present at Northwestern is one of the most distinguishing features of the institution. Chaplain Matthew Floding will begin his ninth year at the college in the fall of 1997.

STUDENT AFFAIRS

Although admittedly not perfect, Northwestern continues to offer one of the most outstanding residence life programs in the U.S. The goal is to provide a wholesome residence life program which builds on the firm foundations established in the homes of so many of Northwestern College’s students. Dean for student affairs Paul Blezien begins his ninth year in this important assignment.

Cocurricular programs in music, theater, and intercollegiate sport continue to be an important part of the Northwestern College experience for many students. The nationally reputed theater program continues to attract students from throughout the country and to place contestants in national competition. Choral and instrumental music programs remain attractive options for students, with an emerging percussion ensemble yet another alternative. Intercollegiate soccer programs for both women and men have recently been established. During the past year Northwestern’s athletic teams competed at the national tournament level in indoor and outdoor track, wrestling, football, women’s golf, and volleyball.

FINANCES

Wayne Kooiker will complete his twelfth year as vice-president for financial affairs; and, not coincidentally, for the twelfth consecutive year the college will finish with a surplus of revenues over expenditures. Record gift income at nearly $4 million includes approximately $500,000 from individual RCA churches. This gift component has remained constant for the past fifteen years, but still represents a significant portion of giving to the annual fund. The college remains very grateful for this financial partnership with the RCA. Harold Van Der Weide is completing his thirteenth year as director of church relations.
The Northwestern College Board of Trustees has established prices for tuition ($11,300), room ($1,400), and board ($1,900) for the 1997-98 academic year. This $14,600 total represents a modest 3.5 percent increase and is the smallest percentage increase in the past twelve years. Northwestern also is essentially fee-free. There are no additional charges for labs, student activities, computers, etc. The goal at Northwestern College is affordable excellence!

The endowment at Northwestern has increased from $2.5 million in 1985 to nearly $17 million today. Although this represents a major improvement, the endowment total is really rather microscopic in relation to those colleges with whom Northwestern competes.

DEVELOPMENT

At the conclusion of 1996, Northwestern completed a very successful capital campaign entitled Call to Commitment: Expanding the Vision. Commitments for current construction, endowed scholarships, and future expectancies totaled $22.5 million, exceeding the initial goal of $15.5 million. The college is indebted to all who gave so generously, even sacrificially, to improve the campus environment and financial viability of the institution. Construction projects completed during the Phase III capital campaign were the renovation of Van Peursem Hall, the main academic building; the cafeteria expansion and construction of the Jack and Mary De Witt Center; the construction of the James E. and Martha T. Bultman Center for Health, Physical Education, and Intercollegiate Athletics; and the restoration of historic, century-old Zwemer Hall, the original campus building. John Greller, vice-president for development, will begin his sixth year at the college in the fall of 1997.

PRAYERS

In the best spirit of a covenantal relationship, the college solicits your prayers in the following areas:

1. That the college will remain faithful to its mission of providing a distinctly Christian liberal arts education of recognized quality.

2. That those students capable of benefiting from a Northwestern College education will, indeed, enroll at NWC.

3. That those with a heart for the college's mission will contribute generously toward its financial support.

4. That the college will serve students well, even as it exhibits wise stewardship of monies entrusted to it.

CONCLUSION

On a more personal note, as I complete my twelfth year as president at Northwestern College, I often give thanks for the privilege of this office. I am surrounded by a highly credentialed faculty, a dedicated staff, and importantly, a very talented and enjoyable group of students. I know it must be surprising to many of you that Northwestern would want me around this long! I am especially indebted to Beth De Leeuw, my faithful and competent assistant, who has served the college with distinction since 1977.
EVALUATION AND REVIEW OF RCWM BY TASK FORCE

The Executive Committee of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries (RCWM) dedicated itself in 1996 to evaluating and expanding the ministry and visibility of RCWM to all Reformed Church in America women. The 1996 General Synod adopted a request by RCWM to form a task force to investigate the implications of bringing RCWM fully under the structure of the denomination (MGS 1996, p. 133). This action prompted evaluations of the ministry of RCWM and discussions on what it means to offer and carry out a vital ministry for all women. The request also recognized the ongoing challenge of financial support, the often undefined ways of relating to the RCA structure, and the need for a more comprehensive, inclusive ministry to women.

Three RCWM representatives, along with members from the Commission for Women and the General Synod Council (GSC), were members of this task force. The task force met two times and concluded that RCWM should remain self-governed and self-funded. The report of the task force (Task Force on the Relationship of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries with the RCA Structure) and its recommendations follow this RCWM report.

RCWM STAFF CHANGES

A major challenge in 1996 was finding a successor to Christina Van Eyl, who resigned in May 1996 to become editor of the Church Herald. RCWM is very grateful to Van Eyl for her leadership and personal commitment to both RCWM and the RCA.

In July 1996 RCWM offered the position of interim executive director to Arlene Arends Waldorf. Waldorf officially became RCWM’s fifth director in October 1996. The RCWM executive committee agreed to keep the RCWM main office in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Waldorf’s personal office in her home in Colorado. RCWM secretary Mary Hondorp continues to administer the Grand Rapids office. RCWM expresses gratitude to Hondorp for her talents, dedication, and graciousness.

Another staff change occurred with the retirement of the Regional Synod of the Far West consultant, Bette Leestma. Leestma was honored for her twenty-five years of faithful service. Glenda Perea of Denver, Colorado, was hired as the new Regional Synod of the Far West consultant. Perea officially began her position January 1, 1997.

RCWM/DENOMINATIONAL THEME

At the 1995 Triennial, RCWM introduced the denominational theme “God’s People Transformed: A Living Sacrifice, Renewed in Mind, and Discerning and Doing God’s Will.” The Rev. Renee House wrote the first of three Bible studies, Set Free for Sacrifice, for this denominational theme. In 1996 the Rev. Edwin Mulder wrote the second Bible study, Renewing Our Minds; and the Rev. Phyllis Palsma is contracted to write the third Bible study. RCWM representatives serve on the Denominational Theme Committee.

RCWM’S OUTREACH

The CAPS Calling Program, which started in January 1996, is designed for RCWM leaders to call on every congregation in the RCA in order to assess the strengths and needs of women’s ministries within the congregation, to plan for the future of the women’s ministry within that congregation, and to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as a part of the family of God. The program’s goal is for RCWM personnel (including denominational, synodical, and classical officers,
and paid staff) to establish personal contact with the leaders of each local congregation for the purpose of assessing needs and determining the shape of women’s ministry in the next century.

The three-year (1996-1998) RCWM Mission Commitment to China began in January 1996. This program carries forth the foundational purpose of RCWM, which is outreach and mission service for the purpose of sharing the gospel. By December 1996 RCWM members and friends donated $100,600 to help the Christian church in China.

The 1996 FOOTSTEPS program sent twenty-six women to four mission sites: Church of the Good News in Chicago, Illinois; Southern Normal School in Brewton, Alabama; New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey; and Prince of Peace Children’s Home in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

RCWM continues to offer scholarships to women in seminary from the Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund. Scholarship funds for women have also been established at Central, Hope, and Northwestern Colleges.

The RCWM executive committee decided at its November 1996 meeting to use the remaining PPIM funds (allocated for communication purposes) to purchase advertising space in the Church Herald. The intent of this expenditure is to inform all the women of the RCA about RCWM.

RCWM PROGRAMS

Regional RCWM leaders plan major conferences for women in their synodical unions. Hundreds of women attend these events, which include keynote speakers, musicians, and workshops. The classical and synodical unions also sponsor mission projects over and above those of the RCWM denominational office. Money, clothing, and gifts are donated to local and nonlocal projects. In-service training seminars are offered to officers and leaders on local and regional levels.

The next Triennial (a denomination-wide gathering for women) is scheduled for 1998 and is already in the active planning stages. The Triennial Committee, composed of representatives from across the denomination, already began meeting in 1996. The 1998 Triennial will be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, August 1-4. The theme for the 1998 Triennial is “The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Us” (Isa. 61:1-4 and Luke 4:16-19). This theme will be used denomination-wide and by RCWM 1998-2000. The keynote speaker for the 1998 Triennial is Maya Angelou; the concert artist is Cherri Keaggy; and the Bible study leaders are the Revs. Bruce and Vicki Menning.

RCWM FINANCES

At year-end 1996 the RCWM financial report was encouraging, with a modest surplus. This existed because RCWM did not pay salary or benefit costs for an executive director for four months. In mid-year 1996, when there was a deficit, Sherry Vander Eyk, president of RCWM, sent an appeal letter. RCWM members responded with great generosity. Because of that response, RCWM did not send a year-end appeal letter. However, RCWM still received many year-end gifts and was able to finish the year in the black with a total administrative income of $197,229.06 and expenses of $175,521.43. All mission giving was in excess of these totals. RCWM is grateful to God for the gifts of time, talents, and money shared by the wonderful women of the Reformed Church in America.
CONCLUSION

Women continue to share their stories of how RCWM has helped them develop their leadership gifts, has encouraged them to be personally, spiritually, and financially involved in mission; and has provided opportunities to study the Bible and gather together with other women for fellowship, learning, and outreach. As RCWM ministers to and with its current membership, RCWM also looks to a future in which the ministry is expanded and transformed, continuing to be vital to RCA churches, the denomination, and the world.

R-2. To give thanks to God, on behalf of all the women of the Reformed Church in America, for the leadership, direction, wisdom, and faithful service of Christina Van Eyl as executive director of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries from July 1994 to May 1996. (ADOPTED)

> Sherry Vander Eck, president of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries, introduced Christina Van Eyl to the Synod. Christina Van Eyl addressed the Synod. <

> Sherry Vander Eck led General Synod in a prayer of thanksgiving for Christina Van Eyl’s leadership, direction, wisdom, and faithful service as executive director of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries. <

Report of the Task Force on the Relationship of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries with the RCA Structure

BACKGROUND

More than one hundred years ago a group of women in the Reformed Church in America organized themselves as the Women’s Executive Committee of the Board of Domestic Missions, with the express purpose of providing funding support for Reformed Church missions around the globe. Drawing upon ideas like the “cent” mission offerings, to which women would give one penny a week for missions, the women’s board quickly became a major impetus in the success of RCA missions, both domestically and abroad. (The women’s board began mission work for the RCA in Appalachia and among Native Americans in Oklahoma, and was key in the development of Southern Normal School. Women gained status as full missionaries in Japan as early as 1901 and in India within a few years of that.)

Eventually the mission boards of the denomination became one. But the need for a separate organization concerned with issues and services related to women continued to exist. The National Department of Women’s Work was voted into existence by the 1957 General Synod (MGS 1957, p. 328), and in 1972 that organization became Reformed Church Women, the direct precursor of the current structure of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries (RCWM). This ministry, like that very first Women’s Executive Committee, remained independent of denominational structure both in decision making and funding.

At nearly the same time, in related yet wholly separate spheres, the General Synod was looking at the issue of women holding church office. In 1958 General Synod adopted a declaration that Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices of the church (elder, deacon, minister of Word and sacrament) (MGS 1958, p. 328); fourteen years later, in 1972, Synod dropped the word male from the Book of Church Order in respect to the offices of elder and deacon (MGS 1972, p. 96). And seven years after that, in responding to judicial challenges of ordinations of women to the office of minister of the Word and sacrament, Synod opened that office to women (MGS 1979, p. 69).
Since the late 1970s, then, women's ministry has been identified with an independently functioning women's organization, while women in ministry has been more the purview of the denomination's Commission for Women. Many needs have been fulfilled and many ministries have been started and supported through these parallel structures. But questions and challenges have also presented themselves concerning vision, focus, function, and funding in a world where the needs and interests of women continue to change and evolve.

**THE MANDATE**

Against this backdrop, then, the 1996 General Synod, in response to a discussion of RCWM's future viability and to an accompanying recommendation presented in the report of RCWM, voted:

To instruct the moderator of the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Reformed Church Women's Ministries (RCWM) Executive Council, the general secretary, the director of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, and the director of Congregational Services, to convene a task force of nine members, to include representatives from RCWM, the Commission for Women, and the General Synod Council's Congregational Services Committee/Unit, to investigate the implications of bringing RCWM fully under the structure of the denomination, for report to the board of RCWM and to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, p. 133).

The following persons were named to the task force:

Barbara Boss
Nancy Cooper
Toni Macon
Nancy Ryan
Sherry VanderEyk
Carole Walker

The Rev. Jeffrey Japinga, Ellen Mers, and Arlene Arends Waldorf served as staff resource persons for the task force.

**PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY**

The task force met on December 10, 1996, and on January 28-29, 1997, both in Newark, New Jersey. In addressing its mandate, the group spent considerable time reviewing the historical beginnings both of RCWM and of the Commission for Women, the two primary organizations/agencies of the Reformed Church with specific connections to women's ministries, and exploring what it understood to be the current perceptions of the two groups. The task force, once satisfied it had grasped the scope and commitments of these two key organizations, then began to examine alternate models for women's ministry, the advantages and disadvantages of each of the possible models, and the costs or benefits in each possible change. Finally, it looked specifically and in depth at the work and focus of Reformed Church Women's Ministries, how best a women's ministry organization might function as it approaches the end of the twentieth century, and whether the current RCWM structure supported such ministries. The recommendations at the end of this report grew out of this process and the findings of the task force, which follow.

**FINDINGS**

Reformed Church Women's Ministries has a long history of mission involvement through a self-governed, self-determined, and almost wholly self-funded structure. In its earliest years this form of structure was necessary because it was, in effect, the only means by which women could participate within the formal structures of the church. It also provided community and spiritual development for women whose lives revolved around home and family. It was a
place to belong and to serve the church at a time when there were relatively few opportunities for women, and it provided those opportunities in ways that strengthened both the individual and the community.

Those values and structures continue to have an abiding role in the work and ministry of RCWM. It continues to be a self-governing and self-funding organization whose leadership is drawn almost exclusively from laywomen; indeed, it is probably the most lay-led part of the RCA structure. It doesn’t draw direct funding from the RCA as a whole, even though it provides the bulk of ministries to/from/for women for the whole of the church. It continues to be a place of belonging and support; its every-third-year Triennial is the largest single cross-denominational gathering of RCA members; and its regional gatherings attract significant numbers of women.

RCWM also continues to hold up mission and spiritual development as two of its main foci. In 1996, for example, RCWM contributed $100,640 to RCA mission work in China as part of a three-year mission commitment of $300,000. Local RCWM groups also have historically been generous in their support of local and global missions, both in funding and in direct service through the RCWM Footsteps volunteer service program. The RCWM Bible study book, tied to the themes of its Triennials, is widely used and appreciated. In short, a tradition of ministry, mission, and community that began over a century ago is still being lived out in the organization today. The task force affirms this ministry without equivocation.

Continuity and self-confidence are marks of an effective organization. But carrying the same goals, dreams, and structures for over a century can also produce its own downside, either real or perceived, if the organization fails to engage the changing signs of the times. And clearly, the end of the twentieth century is a very different time for women. The needs and challenges of women in 1997, like their opportunities in the church and the world, are vastly different than those of a century ago. The majority of women today have taken on work responsibilities outside the home, creating huge issues unknown to women three generations ago. No longer is a women’s organization the only place where women can be involved in the ministry of the church; now all offices of the church have been opened to women. Women still need organizations dedicated to their health and well-being. Many women’s issues remain distinct from men’s, which accounts for the rapid growth of professional organizations just for women. And women need their church to help them address today’s issues spiritually, in the same way the whole church must understand and minister to the culture around them.

Sadly, a widespread perception, especially among younger, professional women, is that RCWM remains their grandmother’s organization. From leadership to style to themes addressed, RCWM is identified by many as belonging to an older generation and being out of touch with the needs of younger women today. Those views are heard in conversation and are reflected in the declining membership and revenue of RCWM. This is not a problem unique to RCWM; any organization with a long history and continuity of service faces the challenge of continually re-imagining its work and ministry while at the same time not excluding those which had sustained the organization through decades of service. That includes the RCA as a whole.

Some brief examples. The very dues which sustain the organization financially tend also to be perceived as a dividing line; membership in RCWM is only for those who have paid their dues, not for all women of the church. Women in ordained ministry perceive RCWM almost as antagonists, not supporters; there has been little contact between the Commission for Women and RCWM, even though the mandate of both organizations is to serve all women. Working or single mothers perceive themselves as unwanted when meetings are held during the day, or when meetings are held at night or on weekends with no child care available. While these findings are not a product of a scientific study but rather of anecdotal evidence, they are nonetheless real and must be treated that way.
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these understandings of the work and ministry of RCWM, the task force was then able to directly address the task which the 1996 General Synod put before it: to investigate the implications of bringing RCWM fully under the structure of the denomination. Or, as the task force alternately phrased the issue: by what means will the women of the RCA be best served in ministry and service?

In examining the implications of a number of different structural models, the task force concluded that the potential for long-term, effective ministry for/by/with women in the RCA would be best served by a women’s ministry organization that remained self-governed and self-funded, as opposed to a number of models that placed women’s ministry more directly under denominational structures.

In drawing this conclusion, the task force raised a number of values it felt were crucial to a successful women’s ministry:

- **Closeness to constituency**: Who better to guide and direct women’s ministry than the very women whom that ministry intends to involve and serve?
- **Personal ownership**: Making RCWM but one piece of a broader structure will not enhance ownership in the organization, and may decrease it.
- **Adaptability**: By remaining self-governing, RCWM has the potential to more quickly adapt to changing circumstances, should it commit itself to doing so.
- **Trust**: The task force believed in the commitment of RCWM to be a ministry for the next century, not just the past century.

This conclusion does not solve all the issues and challenges facing RCWM; funding and more widespread participation are deep issues that still need direct attention in the near-term. But no other model provided easy solutions to these problems either. For example, to bring RCWM into the existing structure of the RCA and, like some other program offices, to fund its executive and office costs through assessments, addresses some of the funding issues for the short term, but it does not provide any assurances that its ministry will find the connections to all women so urgently needed. Neither did any other model provide that. The task force felt strongly that the women themselves, under the leadership of executive director Arlene Arends Waldorf and RCWM’s executive board, were in the best position to face head-on the challenges before it.

The task force thus recommended:

**R-3.**

To reaffirm the self-governing, self-funding structure of Reformed Church Women’s Ministries. (ADOPTED)

The preceding recommendation does not imply that the task force is suggesting nothing about RCWM needs to change. Indeed, as identified in this report, there are key issues which, if not addressed, will negatively affect the future viability of RCWM and women’s ministries in the RCA in general. That makes a process of re-imaging, refocusing, and renewal an imperative for RCWM if it hopes to be an exciting, vibrant ministry for all the women of the church into the twenty-first century. The task force is expressing, in the strongest means possible, its hope
and dream that RCWM will, in a faithful and prayer-filled process, tackle head-on the issues raised in this report.

The result of such a process—an exciting, vibrant ministry by/for/with all the women of the RCA—will not simply enhance the viability of an organization called RCWM, but will enhance the ministry of the RCA as a whole. Indeed, the RCA is indebted to RCWM for more than a century of ongoing ministry and mission support. Such an interdependent relationship, both in formal and informal means, strengthens both. All this suggests that both the RCA and the RCWM would be best served by a mutual investment in each other’s futures, not only in the accountability built into R-3 below, but in the funding of the study as well.

To do what the task force recommends in R-3 is not inexpensive. Outside consultants may need to be engaged to help RCWM in its process of re-imaging and renewal, in the same way that any individual or organization can often be helped by nonbiased experts in a particular field. (To assist RCWM in this endeavor, an amount of $12,500 is included in the proposed 1998 General Synod Operational Budget—see the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget section in the Report of the General Synod Council.)

The task force therefore recommended:

R-4.
To strongly urge Reformed Church Women’s Ministries, in the next year, to engage in a comprehensive self-study of future directions, toward the goal of ministry that includes and serves the needs of all the women of the Reformed Church; and further,

to strongly urge Reformed Church Women’s Ministries to report its findings and anticipated actions to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Finally, the task force is convinced that any effective ministry by/for/with all the women of the RCA must bridge not only some of the generational issues raised in this report, but the false chasm between ordained women in office and laywomen. Yes, there are unique issues faced by women who are called to ordained leadership roles in the church. But there is also much that both groups can learn from each other.

To that end, the task force recommended:

R-5.
To strongly urge the Reformed Church Women’s Ministries executive board and the Commission for Women to meet jointly in 1998 to explore means for fostering future contact and cooperation. (ADOPTED)

The task force commends the need for a strong and vital women’s ministry to the RCA, and it makes this report in support of those in the RCA who have in a variety of ways over the past century committed themselves to that goal.
REPORT OF THE OFFICE FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND YOUTH MINISTRY

We have heard the words since childhood, many of us; heard them, said them, prayed them so often that they were permanently written in our minds. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

We know them to be true and faithful words, and we find comfort in our knowledge. We know so much today, more than at any other time in human history. But in this age of seemingly limitless knowledge, what happens when what we know can’t answer all of our questions; when our knowledge as a people outpaces our ability to discern the appropriate application of that knowledge? How do we respond, for instance, when we learn that the Lord who is our Shepherd is no longer the creator of all the sheep?

It was, of course, a sheep that embodied the news of the latest scientific breakthrough: the ability of humans to clone animals; the ability of a scientist in a lab to take the genetic material of a particular animal and to “create” another identical animal. This sheep, named Dolly, was living proof of what human beings have come to know. What was far less certain is that we know what to do with our knowledge. Calls came immediately to enact bans on the cloning of humans; others asked for bans on cloning altogether; still others said that any stoppage was already too late, that the box had been opened, the technology loosed.

Knowing how to do things—knowing how to clone sheep or how to build better weapons or how to make more money—has not helped us decide whether or how to use that knowledge. Cloning technology, for example, is an immensely complex field, able to yield potentially both astonishing good and frightening evil. Knowledge of weapon technology has never kept members of society from killing each other; knowledge of pollutants has not stopped us from fouling the world. Indeed, knowledge of God as revealed in the Scriptures has not stopped us from misusing God’s name or ignoring it. Something more is clearly needed, something more than just the teaching and learning of knowledge.

Twenty years ago a Christian educator named John Westerhoff wrote a little book called Will Our Children Have Faith? We cannot, he said, be content simply to repeat schooling-instruction methods and expect people to understand and live their faith. “Faith cannot be taught by any method of instruction,” Westerhoff wrote. “We can only teach religion.” Robert Coles, in his new book, Moral Intelligence of Children, echoed Westerhoff in writing that morally intelligent children—ones who are good and kind, who think about others—acquire this ability not just “by memorization or rules and regulations, or by classroom discussion or kitchen compliance. We grow morally as a consequence of learning how to be with others, how to behave in this world; a learning prompted by taking to heart what we have seen and heard. The child is an ever-present witness of grown-up morality.”

Westerhoff and Coles point us to a deeply interconnected world where the means by which we relate become just as important as what we know. So also, ironically, are some scientific disciplines. Recent research in fields like quantum physics and microbiology, foreign to most of us but essential to our way of life, has revealed patterns in the universe unlike anything we’ve known before; a vast interrelationship of actions and reactions.

What does this mean for the future of Christian education and how we in the Reformed Church in America form our educational practice? Clearly, it is no longer enough for Christian education to dispense only information about God. Knowledge by itself may never have been enough, but in this age of information saturation, we need something more, something that
stirs deeply within us. We must read the Bible, live the Gospels, study the faith, both with mind and with heart. And we must seek out involvement with other persons, both believers and nonbelievers, and with the wider culture, as we seek to grow religious knowledge into a living faith and a life of discipleship.

The discipline of Christian education, whether for children, youth, or adults, is perfectly positioned to make a significant impact on this changing world, if we allow it to be. For instance, we can prepare children and adults for active faith and engagement with the world not only by teaching what the Bible says, but by encouraging children to ask why, and to ask what impact their own knowledge might have on the world around them. We can encourage adults to learn and seek knowledge not just as individuals, but with communities which seek to evaluate moral applications of that knowledge. We can no longer simply invite people to an education class on Sunday morning, give them a dose of the divine, and then send them back into their fractured, competitive world. We must model an education program that engages both the mind and the heart; that emphasizes both knowledge and relationship.

These insights continue to be the compelling force behind RCA initiatives in Christian education in areas like Young Children and Worship, LiFE curriculum, Project Timothy, deacons' ministry, and a new effort in biblical engagement. These and other projects have been and continue to be developed to help churches to seek fresh models and resources for learning, and to engage all children, youth, and adults in the lifelong work of Christian discipleship. What follows in this report is a more focused look at some of the initiatives of the Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry.

Children’s Curriculum

LiFE (Living in Faith Everyday), the Bible-based curriculum for children in preschool through sixth grade, jointly developed by the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America, continues to be well received by RCA congregations. Introduced in the fall of 1994 after five years of designing, writing, and editing, LiFE is uniquely designed not only to teach children the basics of the Christian religion, but to move them toward a personal encounter with faith. Faith knowledge is but one of the three components of the curriculum, joined by faith nurture and faith modeling. Adult leaders are encouraged to talk about their own faith with children, not simply to be dispensers of Biblical facts. Children, in turn, are encouraged to wonder openly about God and the Bible and faith, as they themselves begin to live into God’s story.

Now that the core children’s curriculum is in more than a third of all RCA churches, LiFE is completing the first year of the second round of the two-year cycle. Using the feedback collected from users, editors are making quarter-by-quarter revisions of LiFE curriculum. The revised curriculum will be available for use in the fall of 1998. In light of the plans for the revised LiFE curriculum, the education office is advising congregations to order conservatively for the 1997-98 program year.

A network of regional consultants, working under the direction of the regional synod education staff with the support from the RCA’s Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry, provides direct support and training for RCA congregations using LiFE. These consultants are available for a minimal cost. In addition, Here’s LiFE, a new workshop video for LiFE leaders, produced by CRC Publications in cooperation with the RCA, was introduced in the fall of 1996 and is available for loan through TRAVARCA or purchase through the RCA Distribution Center. LiFE Support, a four-page newsletter for LiFE leaders, produced by CRC Publications with editorial input from the RCA, made its debut in the fall of 1996 in response to leader requests for craft activities, room management helps, and alternative response activities.
Bible Way continues to be available and will remain available as long as there are a sufficient number of churches using it to warrant its printing. About one-fourth of RCA congregations still use Bible Way on Sunday mornings or in midweek programs. The availability of two core curricula that are grounded both in Scripture and in the Reformed creeds and confessions is a valuable asset to the overall education program of RCA congregations.

While the Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry continues to believe strongly in these two core curricula and the means by which they allow the Christian faith to be presented to children, it also recognizes the varying educational needs of RCA congregations. Thus, the Office continues to be involved in conversations with partner denominations regarding already-produced curricula or the development of new curricula resources.

This summer the RCA Distribution Center will begin carrying the Whole People of God curriculum, a lectionary-based curriculum produced by a consortium of U.S. and Canadian denominations and publishers. Whole People will especially appeal to those congregations who want a lectionary-based curriculum; who want or need options that allow all age groupings to study the same topic or biblical text on the same day; and who value a curriculum with a high degree of theological integrity. The office is also participating with several denominations and publishing houses (Presbyterian Church in Canada, United Methodist Publishing House, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and Christian Board of Publication, among others) in the initial development of a basic Bible curriculum for the year 2000.

In addition to the core curricula, the RCA participated in the development and publication of the StoryTeller series, a five-day vacation Bible school program published by a partnership of several denominations. “Stories Jesus Told,” the newest in the StoryTeller series, is available for 1997.

The General Synod Council assigned responsibility for mission education to Congregational Services. Congregational Services, along with Mission Services and Stewardship and Communication Services, has initiated plans for a twelve-session series, Living in Mission Everywhere, for children in kindergarten through sixth grade. The first session, “American Indians,” will be introduced in the summer of 1997.

Leader training designs and workshops for denominationally-supported curricula are available to support planners, leaders, and teachers. Regional synod education staff and a network of thirty-one regional consultants are available to lead continuing education events, provide teacher training, and consult with churches regarding the development of sound education programs with children. Ongoing support for all congregations is provided through a toll-free RCA Resources Information Helpline, (800) 968-7221, and through the Office for Children’s Ministry, (800) 968-3943.

Children and Worship

In addition to providing core curricula for the support of congregational ministries with young children, the Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry remains deeply committed to the Children and Worship program adopted in 1988 as a cooperative ministry of Western Theological Seminary, the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Children and Worship helps children learn about and experience God in a worship setting of their own, while also preparing them for the time when they will worship with the whole congregation.

A network of twenty regional Children and Worship trainers in the U.S. and Canada are available for scheduling and presenting either introductory sessions for congregations who want to learn more about the program or basic training events for congregations who want to become involved in the ministry. In addition, the trainers provide enrichment events or
specialized events for congregations that have been involved in the program for a number of years. The basic training costs $75 per participant. The cost for introductions, enrichment events, and specialized events is keyed to the nature of the event. These fees are used to offset the contract costs of the trainers and to enable the denominations to offer an annual conference and retouching event for trainers.

Children and Worship trainers who work on behalf of the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada are: Barbara Cullum, the Rev. Jan Hoffman, and the Rev. Phyllis Palsma (Regional Synod of Albany); Nina Dupuis, Yvonne Hogenes, Wendy Pauw, Marie Prins, Linda Shaw, and Anelia Wierbos (Regional Synod of Canada); Candy Baylis and Ann Jean Vander Veen (Regional Synod of the Far West); Holly Schut, Deb Swanson, and Ellen Vellenga (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes); Marcia Flobing (Regional Synod of the Heartland); Dot De Boer and Karen Stabelfeldt (Regional Synod of Mid-America); Kay Weeks (Regional Synod of the Midwest); and Betsy Tmnlyn (Regional Synod of New York).

Congregations interested in Children and Worship are encouraged to contact the RCA Office for Children’s Ministry, (800) 968-3943, or the RCA Resource Information Helpline, (800) 968-7221, for information about localized training and personnel available to support the Children and Worship program.

Youth Ministry

The availability of church education curricula for youth is no less important than it is for younger children. Here again, the RCA continues to benefit from its cooperation with CRC Publications and the education department of the Christian Reformed Church. Cooperative agreements make available a full range of learning materials for younger youth and a variety of course offerings for middle and older youth. The Crossroads series, produced by CRC Publications for junior high-aged young people, published one new course in the fall of 1996 and will premiere another in the fall of 1997. The Prime Time Bible Study series and LifeWise series continue to be helpful curriculum options for senior high young people. For a full picture of resources for youth, one may call Jane Schuyler at the Resource Information Helpline, (800) 968-7221.

In addition, the Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry participated in an independent survey of youth leaders and young people commissioned by CRC Publications, but with broad involvement of RCA constituencies. The results of this survey, done through focus groups, telephone polls, and mail-in survey instruments, will provide the office with crucial information on the needs of youth and congregations, not only in curriculum and other materials, but in the kinds of teaching and learning methods that are most effective with youth.

But ministry with youth does not end with appropriate curriculum; it only has begun. Youth need to be provided with opportunities, both in the classroom and outside of it, to see faith in action and to test their own developing faith in real-life situations. That model is lived out in Project Timothy, an annual ten-day summer mission event for high school youth and adult sponsors. In 1996 more than forty RCA young people gained powerful new insights into faith and discipleship through their participation in Project Timothy. Listen to what they said:

It's amazing to think that God can use me to help young people grow spiritually and at the very same time use them to help me grow spiritually.

What the Project Timothy experience has done in my life is, in short, made me believe in God!...It's strange to think that I had to go so far away to find something that was in front of me the whole time.

I met so many people who surprised me. I met people who proved my stereotypes wrong.
In 1997 six RCA ministry sites will host Project Timothy participants during July: St. Thomas, Virgin Islands; San Jose, California; Interlaken, New York; Powell, Ohio; Miami, Florida; and Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Rev. Randy Wieland, pastor for youth at Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount, California, and an education consultant for the Regional Synod of the Far West, is the coordinator of Project Timothy.

Staffing for youth ministry in the RCA continues to be an important topic of consideration, and one of positive directions. In the fall of 1994, following the departure of the Rev. Keith Krebs from his position as the RCA's minister for youth and young adults, the General Synod Council approved a revised position description for an associate for youth and young adult ministry and authorized a search process to fill the position. However, throughout the late fall 1994 and early winter 1995, youth staff in RCA regions, regional synod executives, congregation-based leaders, and others expressed continuing concern that the denomination seek to define its responsibilities in youth ministry to better complement the work already being carried out in regional synods.

In the spring of 1995 the General Synod Council approved a new plan for staffing youth ministry in the RCA. This included the creation of up to four part-time contract positions to carry out key ministries for youth, in cooperation with the ongoing efforts of regional synods. Due to the departure of the minister for education and faith development, the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell, shortly after this plan was approved, however, actual implementation was put on hold until the new person in that position and the denominational youth team were able to hold discussions concerning this issue.

Those discussions were held during meetings of the Denominational Youth Team (DYT) in April and November 1996. (DYT is composed of one representative from each of the regional synods, one representative from each of the racial/ethnic councils, and the minister for education and faith development. The meetings are held under a shared-cost arrangement, whereby each member pays his or her own transportation and the Congregational Services program budget pays all on-site costs.)

At its November 1996 meeting, DYT approved a job description for the first of the contract positions, youth team leader. Three members of the team—the Rev. Randy Wieland, Colleen Wiessner, and the Rev. Jeffrey Japinga—were given authority by the team to receive resumes, conduct interviews, and make a single recommendation to the director of Congregational Services. In December 1996 a forty-day-per-year contract for this position was accepted by Ron Den Hartog, who also serves in ministry at Central Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa. At its April 1997 meeting DYT focused on creation of the parameters around a contract position in urban youth ministry as the next step in a complete staffing package.

It is clear that DYT, with its diversity along both regional synod and racial/ethnic lines, will continue to play a key role in determining the future of youth ministries at a denominational level. Because of the ongoing high level of success in youth ministry programming at the regional level, it is crucial that the denomination closely coordinate its youth ministry efforts with those that are already ongoing at different levels of the church, while retaining a strong denominational commitment to youth ministry and to the youth of the Reformed Church in America. A holistic youth ministry program for the RCA is one that is best carried out together rather than exclusively within the bounds either of the denominational structure or of a regional synod; the youth team will be expected to provide leadership and guidance in both staffing and program areas.
Family Ministry

Since 1990, at the impetus of a General Synod recommendation to the then-General Program Council "to develop a plan, including job description and means of funding, to provide full-time staff for the Office of Family Life, making family life ministry a major program priority in the Reformed Church in America" (MGS 1990, R-16, p. 101), the Office of Education has sought to find a way to fulfill the synod's intent to consciously do family ministry. With the encouragement of the GSC Congregational Services Committee, the minister for education and faith development hired in the spring of 1995 the Rev. Tom Schwanda to give eighteen to twenty days annually to family ministries as a beginning step. Most of Schwanda's attention has been given to the strengthening of resource information in the area of family ministries, including the ongoing updating of an annotated bibliography of family resources, which is available for all congregations through the RCA Distribution Center. In addition, a packet of materials to coincide with National Family Week in May 1997 was sent to all RCA congregations.

Adult Education

In 1995, in response to the report of RCA general secretary, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the General Synod the approved the following recommendation:

To instruct the General Synod Council's Congregational Services Unit to expand programs for equipping the laity in the ministries of the Reformed Church in America;

and further, to give a new central emphasis on adult Christian education and spiritual formation (MGS 1995, R-5, p. 136).

R-5 came out of Granberg-Michaelson's own commitment that the church must increasingly look at fresh new ways to identify and utilize the gifts of the laity in ministry, or risk a faith where "our faith atrophies and stops growing, [and] the waters of our baptism become stagnant" (MGS 1995, p. 41).

This emphasis on adult learning hearkens back to Westerhoff and Coles, and to the new sciences: How can we continue to not only increase our knowledge of faith, but also to live out what we know? The Office for Christian Education and Youth Ministry is excited to commend to the RCA a new initiative in biblical engagement, tied to the theme of the 1997 General Synod, "God's People Transformed: Renewed in Mind and Discerning and Doing God's Will." Here's what the committee putting together the content of this initiative stated as its goal:

We desire to see the Reformed Church actively engaged with Scripture, in order to experience the transforming power of God's Word. In the life of the General Synod and through its work, individuals, congregations, and the whole of the church will be invited to question and examine how this active engagement with Scripture can be realized in every area of their individual and collective lives.

The word "engagement" was purposefully chosen, to challenge us to move beyond simply acquiring more biblical knowledge to an active dialogue with Scripture. The committee passionately believes that such an "engagement" with Scripture could make all the difference in the world; the difference between stagnation and growth; between skepticism and faith. Toward that end, it designed a full program aimed at providing both the inspiration and resources necessary for individuals and congregations to embark on a program of biblical engagement and dialogue. The program's focus is a comprehensive resources package for biblical engagement, including: 1) a broadcast-quality video emphasizing the transforming power of Scripture that can come to individuals and congregations who seek it; 2) a complete
resource book, with both articles and direct resource listings, that will provide congregations and teachers with the information necessary to match the ethos and need of a particular congregation with an appropriate resource; and 3) a trained consultant team that can go into congregations and help identify and set up an appropriate means for Scripture engagement.

Prior to voting on R-6, Synod viewed the video, *Turning Points: The Dangerous, Liberating, Holy, Transforming, Everyday Stories of People Enjoying the Bible.*

**R-6.**

To urge every RCA congregation to ask how it can incorporate an ongoing emphasis on biblical engagement for transformation into its life and witness; and further,

_to commend the resources provided through the Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry to each RCA congregation._

_(ADOPTED)_

Other key initiatives for adults in the past year also focused primarily on training for leadership and spiritual growth. In December 1996, in cooperation with the Office of Diaconal Ministries, *Branches on the Vine* made its debut as a self-contained, consistory training workshop. The workshop combines the previously published books, *Ministry of the Deacon,* by Betty Voskuil, and *Ministry of the Elder,* by the Rev. Robert A. White, and the video, *As One Who Serves,* with a newly created workshop structure for training elders and deacons together. The package is available through the RCA Distribution Center.

The Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry has also entered into dialogue with RCA camps and conference centers around the themes of personal spiritual formation and spiritual retreating. The wonderful resources the RCA enjoys in its camps and conference centers have long been known through our young people. Now, in a joint initiative, the RCA camps and conference centers and the education office are exploring ways to combine the physical resources of the camps and conference centers with some spiritual formation initiatives from the denomination. The partnership suggests some innovative and helpful directions for the future.

**Leader Support for Education**

A key to any effective educational program, whether at the local, regional, or denominational level, is a provision for first identifying those gifted for educational ministry, and then providing training and leadership resources that allow those gifts to grow, blossom, and be appreciated in the RCA.

The primary means of reaching this goal is the network of regionally-based, trained consultants available to all RCA congregations. Consultants can provide congregations with assistance on a number of levels, including teacher training, programming recommendations, educational workshops, or even redesign of the educational ministry. Consultants should be contacted through the education ministry of the regional synods; contact names and numbers are printed in the *Plan Calendar.* Or, call the Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry, (800) 968-3943, for referral to a consultant.

The Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry also produces resources that can be used directly by congregations in leadership training. *Branches on the Vine,* a consistory training workshop, and *Here's Life,* a video-training workshop for Life curriculum leaders, were both introduced in 1996. In addition, the office supports the publication of *Servant Leaders,* a resource newspaper for congregational leaders, as a key means of identifying important congregational resources.

One key component in all ongoing educational initiatives from the Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry is the Council for Christian Education (CCE). The council meets three times annually, paid for with a shared funding agreement, and operates under the umbrella of a document approved in 1995 outlining eight assumptions about the joint work of the denominational education office and regional synod education personnel. CCE plays a central role in the future development of RCA educational philosophy and in the development or evaluation of educational resources. The CCE is the embodiment of a commitment that Christian education can be done best and most efficiently when it is done on a collaborative basis and with the local congregation in mind.

While structurally housed in the Office of Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, and functionally the responsibility of classes, the newly introduced certification process for associates in ministry and ministers of Christian education is wholly supported by the education office. The office encourages all those who are actively involved in Christian education in the Reformed Church to take advantage of this tremendous opportunity, and the office promotes the program in a variety of settings.

General Synod Referrals

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To request Congregational Services to research the variety of alternatives available for equipping RCA congregations in the development of covenant groups (small group ministries), marriage enrichment programs, and other programs offering support to the variety of family structures within our congregations; and further,

- to include in this research such initiatives such as the Cursillo Tres Dias program,
- Stephen Ministries, and similar programs in other denominations (MGS 1996, R-7, p. 103).

The Office of Christian Education and Youth Ministry assigned this referral to the associate for family ministry, the Rev. Tom Schwanda. Since an annotated listing of family-related resources was already in development, the resources and programs listed here were included in that development process. That resource will be available through the office in 1997 to help guide congregations and individuals as they seek guidance for family ministry.

The 1995 General Synod voted:

To request the General Synod Council Congregational Services Committee, though its Office for Education, in cooperation with the Commission on Theology, to prepare and make available to RCA congregations a study guide on the Belhar Confession (MGS 1995, R-16, p. 102).

Work on this item continues to be delayed by more pressing cooperative matters with the Commission on Theology, especially the study guide on the homosexuality curriculum. The Commission on Theology will be consulted at its fall 1997 meeting regarding movement forward on this referral.
The 1995 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Congregational Services Unit, though its Office of Education, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to provide materials and resources in keeping with the above prospectus outline in order to enable RCA congregations, classes, and regional synods more fully to fulfill the 1994 General Synod’s call to repentance, prayer, learning, and growth in ministry to and with persons of homosexual orientation (MGS 1995, R-5, p. 388).

The vacancy in the Office of Education during the second half of 1995 delayed initial action on this recommendation until the new minister for education and faith development was in place. On February 1, 1996, a working group, brought together by the minister for education and faith development, developed an outline for a three-tiered model of resources: 1) a study guide which would follow the content of a section of the prospectus presented to the 1995 General Synod (MGS 1995, pp. 381-88); 2) additional study materials addressing the scriptural and pastoral questions surrounding this issue, in keeping with the previous statements and actions of the General Synod; and 3) an annotated bibliography of outside resources that move beyond the current statements of the General Synod, which could be used for additional study and reflection on this issue.

The working group also recommended the possibility of developing a video resource unique to the RCA, to be used alongside the first tier of written resources, pending the identification of possible funding sources for this video. This educational plan was affirmed by the Commission on Theology. The 1996 General Synod, in response to a motion from the floor that the annotated bibliography be removed from the model, voted to defeat that motion (MGS 1996, p. 142) and to leave the design in place as identified. The first draft of the study guide was completed in late 1996 and circulated to the working group and the Commission on Theology for comment. Those comments were incorporated into a second draft of the study resource, which was also circulated for comment. The study resource will be available in the summer of 1997 for use by congregations or individuals. While this process has been laborious and time-consuming, the importance of this issue in the RCA requires careful consideration both of issues and ramifications surrounding this topic. This careful consideration will be evident in the final product.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF DIACONAL MINISTRY

The diaconal ministries program, recommended by the 1993 General Synod (MGS 1993, R-2, p. 153), is symbolized by the pitcher, bowl, and towel. This is particularly fitting for a program designed to assist deacons in assuming their roles as leaders in ministries of service, mercy, and outreach. It is a reminder that Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest servant of all, set the example for serving others when he got up from the table after sharing the last supper with his disciples, took a towel, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet. Later he said, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15).

Progress continues to be made in implementing the diaconal ministries program approved by the General Synod Council at its October 1993 meeting. Deacons continue to be trained, consistories are re-examining their roles and organization, and members of congregations are being encouraged to truly become involved in ministry as a part of the priesthood of all believers.

Branches on the Vine, an orientation workshop for consistory members, is the latest educational resource added to the growing roster of basic materials intended to educate, undergird, and motivate deacons and leaders in diaconal ministries. This workshop joins the deacon and elder booklets, the Deacon’s Notebook, the As One Who Serves video, and the biannual Deacon’s Bench newsletter as basic resources for the diaconal program.
The fourth annual diaconal ministries gathering was held April 25-27, 1997, at the Church World Service Center in New Windsor, Maryland. The center is operated by the Church of the Brethren. This gathering of delegates from each of the eight RCA regional synods was intended to equip and motivate the delegates to serve as leaders for planning diaconal training events in their geographic areas. As a result, diaconal teams planned events in the regional synods of the Mid-Atlantic, the Heartland, the Great Lakes, the Far West, and Albany, as well as classis events for the classes of Florida, Wisconsin, and Ontario during the past year.

In addition, the coordinator for diaconal ministries, Betty Voskuil, assisted pastors and deacons from the classes of North and South Grand Rapids with a proposal to develop a diaconal center in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area to coordinate diaconal ministries. It is hoped that this center can be a pilot project for the rest of the denomination.

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To request the Diaconal Ministries Team to consider the issues raised in these papers, “Hope for the Family: Christian Action for Stronger Families” [see MGS 1996, pp. 89-97] and “Christian Families and the Household of God: Mutual Responsibility and Accountability” [see MGS 1996, pp. 97-103], in their development of programs and resources for equipping the diaconal ministries of RCA congregations (MGS 1996, R-8, p. 103).

The Diaconal Ministries Team, under the leadership of the coordinator for diaconal ministries, has used understandings from these papers both in the development of ongoing resources and in the diaconal ministries publication, Deacon’s Bench.

This report is submitted in compliance with the instruction of the 1993 General Synod to Congregational Services and Mission Services “to begin additional programs for diaconal ministries...and to report progress toward fulfillment to the General Synods of 1995 through 2000” (MGS 1993, R-2, p. 153).

From the Report of the General Synod Council’s Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee

GENERAL SYNOD 1997 THEME

The 1997 General Synod theme is “God’s People Transformed: Renewed in Mind and Discerning and Doing God’s Will.” The theme text is:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

A design team, composed primarily of laypersons and church educators, organized the 1997 General Synod theme program. The focus of the design team was:

We desire to see the Reformed Church actively engaged with Scripture, in order to experience the transforming power of God’s Word. In the life of the General Synod and through its work, individuals, congregations, and the whole of the church will be invited to question and examine how this active engagement with Scripture can be realized in every area of their individual and collective lives.

To accomplish dialogue and active engagement with Scripture, the design team: 1) invited the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez to be the keynote speaker, 2) produced a broadcast-quality video emphasizing the transforming power of Scripture and a resource book for introduction at the
1997 General Synod, and 3) organized a number of workshops to address the vast range of Scripture-related issues, from basic Bible instruction to implementing study programs in the church to methods of interpretation to using the Bible in one's own personal spiritual journey.

The design team also scheduled Bible studies for the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoon sessions of General Synod and cooperated with the Commission on Christian Worship and the General Synod worship leaders in integrating the 1997 General Synod theme into worship services.

From the Report of the President

P-4 (p. 36) and P-6 (p. 39) were referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Education and Discipleship.

➢ In response to P-4 (p. 36), the advisory committee recommended:

R-7.
To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with Reformed Church Women's Ministries and the Commission for Women, to plan and implement for the 1998 General Synod a special celebration of the ordination of women to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and sacrament. (ADOPTED)

➢ In response to P-6 (p. 39), the advisory committee recommended:

R-8.
To instruct the General Synod Council to appoint a task force consisting of a student and the chaplain from each RCA college, a representative from each RCA seminary, and three additional persons; and further,

To instruct the task force to develop a denomination-wide strategy for calling forth those committed and appropriately gifted RCA youth and children needed by the Reformed Church in America to serve as missionary pastors in the twenty-first century, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

(This vote had a cost effect on the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget. See Report of the Committee of Reference, p. 428.)

(A point of order from the floor challenged the vote on R-8. The vote on R-8 was taken without a report to Synod on the impact to the General Synod Operational Budget. A motion was made and supported to reconsider the vote on R-8. The motion LOST.)
From the Report of the General Secretary

P-2 (p. 49) was referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Education and Discipleship.

In response to P-2 (p. 49), the advisory committee recommended:

**R-9.**
To instruct Congregational Services, in consultation with regional synods and classes, to develop and begin implementing a specific plan for continuing to raise the visibility of the ministry of the laity at all levels of the church, including a means for gathering and communicating to local congregations key resources or processes that can identify and evoke the gifts of the laity; and further,

to instruct Congregational Services to include in this plan a proposal and models for congregationally and geographically based celebrations of the gifts of the laity, to be held in the year 2000; and further,

to instruct Congregational Services to include this plan in its report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. While the advisory committee cannot support strongly enough the vision of affirming the gifts of the laity, the advisory committee believes a denominationally based festival will not be an effective vehicle by which to accomplish this vision or an efficient use of funds.

2. The advisory committee believes that the vision for the ministry of the laity must focus on local implementation as the greatest need at this time.

3. R-9 is a continuation of the general secretary’s emphasis on gifts of the laity, as stated in his 1995 General Synod report (*MGS 1995*, p. 41).
Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 and given responsibility for collecting and preserving the official records of the Reformed Church in America, promoting interest in the history and traditions of the church, and disseminating and stimulating research in the history of the RCA. Within the past year the commission met twice, on September 27, 1996, in Newark, New Jersey, and on March 7, 1997, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

The commission is active in publishing the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America under the general editorship of the Rev. Dr. Donald Bruggink. Twenty-six volumes have appeared since the inception of the series in 1968. Currently, the commission is looking toward the publication in the historical series of a volume by the Rev. Dr. Gregg Mast on the life and ministry of the late Rev. Dr. Howard G. Hageman. In addition, the commission is also encouraging research projects that are advancing toward possible eventual publication in the Historical Series. Among these are: 1) the Rev. Lewis Scudder's work on the RCA Arabian mission; 2) Morell Swart's work on the history of the RCA mission in Africa; 3) a collection of essays on women in RCA history, edited by the Rev. Renee House and the Rev. Dr. John Coakley; 4) Janney Venema's work with the Deacons' Account Books of Beverwyck, New York; 5) the Rev. Dr. Earl William Kennedy's study of the RCA and Christian Reformed churches in Orange City, Iowa; 6) a history of the RCA mission in Chiapas, Mexico, by Dorothy Meyerink; 7) a developing collection of essays about African-Americans in the RCA to be edited by the Rev. Wilbur Washington; 8) an important survey of the history of the RCA in the nineteenth century, by Dr. Gerald De Jong; and 9) a volume on the history of the RCA's mission with Native Americans, by the Rev. LeRoy Koopman.

The commission continues to encourage anyone who is contemplating RCA research projects to contact the commission and ascertain how the commission may offer assistance.

The commission also receives reports on the work of the RCA Archives from the RCA archivist, Russell Gasero, and acts as an advisory board for the RCA Archives (The Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5(b)2. At the writing of this report in March 1997, an important and pending matter is the future direction for the RCA Archives. The moderator of the Commission on History, the Rev. Sophie Mathonnet-Vander Well, is serving on the Ad Hoc Committee to Review the Archives. The commission is carefully watching developments concerning the future direction of the RCA Archives, since the commission is the advisory board for the RCA Archives.
RCA ARCHIVES AND OFFICE OF HISTORICAL SERVICES

The archival task in the Reformed Church in America is to preserve the essential documentation of the life and ministry of the denomination. This documentation usually takes the form of written records (including handwritten, typewritten, and computer-generated records), but it also includes audio, video, pictorial, and oral testimonies. The goal is to document the “five Ws” of history:

What happened?
When did it happen?
Who did it?
Where did it happen?
Why did it happen?

The usual manner in which documentation is generated is through the preservation of regular correspondence about the daily life and work of the RCA—the regular reports, letters, minutes, agenda documents, and other such material. These are witnesses to the work and ministry of RCA.

The Office of Historical Services is responsible for the management of the Reformed Church archival program. This office provides many historical services to RCA staff, agencies, and congregations throughout the denomination. Some of the services offered are:

1. Collecting, arranging, preserving, and making available the records of the denomination. This includes:
   a. Appraising and transporting records from RCA congregations and denominational offices.
   b. Arranging, describing, and making available the records for public research.
   c. Working with and assisting a wide range of research workers who are engaged in historical study of either the RCA or its mission areas.
   d. Assisting RCA staff with their records management needs and in their decisions for retention and disposition of current records.

2. Providing staff support and services for the Commission on History.

3. Updating, researching, and publishing the Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America.

4. Updating, researching, and publishing the Digest and Index of the Minutes of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

5. Providing historical background studies for RCA staff, agencies, and congregations as needed.

7. Providing assistance and workshops for congregations to write congregational histories, celebrate anniversaries, and preserve congregational records.

8. Serving at New Brunswick Theological Seminary on the Albert A. Smith Fellowship Committee and the Standing Seminar Committee on RCA History.

On a daily basis, the archives office receives a number of requests for assistance and reference. During the past year the archivist researched 119 requests for genealogical information and 209 requests for reference and historical background information. The nature of this reference work ranged from the preparation of substantial research papers for denominational staff and agencies to biographical information on RCA ministers. In addition, forty-three individuals visited the RCA Archives to engage in research during the past year. The use of the RCA Archives in 1996 was at its highest level since the archival program was established in 1978.

The archivist also continues work on the update to the *Digest and Index of the Minutes of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America*. The basic data and information is now completed through 1996 and this task will continue on an annual basis. The Commission on History requested the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee to consider publication of this digest and index (1978-1999) in the year 2000. Sources of funding for publication of this volume still need to be identified by the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee.

The archivist also collects data and edits the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America*. The Commission on History also requested the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee to consider publication of this volume (1628-1999) in the year 2000. Sources of funding for publication of this volume still need to be identified by the GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee.

The Office of Historical Services is engaged in publishing a variety of other historical and resource materials. During the past year the archivist investigated the possibility of publishing source material in electronic format and compiled an *Ecumenical Sourcebook* of significant reports and publications from minutes of the General Synod.

Storage, staffing, and budget limitations remain a continuing problem for the effective operation of the office. The General Synod Council, at its March 1996 meeting, appointed an ad hoc committee to review the RCA archives, and this ad hoc committee is addressing some of these issues and future directions for the RCA archives. The ad hoc committee will present any recommendations to the General Synod Council for approval.

As the steward of the RCA’s documentary heritage, the archives accessioned the following records during 1996:

**Denominational Records**

**Boards and Agencies**

Board of Domestic Missions. Minutes of the Board of Domestic Missions from 1922 to 1940.

Board of North American Missions. Promotion literature produced and used by the board from 1956 to 1968. Records include pamphlets, brochures, and acquaintance sheets.

Board of Publication. *Die Psalmen Davids nebst einer Gammung Geistlicher Lieder fur Deffentlichen und Privat-Gottesdienst. Auf Verordnung der General Synode der Reformirten Protestantischen Niederlandischen Kirche in Nord-Amerika*. Published by the Board of
Publication, RCA, and the Presbyterian Board of Education, 1863. Gift from Lt. Col (Ret.) Marion Nestor. This volume belonged to Nestor's maternal grandparents, Johannes Hoff and Berta Labouseur, who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1870s.

Board of World Missions. Missionary personnel files of the board from 1957 to 1962. Records include correspondence from Ruth Ransom to RCA missionaries.


General Synod


Office of Finance. Records from 1962 to 1984 include correspondence with RCA colleges and seminaries, special appeals, legal advice, mission area property agreements, deeds, and bequests.

Office of Human Resources. Records of the Ad Hoc Committee on Services, Structures, and Funding from 1990 to 1992. The ad hoc committee was charged to examine the structure and funding of denominational programs and offices. The ad hoc committee, in its report to the 1992 General Synod, recommended the organization of the General Synod Council and the disbanding of the General Synod Executive Committee, the Trustees of the General Program Council, and the General Program Council (MGS 1992, R-6, pp. 51-57). Records of this ad hoc committee include minutes and agenda documents, resource papers, responses from throughout the denomination to the restructuring reports, correspondence, reports on regional consultation meetings, and survey results of reactions to the ad hoc committee's report.

Office of Promotion and Communication. Subject files of the Office of Promotion and Communication from 1960 to 1973. Records include correspondence regarding the production of film and print resources; issues of the Minister's Exclusive and Prayer Letters; resources for missions (histories, brochures, acquaintance sheets, etc.); and items for public performance: Happy Birthday, RCA, 1628-1978, by Betty Hibma; The Heritage Song, by Camilla Mays Frank and Jane Douglas White; and Heritage and Horizon, presented by the General Program Council at Calvary Reformed Church in Ripon, California, October 22, 1976. Also included are working files of the secretary for print resources, Una Ratmeyer, for her book, Hands, Hearts, and Voices (files for this book include notes, biographical sketches for the chapters, taped interviews, responses to questionnaires sent out by Ratmeyer, and correspondence with denominational staff); slide/tape presentations used by RCA staff in the RCA offices in Orange City, Iowa, for promotion and education regarding RCA missions work (presentations include: Feasts of the Kingdom [slide, tape, and script], Hong Kong—Summer with a Purpose [ca. 1987; slides and script], Jackson County Ministries [ca. 1990; slides, tape, and script], Adult Voluntary Services [ca. 1990, slides, tape, and script], and Nicaragua Study Tour [May 9-16, 1987, slides].

Hymnbook Committee. Records of the secretary for this committee from 1979 to 1987 include minutes, correspondence, and manuscripts regarding the design, publication, and promotion of the Rejoice in the Lord hymnbook.
Commission on Judicial Business. Records include the appeal of the Rev. Edward Veldhuizen against the decision of the Classis of Holland to depose him from the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, and the appeal of Emmanuel Reformed Church against the decision of the Classis of Chicago to disband the congregation.

**General Program Council**

Executive Secretary for Program. Records from 1977 to 1980 relate to urban ministries and include consultations, the urban ministries design team, and the policy committee.

Secretary for Program. Program Planning Budgets from 1983 to 1990.

 Secretary for Youth and Young Adult Ministry. Records of the secretary from 1981 to 1994 include planning and correspondence for Adventure in Ministry (AIM), Project Timothy, Young Adult Ministry Team, workcamps, youth ministry projects, and planning for the General Program Council (GPC) and the Office of Faith Development. Records of the minister for youth include ministry team logs, correspondence, and program papers; and General Synod Council reports, minutes, and agenda documents from 1993 to 1994. Records of the associate for youth and young adult ministry include correspondence, proposals, finances, and agenda documents relating to AIM, Youth Ministry Team, and GPC programs; and Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Ministry: Designs for Teacher/Leadership Education.


Church Planning and Development. Records from 1971 to 1979 include the Reformed Church Growth Fund design and implementation, and the Regional Synod of Albany pilot project and congregational studies by the Rev. Douglas Walrath.

Taiwan Mission. Correspondence files of the secretaries of the mission from 1957 to 1964. Secretaries during this period included the Rev. Carl J. Schroeder and the Rev. Alvin J. Poppen. Correspondence between the secretaries and the Board of Foreign Missions and other individuals associated with the mission in Taiwan.

Secretary for Africa and the Middle East. Missionary correspondence with Middle East missionaries and subject files relating to Bahrain (Al Raja School and the National Evangelical Church). Missionary correspondence files from 1990 to 1991.

Secretary for the Americas. Subject files relating to Jackson County Ministries (formerly Annville Institute), Annville, Kentucky, from 1967 to 1984 and 1990 to 1991. Records include minutes of the board and executive committee, education committee reports, budget and financial correspondence, and correspondence with the denomination and Jackson County staff. Records for 1982 relating to the interview process for the director of Jackson County Ministries include applications and references. Records from 1972 to 1991 relating to Southern Normal School in Brewton, Alabama, include minutes of the trustees and directors, correspondence with school staff, budget reports, and photocopies of deeds from 1911 to 1939.

Secretary for Stewardship Development. Correspondence files of the secretary with RCA congregations located in the Regional Synod of the Heartland from 1981 to 1993, and 1993 pledge receipts for Partnerships in Mission.

Secretary for Volunteer Services. Records from 1990 to 1994 include correspondence with mission areas, church sites, volunteers, host sites, and denominational staff.
General Synod Council

Secretary for Mission Programs in the Middle East. Records from 1992 to 1996. Records include missionary personnel and correspondence files, subject files on mission areas and programs, and correspondence with RCA staff.

Classical Records

Classis of Dakota. Records include classis minutes, minutes of the church planning and development committee, ministers received and dismissed, and correspondence from 1964 to 1987.

Classis of Paramus. Record book of the Women's Missionary Classical Union of New Brunswick, New Jersey. The classical union was organized on April 24, 1890. This record book includes the members of the executive committee, the order of churches, the constitution, and the minutes from 1903 to 1928. Papers relating to the hearing of an appeal to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic regarding the Rev. Thomas Boslooper teaching at Unification Theological Seminary.

Classis of Rocky Mountains. Records from 1988 to 1993. The Synod of the West was divided into the Regional Synod of the Far West and the Regional Synod of the Heartland in 1989 (MGS, 1988, pp. 410-11). The Classis of Rocky Mountains was established with congregations from the Classis West Central and one congregation from the Classis of West Sioux. Records include classis and executive committee minutes, financial reports, pastoral relations, and new church development committee minutes regarding Community Life Ministries in Thornton, Colorado.

Classis of Schenectady. Minutes from 1974 to 1986. Records also include legal documents relating to the Classis of Saratoga, 1929 to 1931; the parsonage at Easton, New York, 1899; legacies concerning the Schagticoke Church, 1929; and the Ganesvoort property and Christian Heidorf, 1980 to 1985.

Local Church Records

Dumont, New Jersey, Old North (Schraalenburg) Reformed Church. The congregation organized in 1724 and is also known as the Schraalenburg Church. Records from 1803 to 1941. Records include consistory minutes, 1818 to 1950; baptisms, 1803 to 1829, 1832 to 1857; marriages, 1802 to 1857; membership list, 1803 to 1857; black members, 1803; pew register book; and The Story of the Old North Reformed Church, 1976.

Englewood, New Jersey, Community (Hudson Avenue) Reformed Church. The congregation began worshipping in 1925 and organized in 1928 and was also known as the Hudson Avenue Church. The congregation disbanded in 1995. Records include consistory minutes and papers, 1938 to 1995; register book, 1900 to 1917; Couple's Club records, 1953 to 1969; Women's League for Service records, 1956 to 1983; Ladies' Aid Society records, 1976 to 1992; Sunday School records, 1939 to 1965; elder's minutes, 1928 to 1961, 1991 to 1993; Guidelines for Shared Facilities; bulletins, 1953 to 1968; financial records; Men's Club records; miscellaneous papers; and Highland Union Sunday School records.

Waldwick, New Jersey, Community Church. Records include the membership register and consistory minutes from 1963 to 1978.
Gifts

The following book was donated by the author, Cora Helen Roelofs Verbrugge:


The RCA Archives continues to gather the corporate records of the denomination from RCA staff offices, regional synods, classes and congregations. As the steward of the RCA's heritage, the RCA Archives continues to engage in the ministry of memory. It is the responsibility of the RCA Archives to assure that tomorrow has a yesterday.

Necrology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>Marion E. Klaaren</td>
<td>June 25, 1996</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raymond Eugene Beckering</td>
<td>July 14, 1996</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Bovendam</td>
<td>August 19, 1996</td>
<td>88</td>
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<td>Harold Hesselink</td>
<td>November 23, 1996</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin S. Deitz</td>
<td>December 5, 1996</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
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<td>William Charles Schwab</td>
<td>January 21, 1997</td>
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<td>John Ernest Grant</td>
<td>January 23, 1997</td>
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<td>February 26, 1997</td>
<td>93</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Weeber</td>
<td>March 13, 1997</td>
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<td>Clinton Capen Baker</td>
<td>March 27, 1997</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold Carl Ringenoldus</td>
<td>March 30, 1997</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon James Van Wyk</td>
<td>April 9, 1997</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marion E. Klaaren

Marion E. Klaaren was born at Leighton, Iowa, on March 27, 1906. He received his undergraduate education at Central College, from which he graduated in 1932. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1935.

Klaaren was licensed by the Classis of Pella in 1935 and ordained by the Classis of Muskegon the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Conklin, Michigan, from 1935 to 1937; Fairview, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1937 to 1945; Overisel, Michigan, from 1945 to 1951; Central, Sioux Center, Iowa, from 1951 to 1966; and Trinity, Battle Creek, Michigan, from 1966 until his retirement in 1973.

Marion Klaaren died in Holland, Michigan, on June 25, 1996.

Raymond Eugene Beckering

Raymond Eugene Beckering was born at Oostburg, Wisconsin, on December 27, 1910. He received his undergraduate education at Central College, from which he graduated in 1931. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1934. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Central College in 1966.
Beckering was licensed by the Classis of Pella in 1934 and ordained by the Classis of Chicago the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Ross, Gary, Indiana, from 1934 to 1940; Calvary, Cicero, Illinois, from 1940 to 1942; Hope, Chicago, Illinois, from 1942 to 1945; Hope, Los Angeles, California, from 1945 to 1949; Hope, Chicago, Illinois, from 1949 to 1954; Park Hills, Los Angeles, California, from 1954 to 1958; and Second, Zeeland, Michigan, from 1958 to 1967. He served as associate pastor at Garden Grove Community Church, Garden Grove California, from 1967 until his retirement in 1976. Beckering served General Synod as vice-president from 1965 to 1966 and as president from 1966 to 1967.

Raymond Beckering died in Holland, Michigan, on July 14, 1996.

Henry Bovendam

Henry Bovendam was born at Hamilton, Michigan, on June 11, 1908. He began his undergraduate education at Seattle Pacific College, which he attended in 1934. He completed his undergraduate education at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1939. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1942.

Bovendam was licensed by the Classis of Cascades in 1942 and ordained by the Classis of Muskegon the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Moorland, Ravenna, Michigan, from 1942 to 1946; Matlock, Iowa, from 1946 to 1954; Silver Creek, Maple Lake, Minnesota, from 1954 to 1958; Trinity, Sibley, Iowa, from 1958 to 1967; and Bethel, Leota, Minnesota, from 1967 to 1973.

Henry Bovendam died in Leota, Minnesota, on August 19, 1996.

Harold Hesselink

Harold Hesselink was born at Oostburg, Wisconsin, on October 9, 1905. He received his undergraduate education at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1928. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1931.

Hesselink was licensed by the Classis of Wisconsin in 1931 and ordained by the Classis of Rochester the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Sodus, New York, from 1931 to 1937; Harrison, South Dakota, from 1937 to 1941; Rock Rapids, Iowa, from 1941 to 1945; Alton, Iowa, from 1945 to 1953; Lynden, Washington, from 1953 to 1959; Adams, Nebraska, from 1959 to 1965; Emmanuel, Whitby, Ontario, from 1965 to 1970; and Silver Creek, Minnesota, from 1970 to 1973.

Harold Hesselink died in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, on November 23, 1996.

Franklin S. Deitz

Franklin S. Deitz was born at Berne, New York, on May 11, 1913. He received his undergraduate education at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1934. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1938.

Deitz was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Schoharie in 1938. He pastored the following New York congregations: Prattsville, from 1938 to 1944; Second, Rotterdam, from 1944 to 1961; and Sharon and Lawyersville, from 1961 to 1975.

Franklin Deitz died in Berne, New York, on December 5, 1996.
William Charles Schwab

William Charles Schwab was born at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 30, 1906. He received his undergraduate education at Ursinus College, from which he graduated in 1932. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1935.

Schwab was licensed by the Classis of Philadelphia in 1935 and ordained by the Classis of Schenectady in 1937. He pastored the following New York congregations: West Glenville, from 1936 to 1941; New Baltimore, from 1941 to 1951; Canarsie, Brooklyn, from 1951 to 1971; Kiskatom, from 1973 to 1975; and Jerusalem, Feura Bush, from 1978 to 1985. He also served as the stated supply pastor at Unionville, New York, from 1944 to 1951.


John Ernest Grant

John Ernest Grant was born at Waukegan, Illinois, on April 6, 1906. He received his undergraduate education at Wesleyan University, from which he graduated in 1959. He began his theological education at Biblical Seminary in New York City, where he studied from 1959 to 1961. His theological education was completed at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1962.

Grant was licensed and ordained by the Classis of New York in 1961. He began his ministry as assistant pastor at Fort Washington Collegiate Church, New York City, from 1962 to 1963. He then pastored the following congregations: New Baltimore, New York, from 1963 to 1968, and First, Long Branch, New Jersey, from 1968 until his retirement in 1972. During retirement he served as stated supply pastor at Leeds, New York, from 1972 to 1977. He also served as a chaplain for the New York State Department of Correctional Services from 1974 to 1977. Grant also served the following New York congregations as interim pastor or stated supply pastor: Athens, First, West Coxsackie; Second, Coxsackie; Germantown; Onesquethaw, Feura Bush; and Mt. Pleasant, Hudson.

John Grant died in Melbourne, Florida, on January 23, 1997.

John H. Keuning

John H. Keuning was born at Pella, Iowa, on March 7, 1903. He received his undergraduate education at Central College, from which he graduated in 1928. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1931.

Keuning was licensed by the Classis of Pella in 1931 and ordained by the Classis of Dakota the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Hope, Westfield, North Dakota, from 1931 to 1933; Central, Sioux Center, Iowa, from 1933 to 1936; Calvary, Ripon, California, from 1944 to 1952; Forrester, Illinois, from 1952 to 1956; North Holland, Illinois, from 1956 to 1959; and Hope, Los Angeles, California, from 1959 to 1968. He also served as a missionary in Dulce, New Mexico, from 1936 to 1944.

John Keuning died in Vacaville, California, on February 26, 1997.

George Weeber

George Weeber was born at Garyp, Friesland, on November 28, 1904. He received his undergraduate education at Calvin College, from which he graduated in 1932. His theological education was received at Calvin Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1935.
Weeber was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Illinois in 1935. He began his pastoral work as a missionary in Chicago, Illinois, from 1935 to 1938. He then pastored the following congregations: Christian Reformed, Edmonton, Alberta, from 1930 to 1940; First Christian Reformed, Paterson, New Jersey, from 1944 to 1946; Presbyterian, McBain, Michigan, and Lake City, Michigan, from 1947 to 1949; Fellowship, Muskegon, Michigan, from 1949 to 1951; and First, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 1954 to 1956. He was transferred to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1956.

George Weeber died in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on March 13, 1997.

Clinton Capen Baker

Clinton Capen Baker was born at New York City on May 18, 1929. He received his undergraduate education at Emory University, from which he graduated in 1951. He began his theological education at Columbia Theological Seminary, which he attended from 1951 to 1952. He completed his theological education at Biblical Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1954. He undertook additional graduate study and received a master's degree from Memphis State University in 1967.

Baker was licensed and ordained by the Central Mississippi Presbytery in 1954. He transferred to the Reformed Church in America and was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Lake Erie in 1966. He pastored the following congregations: Presbyterian, Carrollton, Mississippi, from 1954 to 1957; Johnson Memorial Presbyterian, Jackson, Tennessee, from 1957 to 1966; and Parma Park Reformed Church, Cleveland, Ohio, from 1966 until his retirement in 1995.

Clinton Baker died in Lakewood, Ohio, on March 27, 1997.

Harold Carl Ringenoldus

Harold Carl Ringenoldus was born at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on March 12, 1911. He received his undergraduate education at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1934. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1937.

Ringenoldus was licensed by the Classis of Wisconsin in 1937 and ordained by the Classis of Muskegon the same year. He pastored the following congregations: South Barnard, Charlevoix, Michigan, from 1937 to 1942; Ferry Memorial, Montague, Michigan, from 1942 to 1945; East Lawn, Muskegon, Michigan, from 1945 to 1952; Hope, South Haven, Michigan, from 1952 to 1956; American, Hull, Iowa, from 1956 to 1966; and Second, Fulton, Illinois, from 1966 until his retirement in 1976. Following his retirement, he served as interim pastor at Community, Clinton, Iowa, in 1979, and at First United Methodist, Clinton, Iowa, in 1982.

Harold Ringenoldus died in Clinton, Iowa, on March 30, 1997.

Gordon James Van Wyk

Gordon James Van Wyk was born at Maurice, Iowa, on August 4, 1919. He received his undergraduate education at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1941. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1944. Van Wyk undertook additional graduate study at the University of California from 1944 to 1945 and at Yale University in 1946, where he received a master's degree. He went on to attend the University of Michigan from 1951 to 1952, the University of Chicago from 1958 to 1959, and the University of Wisconsin from 1969 to 1970.
Van Wyk was licensed by the Classis of Muskegon in 1944 and ordained by the Classis of Wisconsin the same year. He entered into missionary service at Fukien Christian University in Foochow, China, in 1946, where he taught until 1951. He then served at Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan, from 1953 until his retirement.

Gordon Van Wyk died in Louisville, Kentucky, on April 9, 1997.

The Rev. Neva Evenhouse, vice-moderator of the Advisory Committee on Christian Heritage and Communications, led the General Synod in a "Commemoration of Those Who Have Died in Faith" service. The service concluded with Synod standing to sing the hymn, "For All the Saints." 

Report of the Editorial Council of the *Church Herald*

In 1996 the *Church Herald* continued its efforts to be practical and helpful in the lives of RCA members, often focusing on topics related to family and congregational life. The *Church Herald* offered information on current events in the denomination, including General Synod, Spring Sabbath, and the events in the Classis of Muskegon. The magazine's pages also served as a forum on issues such as medical ethics and racism as well as providing features such as an Advent devotional, the Kids' Journey Page, and regional news through Close to Home.

The magazine maintains the same format, publishing eleven issues annually. In 1996 six issues were fifty-eight pages, four issues were sixty pages, and one issue was reduced to thirty-six pages for financial reasons. The publication continues to utilize a variety of authors and an increasing number of artists.

A survey conducted by the Gallup association in late 1995 indicates the magazine is well read by the members of the denomination. Particularly popular are pieces by regular columnists the Rev. Louis Lotz, the Rev. Gregg Mast, and the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson. Other columns with rotating authorship, such as Living by the Word, Platform, and Flak and Flattery, also continue to draw readers.

The *Church Herald* has done regular readership studies in the past and will continue to do those, in keeping with the directive of the 1996 General Synod (*MGS 1996*, R-3, p. 163).

**FINANCES**

The *Church Herald* ended the calendar year 1996 well in the black, in part because the magazine runs a tight ship and in part because of a vacant staff position. A postal rate increase in midyear 1996 was offset by the implementation of barcoded addresses; this helped keep mailing costs level. Additionally, paper prices climbed only slightly in 1996, another unexpected blessing. The magazine returned $57,000 of the General Synod operational (assessment) budget designated for the *Church Herald* to the denomination as a 1996 surplus. Based on the strength of finances in 1996, the magazine plans to replace some of its aging computer equipment in 1997.
The editorial council appointed a subcommittee to investigate the 1996 General Synod referral regarding an endowment to offset some of the magazine's costs (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 163). The editorial council will vote on the subcommittee’s recommendation in the fall of 1997.

STAFF

The staff of the Church Herald remains remarkably consistent. Even a change in editor proved to be the return of a former employee rather than the addition of a genuinely new staff member. Christina Van Eyl assumed the position of editor in May 1996, a position vacated at the end of 1995 by the Rev. Jeffrey Japinga. In the interim and since the arrival of the new editor, the other staff members pitched in to keep the magazine on track even while short-staffed.

THE FUTURE

As electronic media continue to gain domination in society, some wonder about the relevance, the cost efficiency, and the wisdom of publishing and mailing a magazine each month. While technology certainly has implications for how the Church Herald is produced, and while technology will have implications for whether it will be produced in its current form in the future, for now the magazine continues its print ministry to RCA members.

In addition to new computer hardware, computer software continues to be a pressing need. The long-awaited subscription program update, called Calvin, is expected to be fully operational at the time of the 1997 General Synod meeting. This software program shows promise despite some implementation delays. Additionally, the editorial council and Church Herald staff continue to monitor the direction of electronic communications and to consider how the Church Herald should alter its mission.

For now, the magazine itself continues its quest to be balanced, informative, thought-provoking, and enjoyable for members of the Reformed Church in America.

Report of the Perspectives Board of Editors

The Perspectives Board of Editors appreciates this opportunity to report to the 1997 General Synod. This monthly theological journal provides an important forum in which the Reformed Church in America can discuss theologically the issues it faces. Perspectives also provides opportunities for aspiring RCA writers to make theological contributions within the RCA and beyond the denomination to the wider Christian community.

EDITORIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

In 1996 Perspectives included articles from numerous RCA writers, some easily recognized, but others of whom are new to the magazine. Among them: the Revs. Thomas Boogaart, Donald Cronkite, Paul Fries, Douglas Fromm, Alan Heystek, Lynn Japinga, Allan Janssen, Paul Janssen, Christopher Kaiser, Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, Marchiene Rienstra, Isaac Rottenberg, William Schutter, Gerald Sittser, John Slapert, LeRoy Suess, and Merold Westphal.
An issue of Perspectives was devoted to the theme of Spring Sabbath, the first denomination-wide gathering of RCA clergy, held in April 1996. Issues of Perspectives were used as a resource for the event.

In the painful matters involving the Classis of Muskegon and the Rev. Richard Rhem, Perspectives offered theological comment in the area of ecclesiology and provided a forum for reader interaction.


FINANCES

For Perspectives, 1996 was a break-even year financially. Operating expenditures almost exactly equaled income. Perspectives’ cash assets of approximately $16,000 include a $15,000 interest-free operating loan from the General Synod of the RCA.

The General Synod currently provides financial support in the amount of $6,000 per year to Perspectives (9.375 percent of the journal’s total budget). The board of editors views this contribution as an essential linkage between Perspectives and the RCA Office of Stewardship and Communication Services.

This relationship is embodied and implemented through the active, discreet participation of the Rev. E. Wayne Antworth, director of Stewardship and Communication Services, at all meetings of the Perspectives Board of Editors. While not assuming editorial responsibility for materials that appear in Perspectives, Antworth has been especially helpful regarding financial development, marketing, and denominational issues.

Perspectives continues to cultivate “Friends of Perspectives” to create a modest base of financial support from interested individuals. A corps of loyal supporters is developing. The Board of Editors uses these gifts for subscription-base enlargement.

SUBSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN

In late 1995 the Board of Editors launched its first direct-mail marketing effort for subscriptions. Subscriber and purchaser-lists were rented from three publications. These efforts continued with lists from other publications in 1996. The journal also promotes gift subscriptions during the Christmas season. The subscriber base of Perspectives has stabilized.

As of mid-1996 Perspectives began accepting VISA/MasterCard as payment for subscriptions.

LEADERSHIP ISSUES

The Rev. Dr. Thomas Boogaart, coeditor, returned from sabbatical leave in the autumn of 1996. During his absence more of the leadership load rested with the Rev. Marchiene Rienstra and Carolyn Simon. Currently Boogaart and Simon share the editorial leadership.

Synod delegates were given the May 1997 issue of Perspectives.
From the Report of the General Synod Council's
Stewardship and Communication Services Committee

COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

Stewardship and Communication Services (SAC) is responsible for the program areas of stewardship and communications. The Rev. E. Wayne Antworth serves as the director and is responsible for the administration, coordination, and supervision of the SAC staff.

The mission of the communication program is:

To develop and maintain a communication network that connects individual RCA members, congregations, and the denomination, thus building community, enhancing mutual understanding, and promoting cooperation and involvement in our common ministry.

The mission of Stewardship and Communication Services is to effectively communicate the vision and ministries of the Reformed Church in America. The communications staff of SAC provides print, audiovisual, and electronic resources to RCA congregations.

RCA DISTRIBUTION CENTER

Mission Statement

The mission of the RCA Distribution Center is to provide Reformed Church in America congregations with print and audiovisual resources and to provide RCA staff and agencies with production and distribution services.

Overview

Since its relocation to Michigan in 1986 from South Holland, Illinois, and from the denominational office in New York City, the RCA Distribution Center has grown steadily. In its first year of operation, revenue totaled $281,000. In 1996 revenue exceeded $1,421,000, with the sale of print materials representing over $826,000 of the total. Now located in the Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the operation employs eight full-time staff and two part-time individuals. Kim Baker oversees the operation, Dorothy Schmidt manages the mail order/fulfillment side of the business, and Jane Schuyler is available to answer customer questions on the Resource Information Helpline.

The RCA Distribution Center is also the publishing agent for the Reformed Church in America. It provides high-quality production services for all RCA staff and the Church Herald. It employs two graphic designers who operate state-of-the-art IBM and Macintosh graphic computers. The RCA Distribution Center provides the denomination with a central location for the sale and distribution of promotional, informational, and educational materials. A new Xerox 5090S high-volume duplicator was purchased in 1996.

Promotional Efforts in 1996-97

1. Catalogs

The 1996-97 RCA Resources for Ministry catalog, along with the RCA version of the Friendship Press catalog, was distributed to thirty-five hundred customers, including all RCA congregations. The PREM catalog was sent to current Celebrate and Bible Discovery users (approximately seventy-five RCA congregations).
2. Mini-catalogs

Mini-catalogs on small group ministries, the Crossroads junior high curriculum, the StoryTellers vacation Bible school curriculum, and mini-catalogs for adult church education and youth resources were distributed to all RCA congregations during 1996.

3. Brochures and fliers

Brochures on the RCA’s every-Sunday and special occasion bulletins and several New! fliers (now in full color) advertising new products were distributed through reSOURCES and were included in outgoing orders.

4. Advertising

The RCA Distribution Center ran several display ads in the Church Herald in 1996-97. These ads featured the LiFE curriculum, the That the World May Know video series, the StoryTeller vacation Bible school curriculum, and stewardship resources. The RCA Distribution Center also ran a full-page ad promoting the six best Christian children’s books of 1996—testing the Christmas market. The response to this ad was disappointing. LiFE and stewardship resources were also advertised in the 1996-97 RCA Plan Calendar. The RCA Distribution Center also promotes selected new products on the RCA’s web site and conducts an annual year-end inventory reduction sale.

5. Book tables and displays

The RCA Distribution Center arranges book tables and displays at various RCA events. In 1996-97 these included the APCE/CERCA event, the Spectrum event, the Camp Fowler youth event, the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes Resource Day, diaconal workshops, the Warwick Center worship workshop, the Classis of Holland leadership training event, Classis of Ontario worship events, the Wisconsin Reformed Church Women’s Ministries event, and other events.

Servant Leaders

In January 1995 the RCA Distribution Center produced and distributed the first issue of the new leadership newspaper, Servant Leaders: A Practical Publication Serving RCA Congregations. Produced on a quarterly basis, Servant Leaders is mailed to over twenty thousand RCA members at their home addresses and is very well received. In the fall 1996 issue Servant Leaders published articles on the Internet, creating a church home page, and the RCA’s new web site. The winter 1997 issue included articles on helping children cope with death, parish nursing programs, the RCA Building and Extension Foundation, Inc., and Friendship Ministries for the mentally impaired.

The purpose of Servant Leaders is to serve congregations by providing professional and lay leaders in the Reformed Church in America with useful information about new resources, creative programs, special services, upcoming events and conferences, and continuing education opportunities. Servant Leaders is funded by the RCA’s seven General Synod Council units and is sent free of charge to pastors, elders, deacons, missionaries, chaplains, seminary students, professors, and lay leaders in RCA congregations.

Kim Baker serves as the publication’s editor, and an editorial team (Wenda Fore, the Rev. John Paarlberg, Carol Myers, Kristi Naber, Sara Smith, Jane Schuyler, and the Rev. Randy Wieland) assists in planning and evaluating each issue.
**Curricula**

The RCA Distribution Center capitalized the development of the new LiFE curriculum produced in partnership with CRC Publications. A payback schedule has been established between the RCA and CRC Publications, allowing the RCA Distribution Center to recover its investment through a special discount arrangement. The ability of the RCA Distribution Center to pay off the $256,289 loan from the denomination rests on retaining current users and attracting new LiFE customers. To date, $133,000 has been paid back to the denomination. The RCA Distribution Center currently has over 350 LiFE customers, and sales amounted to $343,780 in 1996.

The RCA Distribution Center, in cooperation with Congregational Services, will introduce the Whole People of God curriculum in 1997 and is exploring other curricula and products to complement current RCA offerings.

**PRINT PRODUCTION**

The production of print resources provides RCA members the opportunity to hear about, understand, and receive the many services and programs of the denomination. The Rev. LeRoy Koopman, Kristi Naber, and Ann Saigeon provide writing and editing services for the production of resources. The following materials are written and/or prepared for publication by SAC:

*RCA Today*

*RCA Today* is a bulletin insert that reports current news of the Reformed Church in America. Copies are sent free to congregations on request. This is the tenth year of publication for *RCA Today*, which is published monthly except for a combined July/August issue. Usage has remained constant, with about 820 of the RCA’s 947 congregations requesting a total of 160,000 copies each month. A Spanish edition, *Hoy!*, is published in cooperation with the RCA’s Council for Hispanic Ministries. Both *RCA Today* and *Hoy!* are posted on the RCA’s Internet web site each month.

*Mission Today*

*Mission Today*, a four-page bulletin insert created in 1996, is the main communication piece of the Mission of the Month program. *Mission Today* highlights one mission area each month but includes news, photos, and prayer requests from other areas as well. The Mission of the Month mailing also includes a sheet of additional information and resources for the focus area, a children’s bulletin, offering envelopes, and a full-color mission poster. Nearly six hundred congregations have requested a total of 110,000 copies of *Mission Today*. These materials are sent free, but they must be requested. Mission of the Month offerings generated nearly $156,000 for support of the RCA mission program in 1996. *Mission Today* is also posted on the RCA’s Internet web site each month.

*Prayerline*

*Prayerline* was initiated in 1993 to share prayer needs across the RCA, thus encouraging a greater sense of community throughout the denomination. Most RCA congregations have their own internal prayer communication links. The RCA’s *Prayerline*, however, is concerned with needs of a broader concern that might not otherwise be communicated. *Prayerline* is enclosed in all *RCA Today* and *Mission Today* mailings and is sent free to an additional three hundred people who have requested it. *Prayerline* is also posted on the RCA’s Internet web site.
“Together”

Quarterly inserts, called “Together,” have been published in the *Church Herald* since 1993, with the *Church Herald* providing the space and SAC providing the materials. These four-page inserts generally include a first-person testimony of faith, a feature about an RCA service or ministry, and a profile of new missionaries.

**Mission Calendar**

The 1997 mission calendar, like the one published in 1996, follows the Mission of the Month schedule and includes a photo, the birth dates of RCA missionaries and their children under the age of eighteen, missionary addresses, and a short summary of the mission work in each area. The 1997 calendar also includes the addresses and birthdays of former and retired missionaries who served the RCA for ten years or more. Youth groups and other church organizations were given the opportunity to sell these calendars as a fundraiser. A calendar was also sent to each RCA congregation as an expression of thanks for support of RCA mission programs.

**Profiles in Mission**

Profiles in Mission, usually used as bulletin inserts, give information about RCA missionaries, staff, programs, and projects. These profiles are sent free in quantity to RCA congregations wishing to raise new mission support, to provide background information for introducing a missionary speaker, or to share general information about RCA missionaries and programs. These profiles are updated as missionary personnel and program changes occur. Twenty-one new or updated profiles were produced in 1996.

**Missionary Letters**

RCA missionaries are asked to correspond regularly with their supporting churches. To make it easier for them to do so on a regular basis, SAC staff edit, format, and distribute their letters to supporting churches and individuals. Last year 126 letters totaling 59,563 copies were distributed. These letters give insight into the work and ministry of missionaries and provide an opportunity to pray specifically for their concerns and needs.

**Reformed Church in Mission Packets**

Reformed Church in Mission packets are useful for making mission displays and promoting the RCA’s work in specific geographical areas. Each packet contains photos, a mission map, missionary profiles, *Church Herald* reprints, a brochure, a prayer card, and other useful materials for a particular RCA mission area. Packets are available free for the following areas: Africa, Japan, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, American Indian Ministries, Appalachian Ministries, Volunteer Services, Chiapas, Central and South America, and Reformed Church World Service.

**The Reformed Church in Mission**

*The Reformed Church in Mission* is an annual publication that describes the personnel, programs, and projects included in the Mission Services budget, together with financial information about how RCA mission dollars are designated. In the past this publication was a loose-leaf notebook, but in 1997 it is being published in a different format.
$9.8 by '98 Resources

The print and audiovisual resources for the $9.8 by '98 fund drive were all produced by SAC. In 1996 SAC staff wrote, edited, and/or distributed the campaign newsletter, news bulletin inserts, *Church Herald* ads, and bulletin inserts for the congregational phase of the campaign.

**Study Books, Brochures, Newsletters, and Other Resources**

A significant number of study books, brochures, newsletters, and other resources are produced each year to meet specific program needs of GSC and related organizations. A few were written by SAC staff; all were edited and proofread by SAC staff.

Study books included those by Reformed Church Women's Ministries, Evangelism and Church Development Services, and Congregational Services. Brochures were written, edited, and produced for Mission Services, Finance Services, City Congregational Ministries, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries, the RCA Building and Extension Fund, Inc., the RCA Internet website, Reformed Church World Service, and Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, among others. Newsletters included those of the African-American Council, Diaconal Ministries, and the Office of Social Witness.

**Ads**

In 1996 SAC assisted in the preparation and placement of fifteen display ads in the *Church Herald*. These ads communicated the work of Congregational Services, Evangelism and Church Development Services, Mission Services, PPIM, $9.8 by '98, the RCA Foundation, the RCA Distribution Center, and TRAVARCA.

**Plan Calendar**

The *Plan Calendar* is published annually for RCA clergy and other church workers. Free copies are sent to each minister in the RCA, and an additional eleven hundred copies were sold in 1996 by the RCA Distribution Center. The cover of the 1997-98 *Plan Calendar* highlights the denominational theme, “God’s People Transformed: Discerning and Doing God’s Will.”

**reSOURCES**

The quarterly reSOURCES mailing, using bulk postage rates, is an inexpensive way to distribute the many resources available to RCA congregations.

**News Service**

In 1996 SAC sent seven special news releases to all RCA congregations in addition to providing twelve news releases and ten “Missionary Corners” for the *Church Herald*. SAC also provides print and broadcast news coverage of General Synod meetings, sending news releases to several hundred newspapers in areas of RCA constituency and providing a daily news report available by calling toll-free 1-800-283-1160. News releases are also posted on the RCA Internet website.

**Displays**

SAC coordinates the displays at General Synod each year and assists in the design and preparation of several of them. Six portable displays are widely used for local mission conferences. Display materials are also available for use at other RCA events. Upon request, materials are sent to RCA congregations for special program displays.
The TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA lending library supplies quality audiovisual resources for the congregations, assemblies, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America; for the Christian Reformed Church in North America; and for the wider Christian community. The TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA collection currently houses audiovisual resources in three formats: VHS video, 16mm motion picture, and slide. The diverse titles include programs for a variety of audiences in a wide range of subjects.

Through resources which reflect a Christian perspective, TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA strives to strengthen and enrich the mission and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA provides a balanced collection of more than two thousand titles to support ministries in worship, education and faith development, evangelism and church development, family life, leader development, missions, social witness, and stewardship. All TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA videos and films are licensed for use at church functions. A study guide is provided with each resource. The resource arrives several days before the actual show date to allow the leader to become familiar with the program and guide. A USPS return postage-paid card, addressed to TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA, is included with every shipment in the continental United States. (Canadian customers return via Canadian Post.)

TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA strives to select resources which are consistent with the theology and practice of the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and others in the Reformed/Presbyterian family of churches. Some resources, while reflecting a Christian perspective, may not necessarily represent the official stand of either the Reformed Church in America or the Christian Reformed Church. Resource descriptions contained in the \textit{Media Resources for Ministry} catalog and updates endeavor to alert users to sensitive materials and to suggest the most appropriate settings for their use.

Jane Schuyler manages the daily operation of the TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA library and supervises the media assistants, Laurie Rodgers and Nancy Ellens. Schuyler, in consultation with the TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA Selection Committee, previews, selects, and purchases new audiovisual resources for the collection. Schuyler is available during regular business hours (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. eastern time) to answer customer questions concerning the content of print and audiovisual resources and their suitability for specific educational settings. The toll-free number for the Resource Information Helpline is 1-800-968-7221, and the fax number is (616) 698-6606. Inquiries can also be made through the RCA web site or by e-mail (rca_helpline.parti@ecunet.org). Schuyler also serves as a consultant to the Council for Christian Education and the Youth Ministry Team. She attends SAC production meetings for print and audiovisual resources and serves as a member of selected project groups in the development and production of RCA media resources. Schuyler produces medialographs of videos that coordinate with various curricula, including LiFE and Bible Way, and leads workshops as assigned. She reports periodically to the TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA Management Committee.

With an annual TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA membership fee, a church or organization is entitled to use every resource in the TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA library free of additional charge, including shipping and handling. There is no limit to the number of resources a member may use. TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA memberships are based on the size of the congregation and denominational affiliation. All memberships expire on August 31. Nonmembers may also use TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA resources but must pay the established handling and shipping fees.

In the summer of 1996 the \textit{Media Resources for Ministry: 1996 Update} catalog was sent to every RCA/CRC congregation, TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA members, staff, selected lay leaders, and to other Christian churches. As of February 28, 1997, TRA\textsuperscript{V}ARCA has 615 members and houses more than 4,840 videos, films, and slide shows (more than 1,789 different titles). It distributed more than 11,450 resources during 1996, an increase of 9 percent over the previous year.
CRC Publications conducted a mailing to its customer list (more than 6,000 congregations) in September 1996. The results were disappointing. Follow-up telemarketing is being carried out to those congregations that responded. Other promotions were included in the Church Herald, the Banner, Christian Educators Journal, Servant Leaders, reSOURCES, and the RCA Plan Calendar.

Under the current income structure, TRAVARCA's major source of income is generated by annual memberships. The financial viability of TRAVARCA depends on increasing the membership base (through marketing to non-RCA/CRC congregations and institutions). Currently TRAVARCA is exploring partnerships with the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Church of the Brethren. TRAVARCA is also assessing its income structure to determine if there is a better method to sustain the operation.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

In a communication world that is being transformed by computer technology, SAC also provides electronic communication services. A new position, electronic communications specialist, was established early in 1996. Kristi Naber, writer and editor on the SAC staff, has assumed this new position in addition to keeping several of her former responsibilities.

In 1995 a project team was created to discuss the issue of electronic communication within the RCA. This group noted that Internet technology 1) could and should be used to enhance communication among RCA members, institutions, and agencies around the world at low cost; 2) could provide the ability to exchange documents, data, and reports instantaneously; 3) could provide the ability to conduct meetings online, minimizing or eliminating some travel costs; and 4) could enable the RCA to join the ecumenical online Christian community, to share RCA news and resources, and to enter theological debate and discussion.

"Plan A"

The project team proposed that the RCA pursue an electronic communication strategy using Ecunet, a nonprofit, ecumenical service. This service would allow RCA staff, clergy, and lay persons to have ongoing discussions about theological issues, to have available RCA programs and resources, and to discuss and be aware of other issues affecting the life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America. Ecunet membership would also allow users to send and receive e-mail via the Internet.

However, in early 1996 as RCA staff began to implement this plan, the project team concluded that Ecunet was already out of date. Ecunet’s software did not provide users with access to the World Wide Web, which was growing at a phenomenal rate. Ecunet itself was undertaking a redesign process in order to address this issue but it seemed that an aggressive marketing campaign encouraging RCA members and clergy to purchase and install Ecunet would be short-sighted.

"Plan B"

Therefore the project team, consisting of staff members from Policy, Planning, and Administration Services; the Office of Information Systems; and Stewardship and Communication Services, decided to change direction and to create an RCA presence on the World Wide Web. Beginning in April 1996 the team worked to develop the RCA Internet web site, which was unveiled at the 1996 General Synod.
That first draft of the RCA web site has five major divisions: 1) “Our Story,” which includes information on the history, beliefs, and structure of the RCA; 2) “The RCA Today,” which includes RCA news and periodicals; 3) “Ministry and Mission,” which includes information about RCA mission, evangelism, Christian education, and other programs; 4) “Resources for Ministry,” which provides information about the RCA Distribution Center and TRAVARCA; and 5) “RCA Directory,” which lists all RCA congregations and staff and provides links to RCA congregational home pages.

In 1996 about twenty to thirty people visited the RCA web site each day. Site statistics indicate that the “RCA Directory” had tremendous use. The second most used area of the site was “Our Beliefs.” More than ninety congregations developed their own web sites in the past year, and more than four hundred RCA members sent their e-mail addresses to the RCA web site’s guest book.

Continuing Development

After a year of maintaining, updating, and expanding the information on the RCA web site, the project team has now begun to plan and work toward changes that will make the site more useful and user-friendly for RCA members and staff. The first phase of these improvements is an expanded directory system. The new directory will allow RCA members to find each other online by allowing them to sign onto a guestbook with their names, church affiliation, and e-mail addresses. This information will become part of a searchable directory of RCA users. All RCA congregations will also be listed in this searchable directory.

The new directory system will also include display listings available to all RCA churches. (The directory itself will function like the “white pages,” and these display listings will function like the “yellow pages.”) Each RCA congregation will be able to create a simple display listing, which they can access and change at any time, updating schedules, adding e-mail addresses or links to more elaborate church home pages, or changing graphics and photos. These listings are available at the 1997 General Synod.

A second major focus is the development of web sites for each RCA regional synod. These regional sites will be housed within the RCA’s Internet domain, allowing users to look in only one place for information about both local and denominational programs. The content of regional sites will be maintained and controlled by each region.

Other developments planned for 1997 include: 1) restructuring the RCA web site and adding search functions to help users find what they’re looking for more easily; 2) adding resources and information within the “Ministry and Mission” section; 3) creating discussion forums and bulletin boards within the web site to allow users to ask questions and share ideas; and 4) adding a new section to the web site which will include administrative resources such as the Consistorial Report Form and information on RCA insurance and pension programs. At some point, resource catalogs and ordering will also be available online.

AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTIONS

RCA Productions is the RCA’s office for audiovisual production. With cameras, field acquisition equipment, and editing and graphics capabilities, the office is fully capable of producing broadcast quality video resources. Senior producer John Grooters, production coordinator Kathy Smarrella, associate producer Terry Bowersox, and secretary Barb Koornedyk staff the department. Working together with other staff and editors from Stewardship and Communication Services, they produce audiovisual resources that help tell the story of RCA mission and ministry. RCA Productions also does contract production work for other ministry-oriented groups outside the RCA. These outside projects help offset the costs of maintaining the office.
Nineteen ninety-six was the busiest and most productive year ever for RCA Productions. Income rose from $192,541 in 1995 to $324,234 in 1996. This income was $100,384 over the projected 1996 budgeted income. Income is derived from the sale of production services, supplies, and equipment rental.

Available at competitive rates are rentals of cameras, lighting and audio equipment, AVID nonlinear editing and graphics services, image magnification, event video support, and video duplication, as well as production, writing, editing, videography, and technical support services. Production bids are available on a per-project basis.

RCA-produced media resources can be ordered through the TRA VARCA lending library. Some items are also available for sale through the RCA Distribution Center. Descriptions are included in the TRA VARCA Media Resources for Ministry catalog.

The following is a list of new audiovisual resources produced over the past year specifically for committees/units of the General Synod Council.

1. **RCA Today 1997** (Stewardship and Communication Services)
   
   This annual RCA video magazine is sent to every RCA congregation and highlights interesting stories from around the world.

2. **Sayuri’s Joy, Part One; The Story of an RCA Missionary** (Mission Services)
   
   This is the latest major release from Mission Services. Shot entirely on location in Japan, this video features the fascinating story of the Rev. Sayuri Kist-Okazaki. She was raised as a Christian in Japan, but found it to be a very lonely and discouraging experience. After having her faith revitalized while a student at Western Theological Seminary, she returned to Japan to be a missionary to her own people.

3. **Sayuri’s Joy, Part Two; RCA Mission in Japan** (Mission Services)
   
   This second part of Sayuri’s Joy allows RCA missionaries serving in Japan to share briefly about their work and ministry. This part of the video gives an overall picture of the RCA’s mission strategy and activity in Japan.

4. **Here’s LiFE** (Congregational Services)
   
   This training video was produced for the CRC/RCA partnership that developed the LiFE curriculum. This video is designed for teachers of LiFE, and it offers models as well as instruction on how to be an effective LiFE leader.

5. **Liturgy and Life, A Reformed Understanding of Worship** (Congregational Services)
   
   This video, introduced at the 1996 General Synod, provides background information and theological reflection on important elements of worship in the Reformed tradition.

6. **Task Force on the Standards for the Preparation of the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America** (Office of the General Secretary)
   
   This video features a panel discussion with some of the task force members: the Rev. Dr. Cornelis Kors, the Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil, the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, and the Rev. Barbara Alexander. This video explores the issues generated by the task
force’s work related to candidates studying and preparing for ordination as ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA.

7. General Synod Synopsis (Policy, Planning, and Administration Services)

Following each General Synod meeting, John Grooters, RCA producer, interviews the elected president and vice-president of General Synod to discuss the highlights and significant events and votes of General Synod. Actual footage from floor debates of General Synod plenary sessions, as well as footage from other areas of Synod life, comprise this twenty-five minute video. This video is sent free to every RCA congregation in July.

8. General Synod Orientation (Policy, Planning, and Administration Services)

This annually updated video is shown just before the first business session of General Synod and both welcomes and orients General Synod participants to the operational procedures and rules for the orderly conduct of business at Synod.

9. Spring Sabbath Review (Office of the General Secretary)

The inaugural Spring Sabbath in April 1996 was a positive and uplifting experience. This video captures some of the memorable highlights of the event.

10. St. Thomas Hurricane Marilyn Aid (Mission Services)

Dollars and volunteers poured into St. Thomas, the U.S. Virgin Islands, following the destruction of the St. Thomas Reformed Church by Hurricane Marilyn in September 1995. This video tells the story of the church and the destruction of its worship facility and parsonage, the progress of the rebuilding, and the stories of volunteers who came from across the RCA to work and to assist members of the church.

11. Partnership-In-Ministry Series: Carrying the Light to the Orma (Mission Services)

Partnership-in-Ministry series programs are videos initiated and written by RCA missionaries. The footage usually comes directly from the cameras of the missionaries. This video by Delvin and Debra Braaksma gives a unique and rare look into the tribal lives of the Orma people of Kenya. The rare footage was obtained because of the trust gained by the Braaksmas from the Orma people.

12. Missionary Conversation Series (Mission Services)

Videos in the missionary conversation series are brief, five-minute glimpses into the lives and ministries of RCA missionaries. Illustrated with video or photographs from a specific RCA mission area, these videos are an excellent way to share briefly with a congregation something about a particular area of RCA mission work. The following twelve videos, all made in 1996-97, are available in the series:

- Charles and Reineke Ausherman (global women’s health)
- Wendell and Renske Karsen (Hong Kong)
- John and Lynn Hubers (Bahrain)
- Merle and Karen VanderSluis (Kenya)
- Peter and Patty Ford (Sudan)
- Brian and Donna Renes (computer translation technology)
- Roland and Judy Van Es (Philippines)
Abraham and Sayuri Kist-Okazaki (Japan)
Wayne and Miho Jansen (Japan)
Gordon and Evon Laman (Japan)
Delvin and Debra Braaksma (Kenya)
Marty Weitz (Oman)

The following videos are currently in progress:

1. Scripture Video (Congregational Services)

This video, premiering at the 1997 General Synod, focuses on the 1997 General Synod theme “God’s People Transformed: Renewed in Mind and Discerning and Doing God’s Will.” The video highlights stories of the transforming power of the Word and how the Bible changes lives and congregations.

2. Custom Church Video (Evangelism and New Church Development Services) Series

1. The Internet Problem
2. Never
3. A Place for Becoming

Each of the above three creative video vignettes revolves around someone locating an RCA congregation on the Internet. This video series is designed to provide a way for every RCA congregation to have a low-cost, high-quality video highlighting the ministry and spirit of its congregation. Any congregation can be inserted into the video series. Call RCA Productions for details.

3. Bearers of the Light (Mission Services)

This video briefly visits each of the five continents where the RCA is in mission. The video focuses not only on where the RCA is in mission, but also why and how.

4. American Indian Video (Mission Services)

This video focuses on the historic and contemporary ministry of the RCA among Native American communities in the United States.

5. Missionary Conversations (Mission Services)

The missionary conversation series is a way to meet an RCA missionary in a casual and brief format (see also number 12 above). Conversations with the following missionaries are currently in the production process:

Gail Beran (Japan)
George and Joyce Magee (Japan)
Cornelia Roghair (Japan)
Tom and Barbara VandeBerg (Japan)

The following seven videos were produced for other clients during the past year by RCA.

1. Vision for Leadership (Western Theological Seminary)

This video helps to articulate the vision and plan of Western Theological Seminary for its future and invites those who support its mission to share in that future.
2. **Open Doors of Opportunity**  
(Theological Education Agency)

The Theological Education Agency (TEA) works with RCA students who are not attending one of the RCA's two seminaries, yet desire to become ordained as RCA ministers of Word and sacrament. In this video, the Rev. Dr. Cornelis Kors, director of TEA, explains TEA, and a number of students tell what TEA has meant to them.

3. **Daring to Be Different**  
(Christian Reformed Church)

A major release of the Christian Reformed Church, this video describes the mission work of the Reformed Church in Japan (an indigenous Japanese church) and the Christian Reformed Church's partnership with that church.

4. **Touched By Marble**  
(Marble Collegiate Church)

Marble Collegiate Church is the RCA’s oldest congregation and one of its best known. In the shadow of the Empire State building on Fifth Avenue, Marble is a healthy congregation thriving in the center of New York City. This video captures the heart of Marble’s ministry and includes an appeal by the senior pastor, the Rev. Arthur Calandro, seeking support for the church’s major fund drive.

5. **Hope Avenue, Kids Hope USA**  
(International Aid, via the Image Group)

Kids Hope is a program matching churches with elementary schools, setting up one-on-one relationships between church members and at-risk young children. Adults spend one hour per week with a child, tutoring, mentoring, and relationship-building.

6. **Carousel Resources**  
(Carousel Resources, via The Image Group)

Carousel Resources is a scrap metal reclamation company which recycles used metals, from automobiles to soda cans. Carousel Resources buys and sells scrap metals.

7. **Geneva Camp and Conference Center**  
(Geneva Camp and Retreat Center)

There are exciting plans for the future of the beautiful Geneva Camp and Retreat Center on the shores of Lake Michigan near Holland. This video highlights some of the many lives that have been changed over the years and looks ahead at Geneva’s exciting future.

**Overture**

*Church Herald* Not Accept Paid Advertising on Denominational Issues

1. The Regional Synod of New York overtures General Synod to direct the editor of the *Church Herald* not to accept paid advertising on denominational issues, and especially on those issues requiring a vote by General Synod.
Reasons:

1. This overture is in the interest of fairness and justice. If paid advertising for issues facing the denomination is permitted, those groups or individuals with enough funds will be able, through the purchasing of advertising, to unfairly influence the outcome of these issues. It is not in the interest of fairness or justice that those with enough funds be able to present their views through advertising while those whose means are limited are not able to purchase advertising. The RCA must not be “sold to the highest bidder.”

2. This overture is in the interest of truth. Those who have the funds to pay for advertising to present their ideas are not bound to speak with clarity, honesty, or objectivity. Paid advertising is designed to influence, not necessarily to enlighten.

3. This overture will prevent divisiveness within the RCA. Paid advertising is not a proper way to have honest, objective, open, and full debate and discussion of issues facing the RCA. Since paid advertising does not allow for discussion or permit all points of view to be presented, suspicion and separation in the RCA can all too easily follow.

4. The Special Rules of Order of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order (BCO) provides a proper procedure for matters of concern to come before General Synod:

   The General Synod may receive overtures from a classis or a regional synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 7).

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

   R-1.
   To request the Editorial Council of the Church Herald to review its advertising policy. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. There is considerable debate in all parts of the RCA regarding paid advertising in the Church Herald on denominational issues.

2. It is the function of the Editorial Council of the Church Herald to establish advertising policy.
Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) met twice since the last session of the General Synod: October 21-22, 1996, at the RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and February 24-25, 1997, at Rancho Capistrano Retreat Center in San Juan Capistrano, California.

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the RCA gives responsibility for ecumenical relations to the General Synod (BCO, Chapter I, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). To carry this out, the General Synod created the Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) in 1974 (MGS 1974, R-6, pp. 201-02) and formally adopted the commission in 1975 (MGS 1975, R-4, pp. 101-02). The commission coordinates the whole range of ecumenical involvements at all levels throughout the RCA. The commission advises the General Synod on matters of ecumenical import; it communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies; it educates the whole denomination on ecumenical matters; and it advocates for actions and positions consistent with the RCA’s confession and practice.

By means of its ongoing agenda, CCU keeps before the RCA the essential questions regarding the nature of Christian unity and ways of giving visible expression to the unity all believers have in Jesus Christ. Conversely, through referrals, the General Synod presents Christian unity matters to CCU for study, implementation, and possible recommendations to General Synod.

Since the 1996 General Synod meeting, CCU devoted much of its time to the Formula of Agreement. Both of the commission’s meeting sites (noted above) were selected intentionally in order to allow the commission to host forums on the Formula of Agreement for local pastors and elders in these areas. CCU has sought to provide to the RCA as much background information as is possible for this year’s consideration by the 1997 General Synod to adopt the Formula of Agreement.

ECUMENICAL OFFICER AND ASSOCIATE FOR ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

The general secretary of the RCA is its chief “ecumenical officer.” As such, the general secretary serves the denomination through various degrees of engagement with the leadership of other church bodies. Because of the vast scope of this engagement (both national and worldwide), the general secretary is enlisted as an ex-officio member of CCU. The commission is grateful for the wealth of experience—ecumenically, practically, and theologically—that the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson continues to bring to CCU.

CCU is also indebted to the Rev. Douglas Fromm, the RCA staff member who serves the denomination part-time as the associate for ecumenical relations and serves as the staff resource person for CCU. Fromm also serves as pastor of Upper Ridgewood Community Church, an RCA congregation in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

ECUMENICAL NETWORK WITH CLASSES

CCU continues to enlist the support of the RCA Ecumenical Network in its dissemination of information to classes. The network, established by CCU in 1993, is comprised of one individual from each classis who serves as an “ecumenical liaison” between CCU and the classis. The commission has asked each classis to designate a specific time in its agenda for an ecumenical report. The “ecumenical liaison” provides updates on ecumenical matters that are before the RCA and also receives individual feedback to report to CCU on behalf of the classis.
RCA ECUMENICAL MANDATE DISTRIBUTED

The 1996 General Synod adopted the paper, "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America" for use in the RCA as a foundation and guide for its ecumenical relations (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). This paper was mailed to RCA pastors and congregations in February 1997. CCU looks forward to implementing the goals of the mandate now and in the years to come. Additional copies are available from the RCA Distribution Center.

CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH AND RCA RELATIONS

In response to an overture from the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to request the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in North America to consider making provision for union churches with the Reformed Church in America (MGS 1996, R-9, p. 221).

In response to R-9, CCU addressed a letter to the general secretary of the CRC, requesting such a provision. A reply to this request is expected to be received by CCU prior to the 1997 General Synod meeting.

In response to an overture from the Classis of North Grand Rapids, the 1995 General Synod voted:

To encourage agencies of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America as well as the Commission on Christian Unity to maintain regular correspondence with the respective corresponding agencies within the Christian Reformed Church in North America and its Inter-Church Relations; and further, to explore avenues of reconciliation between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America for additional programmatic cooperation (MGS 1996, R-5, p. 189).

In March 1996 the RCA general secretary, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, hosted a joint session of RCA and CRC denominational leaders at the RCA offices in the Interchurch Center in New York City to facilitate sharing and future cooperative endeavors. In April 1997 the CRC hosted a similar meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the CRC headquarters. Granberg-Michaelson has also established an informal relationship with his counterpart in the CRC. CCU will continue to foster closer ties between the two church bodies in accord with the directive of the above 1996 General Synod.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST AND RCA DIALOGUE

Background

The 1996 General Synod voted to initiate a dialogue with the United Church of Christ, focusing on the different positions held by the two churches and a desire that the UCC move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and repeal its policies condoning homosexual behavior (MGS 1996, p. 214).

In October 1996 the United Church of Christ responded to the RCA request for a dialogue. The Executive Council of the UCC voted to accept the invitation of the RCA to enter into dialogue on issues related to homosexuality and to demonstrate the integrity of the biblical and theological discernment that has informed and undergirded the UCC General Synod's positions.
In its response to the RCA, the UCC raised three issues to be addressed regarding the structuring of a dialogue. The issues were: 1) the most appropriate number of persons from each denomination to attend the dialogue (keeping in mind fiscal realities); 2) the scheduling of a first meeting (keeping in mind the number of calendars to be coordinated); and 3) a specific request of the UCC Executive Council that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America be invited to participate.

By December 1996 the Reformed Church in America named the following participants to the dialogue:

- **Heino Blaauw**  
  Pastor of Forestview Community Church in Grimsby, Ontario, and member of the Commission on Christian Unity

- **Shari Brink**  
  Copastor of Colts Neck Reformed Church in Colts Neck, New Jersey, and member of the General Synod Council

- **Douglas Groen**  
  Chaplain and marriage and family therapist in San Antonio, Texas, and retired chaplain (colonel) U.S. Army

- **I. John Hesselink**  
  Professor of systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary and past president of General Synod

- **Eugene Pearson**  
  Pastor of Lake Hills Community Church in Laguna Hills, California

Douglas Fromm and Eugene Heideman served as staff resource persons for this dialogue.

By January 1997 the United Church of Christ named the following participants to the dialogue:

- **Frank Dietz**  
  Pastor of Christ United Church of Christ in Cypress, Texas, and chair of the UCC Council for Ecumenism

- **Edith Guffey**  
  Secretary of the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio, and layperson

- **Paul Hammer**  
  Professor of New Testament (retired) at Colgate-Rochester Theological Seminary and member of the Theology Commission of the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches

- **Alice O'Donovan**  
  Pastor of First Congregational Church in South Windham, Connecticut

- **John Thomas**  
  Assistant to the president of the United Church of Christ

**First Dialogue Meeting**

Following the naming of the delegations from each denomination, a search for a meeting date was conducted by RCA and UCC staff. The earliest agreed-upon date by all participants was April 17, 1997. The first dialogue was held at the Church Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Chicago, Illinois. This initial meeting began with worship led by the Rev. Douglas Fromm.

After a round of introductions and setting the agenda for the day, the dialogue focused on the votes of the 1996 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America and the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ which led to the dialogue. It was made clear by all
participants that neither the RCA’s 1996 General Synod vote initiating the dialogue nor the UCC response were set as conditions for the Lutheran/Reformed vote in the summer of 1997. The summer 1997 vote on the proposal for “full communion” between the Lutheran and Reformed churches is not contingent on the outcome of the dialogue. Furthermore, it was made clear by all participants that the RCA General Synod and the UCC Executive Council had not fixed a timeline for the dialogue. The Executive Council did request a report for its October 1997 meeting.

Ecumenical Context

The sensitivity of the bilateral conversations was discussed. It was noted that the dialogue would be of interest to many in the RCA and the UCC as well as to the larger, ecumenical community, worldwide, from parishes to ecumenical councils and alliances. It was noted that the dialogue would most certainly not take place in a vacuum. Furthermore, it was agreed that discussions would need to be sensitive to those persons who are gay or lesbian and to those who have family members who are gay or lesbian. It was agreed that pastoral sensitivity needed to inform the exploration of these issues. This agreement, it was noted, was in compliance with positions and policies adopted by both the RCA and the UCC that have stated that too often the RCA or the UCC has participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior that humiliate or degrade gay or lesbian persons. Too often the RCA or the UCC has shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries and being pastorally engaged as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity.

The opening conversations of this dialogue also agreed that the focus for discussion needed to be broad enough to deal with sexuality in its wider dimensions, and not narrowly focused on homosexuality alone. The issue of homosexuality needs to be addressed in the context of sexuality.

The dialogue then turned to the official positions, policies, and practices of both denominations. Written documents were shared and highlighted that reviewed the votes of the RCA and the UCC General Synods from the early 1970s to the present. The present positions of both denominations were clearly placed on the table as the background of current conversations.

Foundational Questions

The dialogue identified the following four foundational questions to guide its conversations:

1. Can we come to an understanding of how it is that our churches have reached these distinctive, differing positions?

2. How is it that two churches of the Reformed tradition, honoring and reading the same Scripture, can come to such different conclusions? (It was pointed out that this is not the first time in history that this has occurred; e.g. the church’s response to slavery and the response to the ordination of women to church offices.)

3. Can we be on a significant walk together, even when there are deep differences?

4. How does this “table” of dialogue relate to the larger “Table” around which fellowship with the wider church is built and experienced?

First Dialogue Conclusions

Discussion continued for a full day, and the meeting was closed with worship led by the Rev. John Thomas.
Dialogue participants are pleased to report to the RCA and the UCC the progress of the conversations and the following common understandings:

1. The Bible has been and continues to be the foundational guidance for our churches on the issues of homosexuality, although we may come with differing hermeneutical and interpretive principles.

2. The first round of conversations represented frank, open, and candid sharing of each church's background and position on the issue of homosexuality without compromising the convictions or integrity of the participants or the official positions of the church they each represent.

3. There is a commitment to continue the conversations beyond the votes of our General Synods this summer regardless of the outcome of the voting.

4. The nature of this dialogue is of such importance for our churches and the larger ecumenical community, that what we say and do may become a model for how churches deal with differing positions on contemporary moral issues.

5. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be invited to participate in future conversations as observers.

6. An atmosphere of trust was established among all participants, with respect for the person, qualifications, experience, and commitment that each brings to the dialogue.

Future Dialogue

At the close of the first round of conversations, the following decisions were made regarding future dialogue:

1. The dialogue will continue September 17-19, 1997, at the Church Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, Illinois.

2. The focus of the next dialogue will be the question of how the Bible has shaped the discernment of each denomination on the issue of homosexuality.

3. The RCA and the UCC will present, via a biblical scholar or papers, the hermeneutical principles applied in the formation of its position, policies, and practices.

The theologian Howard Thurman has said that "understanding requires great artistry. This is why conversation and good talk and dialogue are of such immense value." The dialogue participants from the RCA and the UCC gratefully accept and begin their task with a sense of urgency and hope. To be profitable to the church they commit themselves to studying, questioning, and prayer. They will be conversant with words and the Word "humbly and reverently, believingly, devoutly, intent upon salvation, prayerfully, with proper application to oneself, with the earnest resolution to be guided thereby in all things." (Quoted from the Heidelberg Catechism, Introduction, Holy Scriptures. Cleveland, Ohio: Central Publishing House, 1907 edition.)

ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

At the January 1996 GSC meeting the president of General Synod for the 1995-96 term, the Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink, requested formation of an ecumenical partnership between the RCA and the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa Sulawesi, Indonesia. This request coincided with a developing relationship of the RCA with the Uniting Reformed Church of
Southern Africa (URCSA). CCU continued its discussion of "ecumenical partnerships." CCU believes it is necessary to form a policy statement whereby the RCA can appropriately respond to requests made by various communions to form closer relationships. (Another such request came before CCU from the Gedo Kale Heywet Church in Ethiopia.)

Because these requests come from international churches, CCU invited staff from Mission Services to participate in the discussion. CCU convened a meeting in April 1997 (coinciding with the April 1997 General Synod Council meeting) to include members of CCU, Mission Services, and other RCA staff to take the next steps in this development.

UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

From the RCA's associate for ecumenical relations, CCU continues to receive information on the developing relationship between the RCA and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). CCU maintains an interest in this relationship as it pertains to the formation of a general policy statement on "ecumenical partnerships" (see above). Also, CCU over many years has been a participant in the long-term relationship that the RCA has enjoyed with the members of URCSA and its predecessors.

ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The World Council of Churches

The RCA is a charter member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and continues to participate in its programs. Recently the RCA responded to a major WCC self-study, "Toward a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC." On behalf of the RCA, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson drafted a response to the self-study based in part on discussions with members of CCU and other at-large RCA participants involved in the study. What follows is a quote indicative of the RCA's recent critique of the WCC. This statement was included within the detailed response forwarded by the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson to the WCC headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland:

The failure of the WCC and other regional ecumenical structures to effectively engage all the major families of the global Christian community around a common table of koinonia—the historic Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical/Pentecostal—represents the major ecumenical impasse of our age. For various persistent historical reasons, this impasse cannot be overcome through a continued reliance on present structures and assumptions. A dramatic, self-emptying, and hopeful gesture is required. The document's ("Toward a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC") call for such a "forum" opens up such a possibility.

CCU is hopeful the WCC will utilize the above and other suggestions as it approaches its fiftieth anniversary in 1998. In 1998 the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches convenes in Harare, Zimbabwe. The theme will be "Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope."

The National Council of Churches (and National Association of Evangelicals)

The financial struggles of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCC) continue. The RCA, in the midst of finding an RCA pastor to serve on the NCCC executive board, continues to have active participation in the various subunits of the council. This past year Donald Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), addressed the NCCC executive board. This signals a new level of rapport between the two major ecumenical organizations in the United States.
The World Alliance of Reformed Churches

CCU approved the following persons as RCA delegates to attend later this year the Twenty-Third General Council Meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC): the Rev. Wesley and Karin Granberg-Michaelson, the Rev. Edwin Mulder, the Rev. Douglas Fromm, and Anna James.

Also, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to participate with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in its discussion of gender equality as status confessionis (MGS 1996, p. 310).

CCU has requested the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson to participate with WARC in its discussion of gender equality as status confessionis.

LUTHERAN/REFORMED PROPOSAL FOR ESTABLISHING “FULL COMMUNION”

The following narrative provides background information on the thirty-four years of official dialogues and conversations that have now resulted in the proposal for full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed churches—the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ.

History of the Dialogues

Representatives of Reformed and Lutheran churches in the U.S.A. have held official conversations since 1962. The first round (1962-69) produced Marburg Revisited. The representatives concluded that there are “no insuperable obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship.” They encouraged the churches to look forward to intercommunion and the full recognition of one another’s ministries. The second round of dialogues (1972-74) concluded that declarations of church fellowship should be dealt with on a church-to-church body basis.

The third round (1981-83) issued joint statements on justification, the Lord’s Supper, and ministry in An Invitation To Action, which was published in 1984. In 1986 representatives concluded that the Reformed and Lutheran churches should recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is proclaimed and sacraments administered according to the ordinance of Christ. They recommended mutual recognition of ministries and Eucharist and a detailed process of reception.

The recommendations contained in An Invitation to Action were adopted by the Reformed Church in America (MGS 1986, R-5, p. 155) and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1986. The United Church of Christ adopted the recommendations in 1989. On the Lutheran side, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the American Lutheran Church adopted the recommendations in 1986. At the same time, however, the Lutheran Church in America offered a more guarded response, calling for a “new series of Lutheran-Reformed dialogues.” The Lutheran Church in America requested further exploration of: 1) the relationship between dialogue and the governing and liturgical documents of the churches, and 2) the confessional nature of the Reformed churches.

Concurrently with the actions of all churches, the three Lutheran bodies were in process of creating a new Lutheran body whereby the three predecessor bodies would be merged into one known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The constituting churchwide assembly was held in 1988.
At the constituting 1988 assembly, creating the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it was decided to engage in further discussions with the Reformed churches. ELCA leaders and representatives of the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ agreed to address the doctrinal condemnations found in the *Formula of Concord* (1577) concerning the Lord’s Supper, Christology, and predestination. Each of the four churches named representatives to the conversations.

The Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations was constituted by the four partner churches and met from 1988 to 1992. Its mandate was to explore the key doctrinal issues: the Lord’s Supper (the real presence of Christ), God’s will to save (predestination), and the condemnations of the sixteenth century. The mandate instructed the Committee for Theological Conversations to see whether or not there was any impediment presented by these three issues which could be called “church dividing.” The committee’s report, *A Common Calling: The Witness of our Reformation Churches in North America Today,* was released in March 1992. In it the committee reported that, on the basis of their theological discussion, participants found no “church-dividing differences” and made the following unanimous recommendation:

That the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) declare that they are in full communion with one another. In the specific terms of full communion as they are developed in our study, this recommendation also requires

1. that they recognize each other as churches in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God;

2. that they withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the faith and life of our churches today;

3. that they continue to recognize each others’ Baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among their members;

4. that they recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament;

5. that they establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches;

6. that they commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service;

7. that they pledge themselves to living together under the Gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.

Having completed its work, the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations was dissolved in 1992.

In light of the recommendation of the Committee for Theological Conversations, a Joint Coordinating Committee of the Lutheran-Reformed Churches was established with representation from each of the four partner churches. The mandate given to the Joint Coordinating Committee was to develop a process of educating the churches as to the meaning and implication of declaring “full communion” between the Lutheran and Reformed churches. In fulfillment of its mandate, the committee produced a number of documents for
study in the churches. These are: A Common Discovery: Learning about the Churches of the Reformation in North America Today; Lutheran-Reformed Theological Reflections on Full Communion; and Glimpses: What Full Communion May Mean to You, a collection of papers written by Reformed and Lutheran writers focusing on each of seven recommendations reported in A Common Calling.

The Joint Coordinating Committee also prepared A Formula of Agreement. The Formula serves as a summary of the report of the Conversations Committee as well as focusing on the intent and meaning of the “full communion” proposal between the Lutheran and Reformed bodies. The Formula provides a basis for understanding the work completed these past thirty-four years leading to a doctrinal consensus and the work to be carried out as “full communion” is effected in the life and mission of the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

At its last working session on February 3, 1997, the Lutheran Reformed Coordinating Committee called attention to the fact that the Formula of Agreement sets forth a fundamental doctrinal consensus that is based on, and presumes, the theological agreements of earlier Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, including the 1983 statement: “Our unity in Christ compels us to claim our strong affinities in doctrine and practice.” Both Lutheran and Reformed traditions:

a. Affirm themselves a living part of the church catholic.

b. Confess the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds.

c. Affirm the doctrine of justification by faith as fundamental.

d. Affirm the unique and final authority of Holy Scriptures in the church.

e. Affirm the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

f. Affirm the priesthood of all believers and have interpreted this as our servanthood to God and our service to the world.

g. Affirm the vocation of all the baptized, which is service (ministry) in every aspect of their lives in their care of God’s world.

h. Affirm that they are in faithful succession in the apostolic Tradition and that faithful succession in this Tradition is all that is necessary for mutual recognition as part of the church catholic.

i. Share a common definition of a church in the apostolic Tradition: a community where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

j. Identify a ministry of Word and sacrament as instituted by God.

k. Ordain once to a ministry of Word and sacrament, and the functions of such persons are identical.

l. Understand that ordination is to the ministry of the church catholic. Such ordinations in both traditions have usually been by presbyters.

m. Have granted the appropriateness under some circumstances of one ordained person exercising episkope, oversight (under a variety of titles, including that of bishop), but both traditions have ordinarily exercised the function of episkope collegially through such structures as presbyteries and synods.
n. Affirm that the church always must be open to further growth and reformation. Both
traditions have been willing to be self-critical. Both traditions have become increasingly
open to a historical-critical understanding of the history of the church and of their
respective traditions within the apostolic Tradition.

General Synod Actions Relating to the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogues

In response to the dialogue of 1981-83, the 1986 General Synod voted:

To adopt the suggested Reformed/Lutheran response as the official response of the RCA
to the proposals of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue (MGS 1986, R-5, p. 155).

The Commission on Christian Unity, in its report to the 1986 General Synod, also reported:

In the long history of Lutheran-Reformed relations, there has been recognition of the
many things that our traditions have affirmed together. The Reformed Church in
America is mindful of this shared heritage and is grateful that An Invitation To Action
provides the occasion to make the following affirmation as an official action of this
church.

a. Recognize one another as churches in which the gospel is proclaimed and the
sacraments administered according to the ordinance of Christ,

b. Recognize as both valid and effective one another’s ordained ministries which
announce the gospel of Christ and administer the sacraments of faith as their chief
responsibility.

c. Recognize one another’s celebrations of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace in
which Christ, truly present in the sacrament, is given and received, forgiveness of
sins is declared and experienced, and a foretaste of eternal life is granted.

Therefore, we urge our churches to:

d. Enter into a process of reception of these recognitions so that they may become a
part of the faith and life of each church at the deepest level, moving beyond purely
administrative and intellectual action (MGS 1986, p. 154).

In response to the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue of 1988-1992, the 1993 General Synod voted:

To commend the Commission on Christian Unity (working with the Presbyterian
Church, U.S.A., and the United Church of Christ) for its dialogue with the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America, as well as to commend the work of our two RCA
theologians...and RCA denominational staff person (MGS 1993, R-2, p. 197).

In response to the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Coordinating Committee’s development of the
Formula of Agreement declaring “full communion” between the Reformed and Lutheran
churches, the 1994 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to produce and distribute to all RCA
clergy and clerks of consistories a brief compendium of A Common Calling: The Witness
of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today, highlighting the main points of
the Reformed-Lutheran dialogue, along with its implications for clergy and congregations
(MGS 1994, R-1, p. 172).
Among its reasons for proposing R-1, the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity stated:

R-1 encourages a positive General Synod vote in 1997. The advisory committee noted that a fragmented body of Christ undercuts the ultimate effectiveness of all Christian endeavor, and that disunity in the church blunts the basic message of the gospel of reconciliation (MGS 1994, p. 173).

The same advisory committee further recommended, and the 1994 General Synod voted:

To urge RCA clergy and congregations to use *A Common Calling* and the companion study, *A Common Discovery*, in adult education classes; and further,

to urge RCA clergy and congregations to engage, where possible, in joint studies with congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (MGS 1994, R-2, p. 173).

In its reason for proposing the above R-2, the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity stated the same reason as presented with R-1 above:

R-1 encourages a positive General Synod vote in 1997. The advisory committee noted that a fragmented body of Christ undercuts the ultimate effectiveness of all Christian endeavor, and that disunity in the church blunts the basic message of the gospel of reconciliation” (MGS 1994, p. 173).

In 1995 the *Formula of Agreement* was presented to the General Synod for information (MGS 1995, pp. 164-73). In response to its review of the formula, the 1995 General Synod voted:

To commend the Commission on Christian Unity for its work in developing the *Formula of Agreement* (MGS 1995, R-1, p. 173).

The 1996 General Synod received an overture from the Classis of South Grand Rapids calling for a postponement of "any decision on the *Formula of Agreement*" until the United Church of Christ, one of the Reformed partners in the dialogue, be informed that “the RCA is opposed to the policies adopted by the United Church of Christ which condone homosexual behavior and that the two churches” enter into dialogue . . . on the issue of homosexuality (MGS 1996, p. 207).

In response to this overture, the 1996 General Synod took no action to postpone the proposed vote in 1997 establishing “full communion” with the ELCA. No conditions on the 1997 vote were implied or stated by the 1996 General Synod.

However, with regard to the homosexual issue of differences between the UCC and the RCA, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to engage the United Church of Christ (UCC) in dialogue on the issue of homosexuality in the context of the paper, “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America” (MGS 1996, pp. 184-97) and the *Formula of Agreement* with its convenantal call for the churches to:

Establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches;

Commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service; and
Pledge themselves to living together under the gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow (Formula of Agreement, Preface, p. 3);

and further,

to encourage this interdenominational discussion at the denominational, classical/association, and congregational levels, based on prior Reformed Church in America statements on homosexuality (MGS 1996, R-4, p. 211). The 1996 General Synod also voted:

To inform the United Church of Christ that while we ourselves have failed in many ways to submit our sexuality to the lordship of Jesus Christ and that while we too wrestle daily with the lusts of the flesh, in a spirit of repentance and love the Reformed Church in America is opposed to the policies adopted by the United Church of Christ which condone homosexual behavior; and further,

to offer to enter into dialogue with the United Church of Christ on the issue of homosexuality for the purpose of encouraging the UCC to move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior (YES-112, NO-110) (MGS 1996, p. 214).

The progress of the proposed dialogue with the UCC was reported above under the section “United Church of Christ and RCA Dialogue.”

PROPOSED ADOPTION TO DECLARE “FULL COMMUNION” BETWEEN THE LUTHERAN AND REFORMED CHURCHES

Consistent with the above-referred-to votes of the 1986, 1993, 1994, 1995, and 1996 General Synods, which either adopted recommendations to declare “full communion” or to “commend the CCU for its work in the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue” and “the development of the Formula of Agreement,” and the decision to enter into dialogue with the UCC on the single issue of homosexuality without the resolution of this issue as a condition for voting on entering into “full communion” with the ELCA, the Commission on Christian Unity received the request made by the Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee to present the resolution for establishing “full communion” between the Lutheran and Reformed churches to the 1997 General Synod for adoption.

STATEMENT CONCERNING THE RESOLUTION

The meaning and the intent of the Formula of Agreement needs to be clear.

The Formula of Agreement is not a document that establishes an organic merger or an organizational union between churches.

The Formula of Agreement is not a document that establishes a new and different relationship between the Reformed churches. To say that the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ are in “full communion” is not to say anything new. As part of their common Reformed heritage, these three Reformed churches are already in partnership in the way that Reformed polity understands full communion. That is, each local board of elders governs admittance to the Lord’s Table and each local classis governs admittance to the pulpit, in keeping with the RCA Doctrinal Standards, the RCA Liturgy, and the RCA Book of Church Order.
In accord with the Reformed understanding common to the RCA, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the UCC, there is, in fact and in practice, an implicit relationship of pulpit and table fellowship between these three Reformed churches. Whether the Formula of Agreement is adopted or not, this implicit relationship will not change. The RCA will still transfer and receive members with oversight by the board of elders. The RCA will still receive and send clergy to each others’ churches with the oversight of the classis, presbytery, and/or conference.

The intent of the Formula of Agreement is to make explicit the relationship of the Reformed churches to each other, while at the same time declaring a completely new relationship between these three Reformed churches and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Specifically the Formula of Agreement provides the capacity for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to bring about a new relationship with each of the three Reformed churches, named individually, without engaging each of them on a “church by church” basis. The ELCA recognizes the unique Reformed understanding of the relationship of pulpit and table fellowship that exists between the Reformed partners. The language used in the Formula of Agreement is necessary to satisfy the ELCA’s need to make clear and explicit what is implicit to the Reformed churches.

It must be clearly stated that the wording of the Formula of Agreement is to satisfy the theology and polity of the ELCA.

Another function of the Formula of Agreement is to offer a summary statement of the fundamental doctrinal consensus reached in the rounds of dialogue since they commenced in 1962. Specifically, reference is made to the three areas of diversity that could be seen as “church-dividing.” At the initiation of, and invitation by, the ELCA in 1988, the last round of dialogue (1989 to 1992) focused on the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, God’s will to save (the doctrine of predestination), and the “condemnations.” These were the potential “church-dividing” issues. The result of the dialogue was:

While the disagreements between our communities that led to the sixteenth-century condemnations regarding eucharist (Lord’s Supper), christology, and predestination continue to shape and reflect our identities, they cannot claim to be church dividing today and should not stand in the way of achieving “full communion” (pulpit and table fellowship) among us (A Common Calling, p. 65).

Another function of the Formula of Agreement is to clarify that the principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition” will be at the heart of the relationship between the Reformed and Lutheran churches:

The principle provides the capacity to make the different theological emphases of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions fruitful for each other and for their common witness in the wider church (A Common Calling, p. 66).

The final purpose of the Formula of Agreement is to provide a preliminary basis for Reformed and Lutheran churches to live in a new relationship. For the RCA this means beginning a new relationship with the ELCA with all the hope and possibilities inherent in the relationship. It means that there is a mutual recognition that the sacrament of Holy Communion is rightly celebrated. It means that the RCA and ELCA recognize each other’s ministries (that is, the Office of Minister of Word, the Office of Deacon, and the Office of Elder). It means that the RCA and ELCA recognize each other’s ordination to these offices as valid. For an RCA pastor this means that she or he ever serve an ELCA congregation, reordination would not be required. It means that members could transfer upon request from the ELCA to the RCA or vice-versa. It means that Reformed and Lutheran congregations and RCA and ELCA
program agencies would share a mutual engagement of mission in the urban, suburban, and rural life of churches and that a mutual focus would be strengthened for mission locally and globally. It means that the Reformed and Lutheran churches recognize that, as joint heirs of the Reformation, the ELCA and the RCA have gifts to bring to each other and gifts to receive as they live out the response to our Lord's prayer for unity-enhancing belief, "that the world might know" the power and lordship of Jesus Christ.

Prior to discussion and vote on R-1, the vice-president led General Synod in a time of prayer.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-1.
To adopt the following resolution:

To resolve that in adopting the Formula of Agreement (if adopted), the Reformed Church in America declares that its relationship with the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remains in accord with the definition of full communion as it is stated in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America" (MGS 1996, pp. 184-97):

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 consistories (MGS 1996, p. 192);

Which the RCA already has with the UCC and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) by virtue of Reformed polity and the fellowship shared through membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; and further,

Specifically, this means for the Reformed Church in America that admittance to the pulpit is governed by the classis and admittance to the Lord's Table is governed by the board of elders. This understanding is in keeping with the RCA doctrinal standards, the RCA Liturgy, and the RCA Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The intent of the Formula of Agreement is that the RCA will have a different kind of full communion relationship with Reformed partner denominations than it will have with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The language of the Formula of Agreement does not make this clear.

2. R-1 makes clear what might otherwise be open to ambiguity of interpretation.

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by inserting the words "and the historic unity of the Reformed Church" following the words "World Alliance of Reformed Churches." The motion LOST.)
R-2.
To adopt the following Lutheran-Reformed resolution for the 1997 Synods/assemblies:¹

WHEREAS the prayer of our Lord, the intent of our ecumenical vision, and the opportunities for mission that God is offering to us all demand that we express more fully the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ; and

WHEREAS the witness of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in Europe has resulted in over two decades of full communion within the framework of the Leuenberg Agreement; and

WHEREAS the four churches represented in the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations, 1988-1992, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, have their historical roots in the Reformation and, in part, have understood themselves in the context of their relationship to one another; and

WHEREAS these four churches rejoice in nearly four decades of dialogue during which the doctrines and confessional commitments of the respective churches have been thoroughly discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a growing sense of common mission and understanding; and

WHEREAS A Common Calling, the report of the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations reaffirmed a consensus reported in previous dialogues that there are no “church-dividing differences”² precluding full communion³ among these four churches;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Reformed Church in America adopt A Formula of Agreement on the basis of A Common Calling, and in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ,⁴ declare that it is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this full communion agreement will take effect when all four churches act affirmatively on this resolution in accordance with their respective governing procedures; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America appoint representatives to a Lutheran-Reformed Joint Committee which will coordinate implementation of full communion in the four churches; and

BE IT FINALLY FURTHER RESOLVED that the Commission on Christian Unity present a progress report on the work of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Committee to the 1998 General Synod meeting of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

Following the adoption of R-1 and R-2, the general secretary announced a pastoral letter to be sent to all RCA congregations would be prepared interpreting the adoption of R-1 and
On Friday, June 20, 1997, Synod reviewed this pastoral letter. Upon a motion from the vice-president, Synod

**VOTED:** To affirm the following June 20, 1997 pastoral letter to be sent to all RCA congregations:

**Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:**

We, the officers of the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, write from this year's meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This General Synod has sought to work and live as the Scriptures guide us, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). The delegates have been inspired by worship, open to vision, committed to mission, and surrounded by the prayers of the whole church. God's Spirit has been present—richly, abundantly, and fruitfully.

Soon you will receive a full report of all the decisions and directions established by the General Synod, including the "Statement of Mission and Vision" to guide us into the future. But the Synod, out of a deep pastoral concern for the unity of the church, asked us to share with you more quickly the action it took on one specific item: the proposal, called the *Formula of Agreement*, which would establish "full communion" between the Reformed Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

You are probably aware that this proposal generated widespread, heartfelt discussion in many parts of the Reformed Church in America over the past year. At the General Synod, delegates listened deeply and carefully to voices from throughout the church, reflecting the whole range of views on this issue, and heard communications ("overtures") from various classes. Only after much thoughtful discussion did the General Synod take two related actions.

The General Synod, by a substantial margin, approved the proposal to "declare that it is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." This is an historic step that we can celebrate in joy and gratitude to God, for it intends to heal the rift between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and three churches of the Reformed tradition. If the *Formula of Agreement* is approved by the other parties, the RCA and the ELCA will be able to officially share at the Table of Communion and mutually recognize each other's offices of ministry. This division has existed since the Reformation, when followers of Martin Luther and John Calvin could not agree on certain issues, such as the meaning of Holy Communion. We trust that this will now enable deeper cooperation between congregations of the ELCA and the RCA in common mission for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Prior to this action the General Synod passed, also by a substantial margin, an important measure clarifying the effect of approving the
Formula of Agreement on our relationship with the two other Reformed partners in this dialogue, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ (UCC). General Synod declared that in adopting the Formula of Agreement our relationship with these two Reformed denominations remains in accord with our own Reformed understanding of “full communion,” which we define as “full table and pulpit fellowship and the recognition of each other’s ministries, in keeping with the authority and responsibilities of the classes, which the RCA already has with the UCC and the PCUSA by virtue of Reformed polity.” The General Synod went on to say, “Specifically, this means for the RCA that admittance to the Lord’s Table is governed by the board of elders, and admittance to the pulpit is governed by the classis. This understanding is in keeping with the RCA doctrinal standards, the RCA Liturgy, and the RCA Book of Church Order.”

What do these two votes mean for the Reformed Church in America, its members, clergy, and congregations: and what do they not mean? Let us try to state some specific results and implications of this vote as clearly as possible:

1. General Synod has clarified decisively the intention of the Formula of Agreement from its beginning—namely, the healing of the centuries-old division that has broken communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and churches of the Reformed tradition.

2. Synod has also clarified the relationship between the Reformed partners in the agreement. That includes a clear call, also reflected in the Formula of Agreement, to address some important differences that we have within the Reformed family. In fact, the provision of “mutual affirmation and admonition” actually strengthens our resolve to do so.

3. Specifically, adopting the Formula of Agreement does not imply that the Reformed Church in America agrees with or supports the United Church of Christ regarding its policy of allowing the ordination of practicing homosexuals or its view of Scripture on such a matter. Neither does adopting the Formula of Agreement change in any way the previous positions taken by the RCA on the issue of homosexuality.

4. Adopting the formula does encourage us, in the spirit of “mutual affirmation and admonition,” to engage the UCC in a direct and focused dialogue over our clear differences on the issues of homosexuality, underlying views of Scripture, and related issues. The 1996 General Synod had already initiated this discussion with the UCC; this General Synod asked for a report back on the results of these discussions no later than 1999.

5. Nothing in the Formula of Agreement changes how we in the RCA accept ministers from the PCUSA or the UCC who may wish to transfer to the RCA. The classis, under the superintendence of the General Synod, has complete authority to examine, judge, and then determine whether such a person
is fit for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the RCA, which is our present practice.

6. This action underscores our Reformed understanding of the Lord's table, which we always open to members of other Christian churches (subject, of course, to the supervision of the board of elders). Now, pending approval by the other partners, all three Reformed churches will enjoy this relationship mutually and officially with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Should you have any further questions or clarifications, please do not hesitate to be in touch with us. In pastoral visits in various regions of the church in the months ahead, we are most willing to be involved in further conversations should that be desired.

This has been a remarkable and inspired General Synod. We have found our way through the most challenging issues while maintaining firmly the bonds of unity and peace. And we have responded to a common vision calling us to "follow Christ in mission in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

Our hearts are filled with gratitude to our God. We thank you for your prayers. The Reformed Church in America emerges from this General Synod alive to God's call and empowered by the Spirit, with its eyes and heart turned to a world in need of the grace and love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his name we send you our warmest Christian greetings and this pastoral letter, on behalf of all the delegates to the 191st General Synod.

Sincerely,

Tony Vis Chuck Van Engen Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
President of Vice-President of RCA General Secretary
General General Synod
Synod Synod

(A motion was made and supported to substitute the following for R-2:

WHEREAS the prayer of our Lord, the intent of our ecumenical vision, and the opportunities for mission that God is offering to us all demand that we express more fully the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ; and

WHEREAS the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Reformed Church in America, have their historical roots in the Reformation; and

WHEREAS these two churches rejoice in nearly four decades of dialogue during which the doctrines and confessional commitments of these two churches have been thoroughly discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a growing sense of common mission and understanding:
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Reformed Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopt full communion or “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 (MGS 1996, p. 192);

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Reformed Church in America desires to enter in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and wishes to maintain a dialogue with the United Church of Christ to confirm if the gospel is rightly preached, before pursuing full communion;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this full communion agreement between the Reformed Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will take effect when these two churches act affirmatively on this resolution in accordance with their respective governing procedures.

The motion LOST.)

(A motion was made and supported to adopt the following resolution:

To resolve that in adopting R-1 and the Formula of Agreement, R-2, the Reformed Church in America declares that the definition of full communion in the preface of the Formula of Agreement does not apply to the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and the United Church of Christ.

A request by the presenter of the motion to withdraw the motion in order to present a substitute was made. The presenter of the motion also requested support for this motion be withdrawn. Support for the motion was NOT WITHDRAWN. The chair then ruled the motion OUT OF ORDER.)

(A motion was made and supported to adopt the following:

In approving the Formula of Agreement, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America does not imply in any fashion approval of the United Church of Christ’s practices concerning the ordination of practicing gay and lesbian persons, and the Reformed Church in America affirms that further dialogue about these practices continue; and further, issues regarding the confessional understanding and sacramental language of the United Church of Christ be a part of the ongoing dialogue.

The motion LOST.) (YES-123; NO-135)

1EXPLANATORY NOTES FOR LUTHERAN-REFORMED RESOLUTION FOR THE 1977 SYNODS/ASSEMBLIES

2 The term “church-dividing differences” has a specific use and meaning here.

When the recent conversations were inaugurated in 1988 at the request of the ELCA, specific concerns were raised as to the issues to be addressed as possibly being “church-dividing differences.”
These issues were: the Lord’s Supper (the real presence of Christ), God’s will to save (predestination), and the “condemnations.”

With regard to the current round of conversations proposed by the ELCA at its churchwide assembly in 1988, the issues of the Lord’s Supper, predestination, and the condemnations were the issues noted as needing further exploration by the Reformed and Lutheran churches to see whether or not there was any impediment presented by these three issues that could be called “church-dividing.”

The Reformed and Lutheran partners in the dialogue, which began in the fall of 1988 and concluded in the spring of 1992, set these issues as the focus of their conversations “to explore what next steps need(ed) to be taken on the road to fuller fellowship.”

It was the concurrence of the partners in the dialogue that consensus was reached on these three issues. Hence it is said that there are no “church-dividing differences.”

For further commentary on this point, see A Common Calling, page 12, section B.

3 The term “full communion” is one used in ecumenical relations. However, it is only recently being introduced into usage by Reformed churches.


The “Ecumenical Mandate” states:

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 (MGS 1996, p. 192).

Specifically, this means for the RCA that admittance to the Lord’s table is governed by the board of elders and admittance to the pulpit is governed by the classis. This understanding is in keeping with the RCA Doctrinal Standards, the RCA Liturgy, and the RCA Book of Church Order.

This understanding is what is already in place and in practice for the RCA with regard to its dialogue partners, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ (UCC).

The adoption of the Formula of Agreement by the 1997 General Synod puts into place and into practice the RCA understanding of “full communion” with regard to the ELCA.

By action of the ELCA adopting the Formula of Agreement, the RCA and the ELCA declare that they are in “full communion” and that the ELCA recognizes the relationship that currently exists between the RCA, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the UCC as historically understood by Reformed polity.

The action by the ELCA further declares that it is in “full communion” with each of these Reformed churches.

4 The phrase “in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ” needs to be clearly understood.
Again, this is understood to state what is currently in place and in practice. In terms of polity, the Formula of Agreement effects no change at all in the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the UCC. The RCA is already in full communion (pulpit and table fellowship) with these Reformed bodies in the way that Reformed polity understands full communion (pulpit and table fellowship). That understanding is that each local board of elders governs admittance to the Lord’s table and that each local classis governs admittance to the pulpit, always in keeping with the RCA Doctrinal Standards, the RCA Liturgy, and the RCA Book of Church Order.

The inclusion of the phrase “in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ” is to satisfy the need of the ELCA to have in a written form what the RCA has known and knows to be the relationship between the RCA and its Reformed dialogue partners.

While the Reformed churches know their relationship of full communion (pulpit and table fellowship) to be implicit, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, because of its theology and polity, requires an explicit statement.

This language in the Formula of Agreement provides the necessary formula for the ELCA to formally recognize the full communion relationships that exist between its Reformed partners, and then to formally recognize its new relationship of full communion with each partner.

In effect it allows the ELCA to say with regard to each of the Reformed bodies what the Reformed bodies have historically said in word and in practice with regard to each other.

The phrase “in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ” is not a constitutive phrase establishing a relationship between the Reformed bodies that has not heretofore existed. In terms of RCA polity, the Formula of Agreement effects no change in the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the UCC.

Any references to “a new relationship” refers to the “newness” of the relationship of the Reformed bodies by the presence of the ELCA in full communion with them. In this sense the Formula of Agreement does create a new relationship between these Reformed and Lutheran bodies.

APPENDIX

FORMULA OF AGREEMENT
BETWEEN
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA,
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.),
THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA, AND
THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
ON ENTERING INTO FULL COMMUNION
ON THE BASIS OF
A COMMON CALLING

Preface

In 1997 four churches of Reformation heritage will act on an ecumenical proposal of historic importance. The timing reflects a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past thirty-two years, coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel
THAT THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.), THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA, AND THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST DECLARE ON THE BASIS OF A COMMON CALLING AND THEIR ADOPTION OF THIS FORMULA OF AGREEMENT THAT THEY ARE IN FULL COMMUNION WITH ONE ANOTHER. THUS, EACH CHURCH IS ENTERING INTO OR AFFIRMING FULL COMMUNION WITH THREE OTHER CHURCHES.

The term “full communion” is understood here to specifically mean that the four churches:

Recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God.

Withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today.

Continue to recognize each other’s baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among their members.

Recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

Establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches.

Commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service.

Pledge themselves to living together under the gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.

This document assumes the doctrinal consensus articulated in A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today, and is to be viewed in concert with that document. The purpose of the Formula of Agreement is to elucidate the complementarity of affirmation and admonition as the basic principle for entering into full communion and the implications of that action as described in A Common Calling.

A Common Calling, the report of the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations, 1988-1992, continued a process begun in 1962. Within that report was the “unanimous recommendation that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ declare that they are in full communion with one another” (A Common Calling, pp. 66-67). There followed a series of seven recommendations under which full communion would be implemented as developed within the study from the theological conversations (A Common Calling, p. 67). As a result, the call for full communion has been presented to the four respective church bodies. The vote on a declaration of full communion will take place at the respective churchwide assemblies in 1997.
Mutual Affirmation and Admonition

A concept identified as early as the first Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue became pivotal for the understanding of the Theological Conversations. Participants in the Dialogue discovered that "efforts to guard against possible distortions of truth have resulted in varying emphases in related doctrines which are not in themselves contradictory and in fact are complementary" (Marburg Revisited, Preface). Participants in the Theological Conversations rediscovered and considered the implications of this insight and saw it as a foundation for the recommendation for full communion among the four churches. This breakthrough concept, a complementarity of mutual affirmation and mutual admonition, points toward new ways of relating traditions of Reformation churches that heretofore have not been able to reconcile their diverse witnesses to the saving grace of God that is bestowed in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.

This concept provides a basis for acknowledging three essential facets of the Lutheran/Reformed relationship: 1) that each of the churches grounds its life in authentic New Testament traditions of Christ; 2) that the core traditions of these churches belong together within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; and 3) that the historic give-and-take between these churches has resulted in fundamental mutual criticism that cannot be glossed over, but need to be understood "as diverse witnesses to the one gospel that we confess in common" (A Common Calling, p. 66). A working awareness emerged, which cast in a new light contemporary perspectives on the sixteenth-century debates.

The theological diversity within our common confession provides both the complementarity needed for a full and adequate witness to the gospel (mutual affirmation) and the corrective reminder that every theological approach is a partial and incomplete witness to the gospel (mutual admonition) (A Common Calling, p. 66).

The working principle of "mutual affirmation and admonition" allows for the affirmation of agreement while at the same time allowing a process of mutual edification and correction in areas where there is not total agreement. Each tradition brings its "corrective witness" to the other while fostering continuing theological reflection and dialogue to further clarify the unity of faith they share and seek. The principle of "mutual affirmation and admonition" views remaining differences as diverse witnesses to the one gospel confessed in common. Whereas conventional modes of thought have hidden the bases of unity behind statements of differences, the new concept insists that, while remaining differences must be acknowledged, even to the extent of their irreconcilability, it is the inherent unity in Christ that is determinative. Thus, the remaining differences are not church-dividing.

The concept of mutual affirmation and admonition translates into significant outcomes, both of which inform the relationships of these four churches with one another. The principle of complementarity and its accompanying mode of interpretation make it clear that in entering into full church communion these churches:

Do not consider their own traditional confessional and ecclesiological character to be compromised in the least.

Fully recognize the validity and necessity of the confessional and ecclesiological character of the partner churches.

Intend to allow significant differences to be honestly articulated within the relationship of full communion.

Allow for articulated differences to be opportunities for mutual growth of churchly fullness within each of the partner churches and within the relationship of full communion itself.
Members of the Theological Conversations were charged with determining whether the essential conditions for full communion have been met. They borrowed language of the Lutheran confessions: “For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree (satis est consentire) concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (Augsburg Confession, art. 7). The theological consensus that is the basis for the current proposal for full communion includes justification, the sacraments, ministry, and church and world. Continuing areas of diversity, no longer to be seen as “church-dividing,” were dealt with by the Theological Conversations under the headings: The Condemnations, the Presence of Christ, and God’s Will to Save.

On justification, participants in the first dialogue agreed “that each tradition has sought to preserve the wholeness of the gospel as including forgiveness of sins and renewal of life” (Marburg Revisited, p. 152). Members of the third dialogue, in their Joint Statement on Justification, said, “Both Lutheran and Reformed churches are ... rooted in, live by, proclaim and confess the gospel of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ” (An Invitation to Action, p. 9). They went on to say that “both ... traditions confess this gospel in the language of justification by grace through faith alone,” and concluded that “there are no substantive matters concerning justification that divide us” (An Invitation to Action, pp. 9, 10).

Lutheran and Reformed agree that in baptism, Jesus Christ receives human beings, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that they may become new creatures. This is experienced as a call into Christ’s community, to a new life of faith, to daily repentance, and to discipleship (cf. Leuenberg Agreement, III.2.a.). The central doctrine of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper received attention in each dialogue and in the theological conversations. The summary statement in Marburg Revisited, reflecting agreement, asserts:

During the Reformation both Reformed and Lutheran Churches exhibited an evangelical intention when they understood the Lord’s Supper in the light of the saving act of God in Christ. Despite this common intention, different terms and concepts were employed which...led to mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Properly interpreted, the differing terms and concepts were often complementary rather than contradictory (Marburg Revisited, pp. 103-4).

The third dialogue concluded that, while neither Lutheran nor Reformed profess to explain how Christ is present and received in the Supper, both churches affirm that “Christ himself is the host at his table ... and that Christ himself is fully present and received in the Supper” [emphasis added] (An Invitation to Action, p. 14). This doctrinal consensus became the foundation for work done by the Theological Conversations.

The theme of ministry was considered only by the third dialogue. Agreeing that there are no substantive matters which should divide Lutheran and Reformed, the dialogue affirmed that:

Ministry in our heritage derives from and points to Christ, who alone is sufficient to save. Centered in the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments, it is built on the affirmation that the benefits of Christ are known only through faith, grace, and Scripture (An Invitation to Action, p. 24).

The dialogue went on to speak of the responsibility of all the baptized to participate in Christ’s servant ministry, pointed to God’s use of “the ordained ministers as instruments to mediate grace through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments,” and asserted the need for proper oversight to “ensure that the word is truly preached and sacraments rightly administered” (An Invitation to Action, pp. 26, 28, 31).
The first dialogue considered the theme of church and world a very important inquiry. The
dialogue examined differences, noted the need of correctives, and pointed to the essentially
changed world in which the church lives today. Agreeing that “there is a common evangelical
basis for Christian ethics in the theology of the Reformers” (Marburg Revisited, p. 177), the
dialogue went on to rehearse the differing “accents” of Calvin and Luther on the relation of
church and world, law and gospel, the “two kingdoms,” and the sovereignty of Christ. The
dialogue found that “differing formulations of the relation between law and gospel were
prompted by a common concern to combat the errors of legalism on the one hand and
antinomianism on the other.” While differences remain regarding the role of God’s law in the
Christian life, the dialogue did “not regard this as a divisive issue” (Marburg Revisited, p.
177). Furthermore, in light of the radically changed world of the twentieth century, it was
deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the sixteenth
century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today. Thus, the
Theological Conversations, in a section on “Declaring God’s Justice and Mercy,” identified
Lutheran and Reformed “emphases” as “complementary and stimulating” differences,
posing a challenge to the pastoral service and witness of the churches. “The ongoing debate
about ‘justification and justice’ is fundamentally an occasion for hearing the word of God and
doing it. Our traditions need each other in order to discern God’s gracious promises and obey
God’s commands” (A Common Calling, p. 61).

Differing Emphases

The Condemnations

The condemnations of the Reformation era were an attempt to preserve and protect the Word
of God; therefore, they are to be taken seriously. Because of the contemporary ecclesial
situation today, however, it is necessary to question whether such condemnations should
continue to divide the churches. The concept of mutual affirmation and admonition of A
Common Calling offers a way of overcoming condemnation language while allowing for
different emphases with a common understanding of the primacy of the gospel of Jesus Christ
and the gift of the sacraments. A Common Calling refers with approval to the Leuenherg
Agreement where, as a consequence of doctrinal agreement, it is stated that the
“condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal
position of the assenting churches” (Leuenberg Agreement, IV.32.b). The Theological
Conversations stated:

We have become convinced that the task today is not to mark the point of separation and
exclusion but to find a common language which will allow our partners to be heard in
their honest concern for the truth of the gospel, to be taken seriously, and to be integrated
into the identity of our own ecumenical community of faith (A Common Calling, p. 40).

A major focus of the condemnations was the issue of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s
Supper. Lutheran and Reformed Christians need to be assured that in their common
understanding of the sacraments, the Word of God is not compromised; therefore, they insist
on consensus among their churches on certain aspects of doctrine concerning the Lord’s
Supper. In that regard Lutheran and Reformed Christians, recalling the issues addressed by
the conversations, agree that:

In the Lord’s Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given
for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself
unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord’s Supper for
salvation, unfaith for judgment (Leuenberg Agreement, III.1.18).
We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper (Leuenberg Agreement, III.1.19).

The Presence of Christ

The third dialogue urged the churches toward a deeper appreciation of the sacramental mystery based on consensus already achieved:

Appreciating what we Reformed and Lutheran Christians already hold in common concerning the Lord's Supper, we nevertheless affirm that both of our communions need to keep on growing into an ever-deeper realization of the fullness and richness of the eucharistic mystery (An Invitation to Action, p. 14).

The members of the Theological Conversations acknowledged that it has not been possible to reconcile the confessional formulations from the sixteenth century with a "common language...which could do justice to all the insights, convictions, and concerns of our ancestors in the faith" (A Common Calling, p. 49). However, the Theological Conversations recognized these enduring differences as acceptable diversities with regard to the Lord's Supper. Continuing in the tradition of the third dialogue, they respected the different perspectives and convictions from which their ancestors professed their faith, affirming that those differences are not church-dividing, but are complementary. Both sides can say together that "the Reformation heritage in the matter of the Lord's Supper draws from the same roots and envisages the same goal: to call the people of God to the table at which Christ himself is present to give himself for us under the word of forgiveness, empowerment, and promise." Lutheran and Reformed Christians agree that:

In the Lord's Supper the risen Christ imparts himself in body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to all people. (The official text reads, "Er starkt uns zum Dienst an den Menschen," which may be translated "to all human beings" (Leuenberg Agreement, II.2.15).

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we proclaim the death of Christ through which God has reconciled the world with himself. We proclaim the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us, we await his future coming in glory (Leuenberg Agreement, II.2.16).

With a complementarity and theological consensus found in the Lord's Supper, it is recognized that there are implications for sacramental practices as well, which represent the heritage of these Reformation churches.

As churches of the Reformation, we share many important features in our respective practices of Holy Communion. Over the centuries of our separation, however, there have developed characteristic differences in practice, and these still tend to make us uncomfortable at each other's celebration of the Supper. These differences can be discerned in several areas, for example, in liturgical style and liturgical details, in our verbal interpretations of our practices, in the emotional patterns involved in our experience of the Lord's Supper, and in the implications we find in the Lord's Supper for the life and mission of the church and of its individual members... We affirm our conviction, however, that these differences should be recognized as acceptable diversities within one Christian faith. Both of our communions, we maintain, need to grow in appreciation of our diverse eucharistic traditions, finding mutual enrichment in them. At
the same time both need to grow toward a further deepening of our common experience and expression of the mystery of our Lord’s Supper (An Invitation to Action, pp. 16-17).

God’s Will to Save:

Lutheran and Reformed claim the saving power of God’s grace as the center of their faith and life. They believe that salvation depends on God’s grace alone and not on human cooperation. In spite of this common belief, the doctrine of predestination has been one of the issues separating the two traditions. Although Lutheran and Reformed have different emphases in the way they live out their belief in the sovereignty of God’s love, they agree that “God’s unconditional will to save must be preached against all cultural optimism or pessimism.” It is noted that “a common language that transcends the polemics of the past and witnesses to the common predestination faith of Lutheran and Reformed Churches has emerged already in theological writings and official or unofficial statements in our churches” (A Common Calling, p. 55). Rather than insisting on doctrinal uniformity, the two traditions are willing to acknowledge that they have been born out of controversy; and their present identities, theological and ecclesial, have been shaped by those arguments. To demand more than fundamental doctrinal consensus on those areas that have been church-dividing would be tantamount to denying the faith of those Christians with whom we have shared a common journey toward wholeness in Jesus Christ. An even greater tragedy would occur were we, through our divisiveness, to deprive the world of a common witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ that has been so freely given to us.

The Binding and Effective Commitment to Full Communion

In the formal adoption at the highest levels of this Formula of Agreement, based on A Common Calling, the churches acknowledge that they are undertaking an act of strong mutual commitment. They are making pledges and promises to each other. The churches recognize that full commitment to each other involves serious intention, awareness, and dedication. They are binding themselves to far more than a mere formal action; they are entering into a relationship with gifts and changes for all.

The churches know these stated intentions will challenge their self-understandings, their ways of living and acting, their structures, and even their general ecclesial ethos. The churches commit themselves to keep this legitimate concern of their capacity to enter into full communion at the heart of their new relationship.

The churches declare, under the guidance of the Triune God, that they are fully committed to the Formula of Agreement and are capable of being, and remaining, pledged to the above-described mutual affirmations in faith and doctrine, to joint decision-making, and to exercising and accepting mutual admonition and correction. This Formula of Agreement responds to the ecumenical conviction that “there is no turning back, either from the goal of visible unity or from the single ecumenical movement that unites concern for the unity of the Church and concern for engagement in the struggles of the world” (“On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: The Message of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order,” 1993). And, as St. Paul reminds us all, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (1 Thess. 5:24, NRSV).²

NOTES:

1 For a summary of the history of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue in North America, see A Common Calling, pp. 10-11. The results of the first round of dialogue, 1962-66, were published in Marburg Revisited (Augsburg, 1966). The second round of dialogue took place in 1972-74. Its brief report was published in An Invitation to Action (Fortress, 1983), pp. 54-60. The third series began in 1981 and concluded in 1983, and was

2 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

To enter into full communion with these three churches (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ), an affirmative two-thirds vote of the 1997 Churchwide Assembly, the highest legislative authority in the ELCA, will be required (anticipating action by the Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly in 1995). Subsequently in the appropriate manner other changes in the Constitution and Bylaws would be made to conform with this binding decision by an Assembly to enter into full communion.

The Constitution and Bylaws of the ELCA do not speak specifically of this church entering into full communion with non-Lutheran churches. The closest analogy, in view of the seriousness of the matter, would be an amendment to the Constitution or Bylaws. The Constitution provides a process of such amendment (Chapter 11). In both cases a two-thirds vote of members present and voting is required.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Upon an affirmative vote of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the declaration of full communion will be effected throughout the church in accordance with the Presbyterian *Book of Order* and this Formula of Agreement. This means a majority vote of the General Assembly, a majority vote in the presbyteries, and a majority vote of the presbyteries.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves. Different orders have served the gospel, and none can claim exclusive validity. A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all members for ministry and maintains the organic relation of all congregations in the church. It seeks to protect the church from every exploitation by ecclesiastical or secular power and ambition. Every church order must be open to such reformation as may be required to make it a more effective instrument of the mission of reconciliation (Confession of 1967, *Book of Confessions*, p. 40).

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by representative bodies composed of presbyters, both elders and ministers of the Word and sacrament. These governing bodies shall be called session, presbytery, synod, and the General Assembly (*Book of Order*, G-9.0100).

All governing bodies of the church are united by nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body. The jurisdiction of each governing body is limited
by the express provisions of the Constitution, with the acts of each subject to review by the next higher governing body (Book of Order, G-9.0103).

The Reformed Church in America:

Upon an affirmative vote by the General Synod, the declaration of full communion will be effected throughout the church, and the Commission on Christian Unity will, in accordance with the responsibilities granted by the Book of Church Order, proceed to initiate and supervise the effecting of the intention of full communion as described in the Formula of Agreement.

The Commission on Christian Unity has advised the General Synod and the church of the forthcoming vote for full communion in 1997. The commission will put before the General Synod the Formula of Agreement and any and all correlative recommendations toward effecting the Reformed Church in America declaring itself to be in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ.

The Constitution of the RCA gives responsibility for ecumenical relations to the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). To be faithful to the ecumenical calling, the General Synod empowers its Commission on Christian Unity to initiate and supervise action relating to correspondence and cooperative relationship with the highest judicatories or assemblies of other Christian denominations and engaging in interchurch conversations “in all matters pertaining to the extension of the kingdom of God.”

The Constitution of the RCA gives responsibility to the Commission on Christian Unity for informing “the church of current ecumenical developments and advising the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3).

Granted its authority by the General Synod, the Commission on Christian Unity has appointed RCA dialogue and conversation partners since 1962 to the present. It has received all reports and, where action was required, has presented recommendation(s) to the General Synod for vote and implementation in the church.

The United Church of Christ:

The United Church of Christ will act on the recommendation that it enter into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Reformed Church in America, by vote of the General Synod in 1997. This vote is binding on the General Synod and is received by local churches, associations, and conferences for implementation in accordance with the covenantal polity outlined in paragraphs 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ.

The UCC is “composed of Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and the General Synod.” The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ lodge responsibility for ecumenical life with the General Synod and with its chief executive officer, the president of the United Church of Christ. Article VII of the Constitution grants to the General Synod certain powers. Included among these are the powers:

To determine the relationship of the UCC with ecumenical organizations, world confessional bodies, and other interdenominational agencies (Article VII, par. 45h).
To encourage conversation with other communions and when appropriate to authorize and guide negotiations with them looking toward formal union (VII, 45i).

In the polity of the UCC, the powers of the General Synod can never, to use a phrase from the Constitution, “invade the autonomy of Conferences, Associations, or Local Churches.” The autonomy of the local church is “inherent and modifiable only by its own action” (IV, 15). However, it is important to note that this autonomy is understood in the context of “mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church” (IV, 14). This Christological and covenantal understanding of autonomy is clearly expressed in the Constitutional paragraphs which immediately precede and follow the discussion of Local Church autonomy:

The Local Churches of the UCC have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the UCC has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility (IV, 14).

Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference, or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church (IV, 16).

From the Report of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

The Hispanic congregations of the Reformed Church in America are concerned with several serious implications if the Formula of Agreement is adopted by this General Synod. The Formula of Agreement binds the four denominations in this agreement and places the RCA in a vulnerable position in relation to issues that raise moral and theological questions.

Several moral and theological issues are involved when entering into an agreement and a relationship with the United Church of Christ, which does not hold the Word of God as its ultimate standard. The RCA must continue to adhere to the Reformed Standards of Unity. The potential problems generated by the Formula of Agreement are far too high a price to pay to seek communion.

The Hispanic congregations of the Reformed Church in America, through their Council for Hispanic Ministries, strongly urge the delegates of the 1997 General Synod not to adopt the Formula of Agreement.
Overtures

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-3.
To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS RCA members, classes, regional synods, and institutions have given thoughtful consideration to the adoption of the Formula of Agreement and have named their concerns through overtures, letters, and other communications;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred and ninety-first session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the eighteenth day of June 1997, acknowledges the concerns that have been raised and expresses appreciation for the great amount of interest shown and attention given. (ADOPTED)

Reason: Since the adoption of R-1 and R-2 denied several of the following overtures that nonetheless contained important concerns that merited further attention, the advisory committee desired to acknowledge the careful work the overtures reflected.

R-4.
To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS many of the concerns raised by overtures and other communications reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity regarding the adoption of the Formula of Agreement directed at the United Church of Christ (UCC) were often cast in such a way as to attribute to the entire UCC denomination things that are not true of all its ministers, members, and congregations (only 180 of its 6,200 congregations have declared themselves as open and affirming congregations), and overlooked the positive contributions UCC ministers, members, and congregations have made to the wider Christian church, including the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS expressions of concern often were stated in such a way as to cause pain in our brothers and sisters;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the eighteenth day of June 1997, apologizes for the strident tone of expressions of concern received and asks forgiveness, especially of our colleague and friend, the Rev. John Thomas, ecumenical delegate from the United Church of Christ to the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.

Reason: Just as the advisory committee desired to acknowledge the concerns of those who opposed R-2, so also the advisory committee desired to respond to any statements that may have been construed as injurious. <
Upon three separate motions from the floor to amend R-4, Synod

VOTED: To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS many of the concerns raised by overtures and other communications reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity regarding the adoption of the Formula of Agreement directed at were about the United Church of Christ (UCC) and were often cast in such a way as to attribute to the entire UCC denomination things that are not true of all its ministers, members, and congregations (only 180 of its 6,200 congregations have declared themselves as open and affirming congregations), and overlooked the positive contributions UCC ministers, members, and congregations have made to the wider Christian church, including the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS expressions of concern often were stated in such a way as to cause pain in our brothers and sisters;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the eighteenth day of June 1997, apologizes for the strident tone of expressions of concern received and asks forgiveness, especially of our colleague and friend, the Rev. John Thomas, ecumenical delegate from the United Church of Christ to the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.*

Synod then voted on R-4 as amended:

R-4.
To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS many of the concerns raised by overtures and other communications reviewed by the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity regarding the adoption of the Formula of Agreement were about the United Church of Christ (UCC) and were often cast in such a way as to attribute to the entire UCC denomination things that are not true of all its ministers, members, and congregations (only 180 of its 6,200 congregations have declared themselves as open and affirming congregations), and overlooked the positive contributions UCC ministers, members, and congregations have made to the wider Christian church, including the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS expressions of concern often were stated in such a way as to cause pain in our brothers and sisters;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the eighteenth day of June 1997, apologizes for the tone of expressions of concern received and asks forgiveness, especially of our colleague and friend, the Rev. John Thomas, ecumenical delegate from the United Church of Christ to the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America.*

*Additions are in light-face type, deletions are stricken out.
friend, the Rev. John Thomas, ecumenical delegate from the United Church of Christ to the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (NOT ADOPTED AS AMENDED) (YES-110; NO-143)<

>Upon a motion from the floor, Synod

VOTED: To combine into one vote the votes to be taken on R-5, R-6, R-7, R-8, R-9, R-10, R-11, R-12, R-13, R-14, and R-18 prepared by the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity for Overtures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 14.<

>Synod then

VOTED: To adopt the following R-5, R-6, R-7, R-8, R-9, R-10, R-11, R-12, R-13, R-14, and R-18 for Overtures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 14.<

Formula of Agreement

1. The Classis of Greater Palisades overtures General Synod to focus its consideration of adopting the Formula of Agreement on the main point of the agreement, that is, the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to heal the 465-year-old breach with the Lutherans; and further,


Reasons:

1. While there are many secondary issues connected with the Formula of Agreement and while these secondary issues must be taken seriously, these issues themselves do not stand in the way of the primary goal of the agreement for “full communion” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

2. The paper, “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197) fully answers the secondary concerns that have been raised; and at the same time the paper calls for such a step as the adoption of the Formula of Agreement.

3. In terms of polity, the Formula of Agreement effects no change at all in the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ. The RCA is already in full communion with these church bodies according to a Reformed understanding of full communion, which is as follows: each local board of elders governs admittance to the pulpit, always in keeping with RCA doctrinal standards, RCA liturgy, and RCA church order. This is clearly stated in both the Formula of Agreement and the paper, “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America.”

4. In terms of polity, the Formula of Agreement does effect a change in the RCA’s relationship with the ELCA, since the RCA’s Reformed polity would, upon mutual adoption of the agreement, be recognized and honored by Lutheran polity, and vice versa.
5. The *Formula of Agreement* makes one change in the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ. The change is a significant advance in ecumenical accountability, enshrined in the principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition.” The fact that the RCA has begun to practice “mutual affirmation and admonition” with the United Church of Christ is precisely because of the *Formula of Agreement*. This should be treated as an argument for adoption of the agreement rather than as an argument against adoption.

6. Those who doubt that restoring full fellowship with the Lutherans has any practical importance for the local church need to remember how we confess in the Apostles’ Creed the following: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.” These words call each pastor and each local church to take seriously the ecumenical issues that reach beyond the local congregation, even such issues as the long-term effects of church history.

7. The Classis of Greater Palisades believes this is what our Lord is calling us to do and what our Lord is continually praying for in his intercession before the Father. (See John 17, which is the foundation of the paper, “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America.”)

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-5.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 1 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

2. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures General Synod to focus its consideration of adoption of the *Formula of Agreement* on the main point of the agreement, which is the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to heal the 465-year-old breach with the Lutherans; and further,


Reasons:

1. While there are many secondary issues connected with the *Formula of Agreement* and while these secondary issues must be taken seriously, these issues themselves do not stand in the way of the primary goal of the agreement for “full communion” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

2. The paper, “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by the 1996 General Synod (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197) fully answers the secondary concerns that have been raised; and at the same time the paper calls for such a step as the adoption of the *Formula of Agreement*.

3. In terms of polity, the *Formula of Agreement* effects no change at all in the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ. The RCA is already in full communion with these church bodies according to a Reformed understanding of full communion, which is as follows: each local board of elders governs admittance to the pulpit, always in keeping with RCA doctrinal
standards, RCA liturgy, and RCA church order. This is clearly stated in both the *Formula of Agreement* and the paper, "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America."

4. In terms of polity, the *Formula of Agreement* does effect a change in the RCA's relationship with the ELCA, since the RCA's Reformed polity would, upon mutual adoption of the agreement, be recognized and honored by Lutheran polity, and vice versa.

5. The *Formula of Agreement* makes one change in the RCA's relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ. The change is a significant advance in ecumenical accountability, enshrined in the principle of "mutual affirmation and admonition." The fact that the RCA has begun to practice "mutual affirmation and admonition" with the United Church of Christ is precisely because of the *Formula of Agreement*. This should be treated as an argument for adoption of the agreement rather than as an argument against adoption.

6. Those who doubt that restoring full fellowship with the Lutherans has any practical importance for the local church need to remember how we confess in the Apostles' Creed the following: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." These words call each pastor and each local church to take seriously the ecumenical issues that reach beyond the local congregation, even such issues as the long-term effects of church history.

7. The Classis of Mid-Hudson believes this is what our Lord is calling us to do and what our Lord is continually praying for in his intercession before the Father. (See John 17, which is the foundation of the paper, "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America.”)

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-6.
To deny the overture (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 2 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

3. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures General Synod to defer for at least one year voting on the proposed *Formula of Agreement* among the Reformed Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Reasons:

1. The Regional Synod of Mid-America recommends further exploration of what the other three denominations believe concerning Jesus Christ and salvation by grace through faith in order for the RCA to be able in complete confidence to affirm the statements in the formula that the gospel is "rightly preached" and "pledge...to living together under the gospel." Some theological and moral issues need further clarification before the denominations can welcome each other in this agreement with open arms as brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. The 1996 General Synod voted:

To offer to enter into dialogue with the United Church of Christ on the issue of homosexuality for the purpose of encouraging the UCC to move toward a more
biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior (MGS 1996, p. 214).

To encourage all UCC members to come to RCA communion tables before the above issues are resolved lessens the eternal significance of these issues and gives a mixed message of the RCA’s uncompromising resolve out of faithfulness to Christ in these matters.

3. The *Formula of Agreement* calls for the covenanting denominations to

Recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

The RCA cannot acknowledge ministers openly living in unrepentant sin as ministers of Word and sacrament, even though their denomination affirms such behavior. The RCA cannot provide for an orderly transfer of such ministers into the Reformed Church in America without sinning against the Lord of the church.

➢The advisory committee recommended:

**R-7.**

To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 3 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

4. The Classis of Florida overtures General Synod to defer voting on the proposed *Formula of Agreement* between the Reformed Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) until the RCA receives input from these denominations concerning their affirmation of the following doctrinal position of the Reformed Church in America (as found in the Standards of Unity) and orthodox Christianity:

The truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind.

Reasons:

1. The first criteria of the term “full communion” in the proposed *Formula of Agreement* is that the denominations “recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God.” The seventh and final criteria states that the denominations “pledge themselves to living together under the gospel.” The 1996 General Synod made explicit the understanding of the RCA for the minimal requirement of such preaching (see number 2 below).

2. The 1996 General Synod explicitly affirmed the following addition by recommending to classes for approval an amendment to the *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1a (addition is underlined):

   a. Are the doctrines of the gospel preached in your church in their purity in conformity with
      i. the Word of God?
      ii. the Standards of the Reformed Church in America?
iii. the truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind? (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 401)

a. General Synod only recommends amendments to the Book of Church Order that are consistent with the doctrinal position of the RCA. The 1996 General Synod commended the above addition (summary of the doctrinal position of the RCA) to the classes. The classes were to judge if adding this doctrinal summary to the Book of Church Order was a prudent decision.

b. The 1996 General Synod also echoed the commitment of the above R-2 when it adopted a resolution prepared by the Advisory Committee on Theology that stated:

[The 1996 General Synod] joyfully and gladly reaffirms its confession that God's unique, unrepeatable, and decisive activity in Jesus Christ is the only sure hope for this world. God's work in Christ alone reveals the deepest truths about God, our life, and our world. God's work in Christ alone saves all who believe. Indeed, there is salvation in no one else, as the Old and New Testaments themselves teach (MGS 1996, R-3, p. 402).

3. "The truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and humankind" is a concise clarification of the doctrinal position of the RCA unambiguously affirmed in the Standards of the RCA.

a. The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 20, asks: Will all people be saved just as they were lost through Adam? The Heidelberg Catechism, A. 20, states: "No. Only those are saved who by truth faith are grafted into Christ and accept all his blessings."

b. The Belgic Confession, Article 27, states:

We profess and believe one unique catholic or universal church, which is a holy gathering of true believers in Christ, expecting all their blessedness in him, being washed in his blood, sanctified and sealed by his Holy Spirit.

The Belgic Confession, Article 28, states: "This holy congregation is a gathering of those who will be saved, and that out of it there is no salvation."

4. It is prudent to commend this clarifying phrase, "the truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind," to each of the proposed covenanting denominations in the Formula of Agreement for their comment to ensure that all four denominations are in agreement on this essential heart of the gospel before the RCA votes to affirm the proposed formula.

5. This delay in voting on the proposed Formula of Agreement does not sever the RCA's current ecumenical relations with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ via membership by all four denominations in the National Council of Churches (NCC) or sever the RCA's current ecumenical relations with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ via membership by the three Reformed churches in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). These channels (the NCC and WARC) provide ample opportunity to clarify the content of the gospel rightly preached.
6. A prerequisite for any ecumenical agreement is that partner churches share essential insights taught to them through their history. The RCA may assume that any ecumenical partner would welcome a temporary delay in a proposed partnership in order that an official clarification of the gospel given by any one of the partners can be adequately studied and responded to by any of the partner churches.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-8.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 4 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

5. The Classis of British Columbia overtures General Synod to declare that full communion with the United Church of Christ (UCC), as defined in the Formula of Agreement and in view of the evidence available on some policies and positions of the United Church of Christ, is in conflict with the RCA Constitution.

Reasons:

1. The Preamble to the Book of Church Order (BCO) declares:

   The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America.

   It is therefore unconstitutional for the RCA to be in a full communion relationship with a denomination in which Holy Scripture is not the only rule of faith and practice.

2. The evidence available supports the view that the UCC, at its highest levels, permits other rules of faith and practice besides Scripture. Following is a brief documentation:

   a. The Rev. Dr. Martin Marty, writing in the Christian Century, states that the leadership of the UCC has been characterized as “slouching out of Christendom.”

   b. The 1995 General Synod of the United Church of Christ referred to its Executive Council a resolution calling on local churches to teach “deeper ecumenism,” which would move the UCC “beyond mere interdenominational dialogue . . . to interfaith dialogue” and would move the UCC to “pool our beliefs and practices [and] take the next step in our ecumenical journey, in affirming those of other faiths and trying to learn from them.” This resolution received widespread support at the 1995 General Synod of the United Church of Christ.

   c. The Rev. Dr. Donald Bloesch, probably the best-known UCC theologian, declared in a 1996 interview that “the theological trend in the UCC is toward a new gnosticism.” He called the Presbyterians “two churches (liberal-evangelical) under one umbrella, while the UCC is several religions under one umbrella.” He further stated:

   The UCC is drifting into Unitarianism. [It] is already Universalist. Such distinctions as heaven and hell, salvation and damnation are already lost. There is nothing really to prevent a merger with the Unitarians. The theology of religions is the latest fad. This says that our theology should include the greatest insights in the world religions. In this the UCC has a growing affinity with the Bahai religion. The similarities are great, the differences small, except that perhaps the Bahai sect would have more traditional morality.
d. The Rev. Thomas Gillespie, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, states: “All revisionist attempts—trying to make the text say what it does not say—are bogus.”

Gillespie quotes the following comments from Rev. Dr. Wolfhart Pannenberg of Germany (who Gillespie notes “certainly cannot be accused of being conservative”):

Here lies the boundary of a Christian church that knows itself to be bound by the authority of Scripture. Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter (homosexual behavior) must know that they are promoting schism. If the church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm and recognize homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would no longer stand on biblical ground, but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. The church that took such a step will thereby cease to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

e. There are now more than 180 “open and affirming” UCC congregations. “Opening and affirming” has become a code for churches that boldly affirm, celebrate, and embrace the gifts of ministry of homosexual persons. The Rev. Dr. Paul Sherry, president of the United Church of Christ, addressing a National Exultation of Opening and Affirming Churches on October 15, 1996, said: “You are a glorious sight. I believe this is one of the major revitalizing movements in our church.” The Rev. Dr. John Thomas, assistant to the president for ecumenical concerns in the United Church of Christ, says: “The UCC sees its understanding of the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church as a gift it brings into continuing ecumenical dialogue.” These views are not of recent vintage. As far back as 1973 the United Church of Christ Executive Council recommended “sexual orientation should not bar qualified candidates from ordination.”

f. Dr. Rita Brock was recently elected chair of the joint United Church of Christ-Disciples of Christ Common Global Ministries Board. Brock rose to prominence as a keynote speaker at the 1993 “Re-Imagining” event in Minneapolis, Minnesota. At this event there was explicit worship of Sophia, an ancient goddess. In her book, Journey by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power, Brock expresses her belief that the Christian faith is merely one spiritual path to the knowledge of God, and any claim to unique revelation is arrogant and oppressive. She writes her feminist “God/dess” is revealed not in Jesus, but through a “Christa/Community” that stresses “intimacy” over “self-sacrifice.” She further believes the Trinity of Christian theology is unholy and paternalistic. She has denounced the crucifixion of Jesus as the act of oppressors that does nothing for the salvation of sinners.

g. At the United Church of Christ gathering, Faith Works 1994, a keynote address was given by Chang Hyun Kyung of Korea. She was a main presenter at the 1993 “Re-Imagining” event as well. While not emphasizing her new trinity of the goddesses Kali, Quani, and Enna to the UCC gathering, she continued to promote non-Christian Eastern spiritual philosophies.

h. In 1997 the United Church of Christ is organizing the Orlando Consultation. This consultation provides yet another illustration of the new religions being offered under the Christian banner. The choice of the main speakers is again revealing. Speakers include Dr. Rita Brock and other radical theologians who advocate in their speeches and articles a new Christianity “liberated” from the “tyranny” of its creeds and doctrines, a Christianity that has become a social movement
characterized by advocacy of "pluralism" and "justice" for all. The Rev. Dr. Leslie Zeigler, formerly of Bangor Theological Seminary, calls this consultation a "denial of the traditional Christian faith."

i. The Rev. Dr. Paul Sherry, the president of UCC, has repeatedly denied UCC support for "goddess worship" or for attempts "to legitimate the new feminist religion which is a synthesis of neopagan, new age, Christianity and gnosticism." However, major events organized or sponsored by UCC such as Faith Works 1994, the UCC Third National Women's Meeting of 1996, and the Orlando Consultation featured agendas verging on paganism and goddess worship, and secured high profile speakers from within and outside of the UCC to promote such worship.

j. It can be said that those who look for garbage will always be able to find some. However, the classis presents the above not as mere anecdotal illustrations but as irrefutable evidence of a consistent and continuing pilgrimage of the UCC into neo-Christianity.

3. In his letter of July 22, 1996, to the Reformed Church in America, the president of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Dr. Paul Sherry, made it clear that in his judgment the only rule of faith and practice in the UCC is Scripture. The Rev. Dr. John Thomas, assistant to the president for ecumenical concerns in the United Church of Christ, made similar statements in his "Reflections" distributed widely in the RCA in 1996. Such also was the position of the authors of A Common Calling and the Formula of Agreement.

In view of the "seriousness of the matter of full communion" (as stated in the Formula of Agreement), the RCA must make sure the facts support the above statements. Jehovah's Witnesses also believe Scripture is their only rule. However, the RCA is not in full communion with them since they reject the Trinity and the full deity of Jesus. The statement of UCC adherence to Scripture alone is contradicted by consistent UCC deviations from core Christian doctrines over a significant period of time.

4. The Formula of Agreement is a significant document. It is not to be relegated to the sphere of interest of ecumenical bureaucrats and of little importance to the life of the RCA. The Formula of Agreement seeks to define who the RCA is. The RCA Constitution hinges on the phrase: "The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America (BCO, Preamble). When this key phrase to the identity of the RCA is allowed to be eroded by interpretations such as are now current in the UCC, it becomes a shibboleth to the RCA past rather than the root of its ongoing life. The RCA status as a confessional church will have lost all integrity. The 1997 General Synod must ensure the integrity of the RCA confessional status by refusing to make a decision that would undermine the Preamble to the RCA Constitution.

5. The RCA is already in a full communion relationship with the UCC on the basis of common membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). This overture perhaps leads to a demand to review the RCA's current relationships as a member of WARC, but it does not immediately affect the RCA's current full communion relationship with the UCC. This overture, however, does declare unconstitutional the proposed detailed, strengthened, and covenantal relationship with the UCC that is envisioned in the Formula of Agreement. The RCA has never declared that "our differences among these churches of the Reformation on questions of confessional commitment, ministry, and ecclesial polity fall within the bounds of allowable evangelical diversity and are therefore not church dividing... We view them not as disagreements to be overcome but as diverse witnesses to the one gospel which
we confess in common (A Common Calling). With adoption of the Formula of Agreement, the RCA would so declare. The RCA has never stated that it recognizes the UCC as a church "in which the gospel is rightly preached" (Formula of Agreement). With adoption of the Formula of Agreement, the RCA would so recognize the UCC. The matter of the constitutionality of this vote on the Formula of Agreement at the 1997 General Synod is not raised by RCA membership in WARC as such, but by the specific language of the proposed full communion stated in the Formula of Agreement.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-9.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 5 was addressed in R-1 and R-2. "

6. The Classis of Canadian Prairies overtures General Synod to declare the recommendation to adopt the Formula of Agreement out of order.

Reason: The Book of Church Order states: "The General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy" (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4). Section 4, however, does not include directing the RCA to act against its own Constitution.

a. The Preamble of the Book of Church Order states: "The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America."

b. The United Church of Christ authorizes the ordination of practicing lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons. The RCA has repeatedly recognized homosexual activity as sinful according to the Word of God (MGS 1990, R-11, p. 461).

c. If the United Church of Christ accepts as right what the Bible declares to be sinful, it follows that the United Church of Christ does not rightly preach the gospel.

d. Consequently, for the RCA to declare the United Church of Christ is a church "in which the gospel is rightly preached" (Formula of Agreement), the RCA has to go against Scripture, which is conflict with its Constitution and is therefore unconstitutional.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-10.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 6 was addressed in R-1 and R-2. "

7. The Classis of Cascades overtures General Synod to discontinue involvement in the Formula of Agreement.

Reasons:

1. The RCA is being asked to enter into an agreement with three other denominations more liberal and less conservative theologically than the RCA. By the time the least common denominator is reached, little of the RCA’s Reformed faith is left.
2. In this day and age when mainline denominations are gradually drifting away from their theological foundations and their great Reformation heritage, it is time for the RCA to strengthen its theological foundations: to reaffirm its Reformation core beliefs—justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone, totally apart from good works; the holy Word of God as the only standard and foundation of faith; and the priesthood of believers, i.e., each individual has the right to go personally into the presence of God to gain forgiveness of sins without going through any intermediary.

3. The Formula of Agreement declares:

Furthermore, in light of the radically changed world of the twentieth century, it was deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the sixteenth century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today.

Isn't the RCA being asked to forget the struggles out of which its doctrines were formed? Isn't the RCA being asked to forget its theological roots and to rewrite RCA beliefs on the basis of culture and the rapidly changing world? Is the RCA wrong in claiming that Scripture, the Word of God, is the only way to avoid error and must be the foundation of faith? The full name of the RCA is, in reality, “The Church of Jesus Christ Reformed according to the Word of God and continuing to be Reformed as we further understand God’s inspired Word”? The RCA can use no other standard if it is to be true to its roots.

4. A Common Calling states: “Our traditions need each other in order to discern God’s gracious promises to obey God’s commands.” First, the RCA is asked to decide doctrine on the basis of culture and the radically changing world (see number 3 above). Now the RCA is asked to add tradition! Isn’t tradition the very reason the Protestant/Reformation forefathers left the Roman church? These forefathers cried “Scripture only!” as the basis of faith and action. The RCA needs to go back to these roots, not discard them.

5. The old adage is: “Program unites, theology divides.” This appears to apply to the proposed full communion. The classis finds in the Formula of Agreement that theology becomes very secondary and communion becomes preeminent. True union must begin with theology and end with theology. The Formula of Agreement states:

Whereas conventional modes of thought have hidden the basis of unity behind statements of differences, the new concept insists that, while remaining differences must be acknowledged, even to the extent of their irreconcilability, it is the inherent unity in Christ that is determinative.

In other words, union is of utmost consequence; everything else is of minor importance. Doctrine, then, becomes of minor importance. Isn’t this a denial of the Reformation, the RCA’s historic faith, and Scripture?

6. The sacraments have historically been the major source of difference between the Reformed and Lutheran churches. The Formula of Agreement states: “neither Lutheran nor Reformed profess to explain how Christ is present and received in the Supper.” Reformed catechisms, however, have always defined the differences. The Lutheran catechism proclaims consubstantiation, while the RCA firmly holds to a spiritual presence of Christ.

The RCA teaches baptism is one of the New Testament sacraments of the new covenant, replacing circumcision in the Old Testament. In baptism we affirm that we
and our children have entered a covenant relationship with God by faith and baptism. It is a testimony to our belonging to the great covenant God made with Abraham in Gen. 17:7, and confirmed at Pentecost. It is a sign and seal of belonging to Jesus Christ. Children must affirm the baptismal promises made to God by their parents when they accept Jesus Christ personally as their Savior and Lord.

The Lutherans teach that baptism saves, that one is born again at baptism, and that salvation actually begins at baptism. The following quotes are from a children’s catechism in a Lutheran school:

What benefits does baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this. But with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing to a new birth in the Holy Spirit.

The classis notes how the scholars blended the above RCA and Lutheran teachings on baptism into the Formula of Agreement as follows:

Lutherans and Reformed agree that in baptism, Jesus Christ receives human beings, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that they become new creatures.

Lutherans can accept this statement, but it is contrary to RCA catechism and theology teachings. It is a real compromise of RCA standards.

7. The text of John 17:11, “that they may be one, as we are one,” has somehow become the basis of ecumenical unity. In this text there is no reference to physical unity—to dissolve all denominations and become physically one. The classis believes the real meaning of the text is spiritual—that we are to be one in Christ, regardless of denomination, organization, or whatever. Promise Keepers is an example of this unity. What unity is expressed! What spiritual growth takes place! If the RCA is to be more ecumenically involved, Promise Keepers is an excellent place to start. What a fulfillment of John 17:11 this would be, and spiritual and numerical growth would take place in the RCA. This is the kind of unity the RCA needs. Let the RCA explore in this direction rather than in the Formula of Agreement.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-11. To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 7 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

8. The Regional Synod of Canada overtures General Synod to refer the decision on the Formula of Agreement and the proposed “full communion” back to the Commission on Christian Unity.

Reasons:

1. The wording for “full communion” in the Formula of Agreement is ambiguous and potentially misleading. It states that the four churches “are in full communion with one another, thus, each church is entering into or affirming full communion with three other churches.” If the Formula of Agreement is adopted, each church is “entering into” full communion for the first time as the term “full communion” is defined and understood to specifically mean in the seven statements presented in the Formula of Agreement.
2. Within the RCA there is a widely held misconception that the adoption by all four denominations of the *Formula of Agreement* will do nothing to alter the RCA’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ (UCC), but will only effectively add the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to full communion partnership. While the RCA is already in a full communion relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the UCC on the basis of common membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), adoption of the proposed *Formula of Agreement* will not only “affirm” the existing full communion status of the RCA with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the UCC, but the RCA will also be “entering into” a newly defined full communion status which is “covenantal” in kind, and not solely the result of membership in WARC.

3. “Full communion” as defined in the *Formula of Agreement* differs from “full communion” under WARC as follows:

   a. The 190-plus WARC member churches are not asked to declare of each other that “the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God.”

   b. “Full communion” relationships within WARC are not covenantal as they will be under the *Formula of Agreement*. Karin Spoore, a member of the Executive Committee of WARC, likens the relationship between member churches in WARC as:

      analogous to the relations between congregations within a church with a congregational polity—WARC is more of a meeting place, a body of cooperation (Karin Spoore, “Then Shall Your Light Break Forth,” *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 46, Issue 4, October, 1994, pp. 447-48).

      The *Formula of Agreement* uses the following covenantal language to speak of the seriousness of this agreement:

      the churches acknowledge that they are undertaking an act of strong mutual commitment. They are making pledges and promises to each other . . . They are binding themselves to far more than a mere formal action.

   c. The General Synods or like bodies of other WARC member churches are not asked to deliberate over the applications of potential new WARC member churches, nor are these General Synods or like bodies asked whether their own traditional confessional and ecclesiastical character is compromised in the least through the addition to WARC of these applicants. Conversely, “covenantal” full communion under the *Formula of Agreement* does require such deliberations and declarations.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-12.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 8 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.<

9. The Classis of South Grand Rapids and the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overture General Synod to recognize that the current position of the United Church of Christ concerning the practice of homosexuality makes it impossible for the Reformed Church in America to adopt the proposed *Formula of Agreement*
with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) without contradicting the RCA’s biblical convictions and theological integrity; and further,

to communicate to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America the Reformed Church in America’s willingness to declare “full communion” with the ELCA according to the seven steps of the *Formula of Agreement*, which means that the churches:

1. Recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the word of God.

2. Withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today.

3. Continue to recognize each other’s baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among their members.

4. Recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

5. Establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches.

6. Commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service.

7. Pledge themselves to living together under the gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.

Reasons:

1. The United Church of Christ has consistently endorsed the election and ordination of gay and lesbian clergy and lay leadership.

The United Church of Christ’s Office of Communication News Service provides on its home page (http://www.ucc.org) a “Chronology of actions in the UCC on the ordination of gay and lesbian people” (March 1, 1996). In reverse order from this March 1 press release, the chronology follows:

1969  Two months before the Stonewall uprising in New York, generally recognized as the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian rights movement, the UCC’s Council for Christian Social Action declares opposition to all laws criminalizing private homosexual relations between adults. The council also opposes the exclusion of homosexual citizens from the armed forces.

1972  The Rev. William Johnson becomes the first openly homosexual person ordained in modern times to the ministry by an historic or “mainline” Christian church. He is ordained by the Golden Gate Association, a grouping of UCC congregations in Northern California.
1973 The UCC Executive Council, the main deliberative body of the church between biennial Synods, recommends that sexual orientation should not bar qualified candidates from ordination. The UCC Gay Caucus receives official standing at General Synod. The caucus will later change its name to the United Church Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Concerns.

1975 The General Synod declares that sexual orientation is not a legitimate ground to deny civil liberties. The Synod supports federal, state, and municipal laws to protect equal rights for all citizens.

1977 In Virginia the Rev. Anne Holmes becomes the first openly lesbian woman ordained in the UCC.

*1983 The Synod passes a resolution recommending to UCC regional associations that "in considering a candidate's qualifications for ministry, the candidate's sexual orientation should not be grounds for denying the request for ordination." The Synod also "advocates that sexual orientation not be a basis for discrimination within the United Church of Christ in the employment of staff or use of volunteers."

1983 Early in the AIDS epidemic, the General Synod declares "compassionate support" for people with AIDS and urges increased funding for research.

1984 The Rev. Diane Darling becomes the first openly lesbian woman called to parish ministry in the UCC, as pastor of College Avenue United Church of Christ in Modesto, California.

**1985 The General Synod calls on all UCC congregations and bodies to study homosexuality and declare that they are "open and affirming."

1987 General Synod declares opposition to all "sodomy laws" and resolves to witness publicly against laws criminalizing homosexuality whenever meeting in a state where a sodomy law is still on the books.

***1991 The General Synod "boldly affirms, celebrates, and embraces the gifts of ministry of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons."

1993 The UCC publishes the only comprehensive curriculum for AIDS awareness and prevention designed for use in Christian education.

1993 Hours after President Clinton authorizes military commanders to dismiss lesbians and gays from the armed forces, General Synod, in session at the time, votes by a wide margin to denounce the ban on homosexuals.

1994 In testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, [the Rev. Paul] Sherry [president of the UCC] urges Congress to lift the ban on military service by gays and lesbians. "To allow the military to discriminate is morally intolerable and contrary to the values that undergird our society," he says.

1994 UCC leaders, including the Rev. Paul H. Sherry, president, join the "March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Equal Rights and Liberation."
1994 University Congregational Church, a UCC congregation in Seattle, calls the first gay clergy couple in history to serve a mainline Christian denomination. A three-fourths majority of the congregation votes to call the Rev. Peter Ilgenfritz and the Rev. David Shull.

1996 There are more than 180 “open and affirming” congregations. Three are predominately lesbian and gay congregations: Liberation United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ in Minneapolis, and Phoenix United Church of Christ in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

*The 1983 (fourteenth) General Synod also recommended that associations throughout the UCC consider the nomination and election of avowed lesbian and gay clergy and lay persons to their Church and Ministry Committees. (From a “Resolution Recommending Inclusiveness on Association Church and Ministry Committees within the UCC,” adopted by the Fourteenth General Synod, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 24-28, 1983, p. 20.)

**Specifically, the 1985 (fifteenth) General Synod encouraged “the congregations of the United Church of Christ to adopt a nondiscrimination policy and a Covenant of Openness and Affirmation of persons of lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientation within the community of faith.” (From a “Resolution Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming,” adopted by the Fifteenth General Synod, Ames, Iowa, June 28-July 2, 1985, p. 23.)

***Specifically, the 1991 (eighteenth) General Synod called “upon local churches, associations, and conferences to extend their welcome and support to openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in care, and to facilitate the ordination and placement of qualified lesbian, gay, and bisexual candidates.” (From a “Resolution on Affirming Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Persons and Their Ministries,” adopted by the Eighteenth General Synod, Norfolk, Virginia, June 27-July 2, 1991, p. 44.)

2. The following similar press release from the UCC Office of Communication on July 2, 1995, highlights the honor given to “open and affirming congregations”:

59 UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONS SAY THEY WELCOME GAYS, LESBIANS, BISEXUALS.

Oakland, California—Fifty-nine congregations were honored July 1 at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ after they declared they will welcome lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals into membership.

The 59 churches were recognized as “open and affirming congregations” at a banquet at General Synod sponsored by the United Church Coalition for Lesbian/Gay Concerns.

General Synod, which meets every two years, is the national deliberative body of the 1.5-million-member United Church of Christ.

With the addition of 59 churches to the roster of open and affirming congregations, a total of 166 UCC churches have adopted covenants accepting homosexual Christians into their community.

The UCC’s General Synod has a long record of defending lesbian and gay rights—both in society and in the church. In 1975 the Synod declared that depriving citizens of civil liberties on the basis of sexual orientation was morally wrong. In 1991 the Synod affirmed the ministries of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in the church.
The first openly gay minister in the United States was ordained by the UCC in 1972. At least 50 openly lesbian or gay ministers now serve in UCC congregations.

The "open and affirming" movement in the church dates back to 1985, when General Synod called on local churches to adopt nondiscrimination policies. The addition of 59 new open and affirming churches since the last General Synod met in 1993 represents a 54 percent increase in the number of UCC congregations that have taken this step.

The first nationwide assembly of open and affirming churches will take place October 13-15 in Cleveland.


With national offices in Cleveland, the United Church of Christ is the 1957 union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

3. In a forthright March 1996 article entitled "United Church of Christ Reflections on Questions Regarding Proposed Full Communion with the ELCA, PCUSA, RCA," written by the Rev. Dr. John Thomas, assistant to the president for ecumenical concerns, United Church of Christ, a number of questions are addressed. The last of the seven questions addressed in the article is: "What would it mean to enter into full communion with a church that officially includes gay and lesbian persons in the ministry of both the laity and the ordained?" Thomas responds:

The issue of homosexuality strains relationships within each of the four churches considering full communion as much as it threatens the relationship between these four churches. Contradictions exist in each church between policy and practice. In each church, there are those whose dissent from the official position of their church creates potentially anomalous situations related to recognition of membership and ministry within their denominations. Full communion neither exacerbates nor resolves these issues. In full communion each church would be expected to confront these questions for itself, just as it does now. However, in full communion, such work would no longer be done in denominational isolation, but in the context of "channels of consultation" and "an ongoing process of theological dialogue" called for by the Formula of Agreement. The integrity of each church's discernment process would be honored, but would be enriched by the gifts and insights of the others.

The General Synod of the United Church of Christ has been on record since 1975 as supporting the human rights of all persons in church and society regardless of sexual orientation, and has called on its local churches to adopt covenants of openness and affirmation of homosexual persons. In addition, in 1991 the Synod called on local churches, associations, and conferences to support openly gay and lesbian students and to facilitate the ordination and placement of qualified candidates regardless of sexual orientation. While consensus on this issue has not been achieved, in general the United Church of Christ sees its understanding of the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church as a gift it brings into continuing ecumenical dialogue.

Full communion includes the corporate recognition of the ordained ministries of each participating church without reservation. The United Church of Christ would expect such recognition to be extended to all its ordained ministers. At the same
time, full communion states that should an ordained minister of one church be invited to serve in one of the partner churches in response to particular needs or special circumstances, that invitation would be subject to the orderly processes and discipline of the inviting church.

4. The Reformed Church in America has consistently affirmed the scriptural witness against homosexual practice, while affirming the need for compassionate help.

   a. The 1974 General Synod voted:

   Being aware of the need for expression of pastoral care towards those who are rejected because of their sexual identity, we URGE the General Synod to encourage the churches to... affirm the biblical teaching against the practice of homosexuality and the study of homosexuality as it relates to the life and work of the church (MGS 1974, R-IV, p. 222).


   It is not possible to quote all the insights from this paper, but it may be helpful to note the following:


   2. “The Scripture’s repeated endorsement of heterosexuality as the Creator’s expressed intent is far more significant for our understanding than the few negative pronouncements concerning homosexuality” (MGS 1978, p. 233).

   3. “The homosexual must be affirmed as a person even while his/her acts of perversion cannot be” (MGS 1978, p. 236).

   4. “When it is understood that most homosexual acts are performed by persons with some measure of heterosexual orientation, the urgency of the church’s moral witness becomes obvious. Contrary to popular opinion, evidence suggests that most homosexuals do have some measure of choice. Thus, the church cannot abandon the adolescent struggling to achieve sexual identity, the ambivalent adult, or the neurotic gay bar ‘cruiser’ to the painful vagaries of a promiscuous culture or the ethical relativism of our time. While avoiding simplistic and obnoxious social crusades, the church must affirm through its preaching and pastoral ministry that homosexuality is not an acceptable, alternative lifestyle. God’s gracious intent for human sexual fulfillment is the permanent bond of heterosexual love. This redemptive word must be spoken, with sensitivity, caring, and clarity to any person who would make a perverted sexual choice, and to society as a whole” (MGS 1978, p. 238).

   5. “Scripture does not refer to the problem of homosexual acts which emerge in accord with one’s conscious, sexual orientation and not against it. As Jesus remained silent on the entire subject, so the biblical writers did not address the human condition now known as homosexual inversion. It does not follow
from this fact, however, that the heterosexual norm is less binding, as many
in the homosexual context aver, or that any sexual act accords with God’s will
if it is performed in fidelity, trust, and love. The norm expressed in creation
and reaffirmed in Jesus’ own teaching is not abrogated by the fact that some
persons cannot conform to it, any more than it is set aside because some
persons will not live by it” (MGS 1978, p. 238).

c. The 1979 General Synod received the report, “Christian Pastoral Care for the
Homosexual,” from the Commission on Theology (MGS 1979, pp. 128-35), and
this paper is reprinted also in The Church Speaks (pp. 258-66). The suggested list
of twelve readings that were part of the 1979 General Synod report (MGS 1979, pp.
134-35) are not included, however, in the reprint of this paper in The Church Speaks.

The 1979 General Synod voted “to make this paper available to the churches of the
Reformed Church in America for study” (MGS 1979, R-4, p. 135). The advisory
committee noted: “The advisory committee feels that the report is biblically sound,
positive in spirit, and will become a valuable resource to pastors and elders in the
discharge of their pastoral responsibilities” (MGS 1979, p. 135).

This 1979 General Synod report identifies a number of crucial principles for
pastoral understanding and response to homosexuals in a congregation, as well as
expressing “Reasonable Expectations of the Homosexual” (MGS 1979, pp. 133-34). Included in these expectations is the following reminder:

The church can also reasonably expect that the homosexual will not regard only
that love to be genuine which affirms his homosexual behavior.

Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his
sin... It is a ministry of mercy, an ultimate offer of genuine fellowship, when
we allow nothing but God’s word to stand between us, judging and succoring
(Quoted in MGS 1979, p. 133, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together [New

One can love a person without approving those things in him which retard his
fullest development . . . The church expects its people to be open to new
possibilities. The homosexual must not place a ceiling on his capacity for
growth. It is important that a person submit his whole self to Christ without
excepting his homosexuality. This means letting go of the myth of incurability.
A facile, overly optimistic view toward change and healing is unwise, but
fatalism is even more so. With a teachable spirit, the desire and determination to
find something better, a sense of the presence of Christ, who wills healing and
growth, and support of the Christian fellowship, much valuable growth can take
place (MGS 1979, pp. 133-34).

d. The 1980 General Synod responded to two overtures concerning homosexuality.
The Classis of Schoharie (in the Synod of Albany) overture General Synod to deny
ordination to practicing homosexuals and lesbians (MGS 1980, p. 285). The
advisory committee recommended denial of the overture for the following reasons:

1. That General Synod cannot deny ordinations; only the classis can do that.

2. The advisory committee believes that the church knows that, according to the
Scriptures, homosexual acts are sin (see General Synod papers on
homosexuality [MGS 1978, pp. 229-240, and MGS 1979, pp. 128-135]).
3. The advisory committee believes that judicatories know their responsibilities in the exercise of discipline as prescribed in the *Book of Church Order*.

4. Because it is impossible to list all unrepented sins that would cause ordination to be revoked or denied, it is inappropriate to list only one (*MGS* 1980, p. 285).

The Classis of Schoharie sent a second overture to the 1980 General Synod:

to bring to the awareness of RCA members, congregations, classes, and synods competent programs and persons which can successfully help the practicing homosexual and lesbian, minister or lay person, overcome his or her sexual behavior (*MGS* 1980, p. 97).

The 1980 General Synod approved this overture, but the RCA staff publication produced in 1981, "Programs for Helping the Practicing Homosexual and Lesbian," was challenged as being in conflict with the 1980 General Synod's intent because it included publications and groups that do not believe there can or should be any change in homosexual orientation on the part of Christians. In 1982 a new resource, "Response to 1980 Schoharie Classis Overture Regarding Overcoming Homosexual Behavior," was distributed in the RCA. This resource cited a number of books, articles, and other resources.

e. The 1990 General Synod adopted the following two statements:

1. To adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to Scripture, while at the same time encouraging love and sensitivity toward such persons as fellow human beings (*MGS* 1990, R-11, p. 461).

2. To commend the papers "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal" (*MGS* 1978, pp. 229-240) and "Christian Pastoral Care for the Homosexual" (*MGS* 1979, pp. 128-135) to RCA churches as pastoral advice until such time as a subsequent study by the Commission on Theology is approved by General Synod (*MGS* 1990, R-13, p. 461).

f. The 1994 General Synod adopted the following resolution:

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America recognizes and confesses that the Reformed Church in America has failed to live up to its own statements regarding homosexuality in 1978 (*MGS* 1978, pp. 229-240), 1979 (*MGS* 1979, pp. 128-135) and 1990 (*MGS* 1990, R-11, p. 461). Few in the Reformed Church in America have creatively and lovingly spoken with persons with a homosexual orientation about the truths of Scripture and the hope of the gospel. Many have participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior which humiliate or degrade such persons. Many of the churches within the Reformed Church in America have not provided an environment where persons have felt the acceptance and freedom to struggle with hard issues involving sexual orientation. Many Reformed Church in America members have shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity. For all these wrongs, this General Synod expresses its humble and heartfelt repentance, and its desire to reflect the love of Christ to homosexual persons. In all that this General Synod does, it seeks to obey the whole of Scripture, demonstrating in its own life the same obedience it asks from others. It calls itself and the whole church to a greater faithfulness to Christ in relationships with persons of homosexual orientation.
To this end, the General Synod calls the church to a process of repentance, prayer, learning, and growth in ministry. This process will be guided by the basic biblical-theological framework presented in the previous statements of the General Synod in 1978 (MGS 1978, pp. 229-40), 1979 (MGS 1979, pp. 128-35), and 1990 (MGS 1990, R-11, p. 461);

and further,

to instruct the Commission on Theology to develop the following resources with assistance from Congregational Services and other resource persons within the Reformed Church in America:

1. A study guide for use in RCA congregations, which will assist Christians in reading and understanding the 1978 and 1979 statements of General Synod on the church and homosexuality. This study guide will include updating of these reports only with respect to factual material.

2. A process of reflection for RCA congregations who are seeking to increase their sensitivity and awareness of the ways in which persons of homosexual orientation have wrongly suffered in our churches and in our society.

3. A collection of models for ministry to persons of homosexual orientation. This collection of models will serve to demonstrate ways of implementing ministry to persons of homosexual orientation which are in harmony with the Reformed Church in America's stated theological positions;

and further,

to submit these resources to the 1995 General Synod for its approval prior to their distribution (MGS 1994, pp. 375-76).

The reasons presented with the above resolution were:

1. This...focuses on the areas where consensus exists within the RCA, and enables the RCA to move forward constructively.

2. The process which this...calls for is explicitly committed to the biblical-theological perspective found in previous General Synod pronouncements; a commitment which some regarded as ambiguous in earlier proposals.

3. This...addresses more clearly the two basic needs of the Reformed Church in America at this time: 1) a movement away from fear, prejudice, and hostility toward persons of homosexual orientation, and 2) a movement toward ministry.

4. This...builds trust by continuing to hold the Commission on Theology accountable to the whole denomination in its work. The...[above] requires the study materials to be submitted for approval at the 1995 General Synod before their full distribution throughout the RCA (MGS 1994, pp. 376-77).

5. The paper, "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," was adopted by the 1996 General Synod for use in the RCA as a foundation and guide for its ecumenical relations (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). The paper refers to the process of "full communion" and "mutual affirmation and mutual admonition" after the opening
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, [underlining added for emphasis] 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).

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 (MGS 1996, pp. 187-88).

6. The classis believes the issue of homosexuality is so pressing in our day that it is an illegitimate approach to argue that a public, publicized relationship should be affirmed with the United Church of Christ because, in the meantime, “mutual affirmation and admonition” can continue. The issues that divide the RCA and the UCC are too profound, and “mutual affirmation and admonition” must not be used as a smoke screen for delay so that the Formula of Agreement can be approved.

7. While the 1996 General Synod instructed RCA dialogue on the issue of homosexuality with the United Church of Christ (MGS 1996, R-4, p. 211 and MGS 1996, p. 214), such dialogue is not an adequate basis for ignoring the deep differences that exist between the RCA and the UCC and, at the same time, moving ahead to approve the Formula of Agreement, which includes the UCC. (The first meeting between RCA and UCC representatives was April 19, 1997.)

8. The classis recognizes that the term “full communion” is important in the Lutheran tradition. For the Lutherans, this official step of full communion is necessary with another denomination before communion can be shared and ordination recognized. That is not the nature of Reformed polity, however. When it is argued that “we are already in full communion with the United Church of Christ,” the classis believes this is misleading. Reformed tradition does not lead to or require such action regarding the variety of Christian denominations in the U.S. and around the world. Nor is such a formal action inferred by membership in councils of churches or the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). To be in “full communion” with members of WARC has never involved the formal action and covenantal commitments which the Formula
of Agreement calls for. The classis recognizes that, in deference to Lutheran tradition, such a formal action may need to be taken with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. However, the classis believes it is unwise to take such a formal action with the UCC at this time.

9. The Classis of South Grand Rapids is concerned about the spiritual welfare of practicing homosexuals. Denominational ambivalence furthers confusion as to whether or not homosexual activity is consistent with Christlike behavior. RCA witness must be clear and straightforward so that with tireless love, gentleness, and compassion, the RCA is more effective in helping homosexuals win freedom from their bondage.

10. The Classis of South Grand Rapids is concerned about any action which causes “little ones to stumble” for whom Christ died.

11. The Classis of South Grand Rapids is concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Reformed Church in America. For the RCA to join in with those who approve of what the RCA believes to be contrary to the will of God compromises and hinders the RCA’s witness for Jesus Christ.

12. The Classis of South Grand Rapids is concerned about the spiritual welfare of the UCC. Since sin hinders the work of God, the RCA should not remain silent about that which is hindering the witness of those we love.

13. The issue is not sin within the UCC; every church struggles with sin in its midst. The issue is approval of sin.

14. All these discussions overshadow the further question of whether the United Church of Christ is, in fact, a confessional church, which is addressed in A Common Calling and An Invitation to Action, with serious uncertainties remaining.

15. The classis recognizes the four denominations will all meet within a two month period in the spring/summer of 1997. The RCA is voting first on the Formula of Agreement. The classis urges the 1997 General Synod to take careful, faithful action, and to avoid steps which hinder our faithfulness to the gospel.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-13.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 9 was addressed in R-1 and R-2.

10. The Classis of Florida overtures General Synod to suspend indefinitely any affirmation of the proposed Formula of Agreement which includes the United Church of Christ (UCC) until the UCC repeals its formal affirmation of homosexual and bisexual lifestyles as appropriate for Christians, and its ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament of persons committed to such lifestyles.

Reasons:

1. The UCC not only affirms homosexuality as compatible with Christianity, but also affirms bisexuality as compatible with Christianity. There can be no question that a denomination is speaking of sexual sin and not merely inclination when it defends bisexuality.
2. The proposed *Formula of Agreement* charges member denominations to "encourage the sharing of the Lord's Supper." By both RCA confessions and church order, the RCA is forbidden to share communion with those living in unrepentant sin.

3. Encouraging UCC members in good standing in a denomination that explicitly defends the practice of sexual sin (homosexual or bisexual in nature) to come to the Lord's Table in the Reformed Church in America is the destruction of the biblical understanding of church discipline. John Calvin and other RCA spiritual forebears suffered greatly for this understanding.

4. Encouraging the Lord's Supper with others in a denomination that promotes sexual sin leaves the RCA perilously close to ceasing to be a true church. One of the RCA confessions, the Belgic Confession, Article 29, says that an essential mark of a true church is that "it practices church discipline for correcting faults." The RCA has often sinned by not consistently practicing church discipline, but the RCA has never principally denied that it is the church's responsibility. Affirming the *Formula of Agreement* with the UCC abrogates the RCA and the local RCA congregation's church discipline by explicitly welcoming to the Lord's Table those living in sexual sin.

5. The 1996 General Synod offered:

   - to enter into dialogue with the United Church of Christ on the issue of homosexuality for the purpose of encouraging the UCC to move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality and to move toward a repeal of all its policies condoning homosexual behavior (*MGS 1996*, p. 214).

   To encourage all UCC members to come to RCA communion tables before these issues are resolved lessens the eternal significance of these issues and gives a mixed message of RCA uncompromising resolve out of faithfulness to Christ in these matters.

6. The proposed *Formula of Agreement* calls for covenanting churches to "recognize each other's various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament." The RCA cannot acknowledge ministers openly living in unrepentant sin as ministers of Word and sacrament, even though their denomination (the UCC) affirms such behavior. The RCA cannot provide for the orderly transfer of such ministers into the Reformed Church in America without sinning against the Lord of the church.

7. These reservations with regard to communion and to recognition of homosexual and lesbian ministers make it morally unacceptable for the Reformed Church in America to adopt the proposed *Formula of Agreement* with the UCC as a covenanting partner; unless the UCC repeals its current policies with regard to homosexual and bisexual practice.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

   **R-14.**
   
   To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 10 was addressed in R-1 and R-2. <
Continue RCA Dialogue with Other Denominations

11. The Classis of Mid-Hudson overtures General Synod to authorize the appropriate agency to continue dialogue with the United Church of Christ (UCC) in order that the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ may together move toward a more biblically faithful understanding of human sexuality.

Reasons:

1. The RCA has "failed in many ways to submit our sexuality to the lordship of Jesus Christ" (MGS 1996, p. 214).

2. "The Reformed Church in America is opposed to the policies adopted by the United Church of Christ which condone homosexual behavior" (MGS 1996, p. 214).

3. As the RCA and the UCC live together under the gospel, the RCA and the UCC will grow and benefit from the continuing dialogue (MGS 1996, R-4, p. 211).

The advisory committee recommended:

R-15.
To commend the work of the United Church of Christ and RCA dialogue delegations; and further,

to request the United Church of Christ and RCA dialogue delegations present a report no later than the 1999 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: R-15 reflects the substance of Overture 11.

12. The Classis of Northern Michigan overtures General Synod to adopt in first reading the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b, for recommendation to the 1998 General Synod for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 3 Commission on Christian Unity

b. Responsibilities

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America's membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.

2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.

3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

4. The commission shall admonish and rebuke, but shall also continue to carry on dialogue with any denomination within Reformed Church in America ecumenical alliances that have adopted policies promoting and/or condoning self-affirmed practicing homosexual or adulterous heterosexual behavior and allowing such persons to hold church offices within their churches.
Reason: Such practices are contrary to the RCA scriptural viewpoint as defined in the position of General Synod reflected in its statements in 1978 (MGS 1978, pp. 229-40), 1979 (MGS 1979, pp. 126-35), and 1990 (MGS 1990, R-11, p. 461).

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-16.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: Specific directions to a commission are not good practice in a constitutional document.

13. The Regional Synod of Canada overtures General Synod to instruct the General Secretary and the Commission on Christian Unity to request the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the World Council of Churches (WCC), the National Council of Churches (NCC), and the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) to declare that the ordination of practicing homosexuals is contrary to the authoritative teaching of Scriptures; and further,

to request the WARC, WCC, NCC, and CCC to ask any member denomination that endorses such ordination of practicing homosexuals to repent of this position or be removed from membership in the WARC, WCC, NCC, and/or CCC.

Reasons:

1. Homosexual activity violates Scripture.

2. Clergy are called to an exemplary standard of holy living.

3. Homosexual activity is not to be endorsed by ordination, but requires instead repentance that makes a person open to being set free by the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. In light of the RCA’s position on repentance for homosexual activity, clarification is necessary for membership of churches in the WARC, WCC, NCC, and/or CCC.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-17.
To refer Overture 13 to the Commission on Christian Unity, for study within the context of the moral dimensions of human sexuality, for report to the 1999 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: R-17 reflects the substance of concerns raised by Overtures 4, 5, 9, 10, and 12, and broadens the scope of these overtures.

➢ The moderator of the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity read to Synod the resolution on homosexuality adopted by the 1994 General Synod (MGS 1994, pp. 375-76).

14. The Regional Synod of Canada overtures General Synod to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity, on the basis of A Common Calling, to request the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to:

1. Withdraw its historic condemnations of the Reformed understanding of Christian life and faith.
2. Recognize the Reformed tradition's understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper as scripturally faithful.

3. Recognize the validity of the Reformed tradition's ordination of minister of Word and sacrament.

4. Welcome Christians of the Reformed tradition to participate in the ELCA's celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Reasons:

1. It is the will and prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ that his church be one (John 17:11) and that this unity be seen by the world (John 17: 20-21).

2. According to A Common Calling, the areas of diversity between the Reformed churches and the ELCA are no longer seen to be "church-dividing differences."

3. The ELCA can carry out unilaterally these withdrawals and decisions.

4. This request is consistent with the "Goals of Christian Unity" section (MGS 1996, p. 194) in the RCA's "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America" (MGS 1996, pp. 184-97).

The advisory committee recommended:

R-18.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 14 was addressed in R-1 and R-2. <
REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship


SUPPLEMENTAL WORSHIP RESOURCES

One of the major tasks of the commission was to begin to work on the 1996 General Synod referral that came from the president's report:

To instruct the Commission on Christian Worship to produce worship resources which include supplemental forms of worship and hymns, songs, and choruses which reflect our faith and speak to our time; and further,

to instruct the Commission on Christian Worship to submit the first of such resources to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-5, p. 232).

Letters were sent to several people across the RCA asking for suggestions as to what specifically should be included in such resources. Three major areas emerged: 1) simplified liturgical orders, 2) optional prayers for use in celebrating the Lord's Supper, and 3) a gathering of hymns, songs, and choruses.

The commission met with Kim Baker, publisher and distributor for the RCA Distribution Center, and Dr. Emily Brink, music and liturgy editor for Christian Reformed Church Publications, to explore the possibility of the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America cooperating in the production of a hymnal supplement. The commission's priorities for such a supplement would include: 1) music from the evangelical tradition, including praise and worship choruses, 2) music from the world church, 3) contemporary composers, especially those from the Reformed tradition, 4) liturgical tradition, especially service music, and 5) a selection of psalms in various forms.

The commission has also begun to explore electronic publishing (CD-ROM) of RCA liturgies, worship resources, and confessions. Such a resource would include some or all of the following:

Order of worship for the Lord's Day (including the Lord's Supper)
Order for the sacrament of baptism
A collection of calls to confession, prayers of confession, and assurances of pardon
A collection of scriptural salutations and benedictions
Prayers for illumination
Prayers for blessing on the Word
Collection of litanies and seasonal prayers
Musical settings for congregational responses
Responsorial psalms
Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds
Heidelberg Catechism
The Belgic Confession
The Canons of the Synod of Dort

With these worship resources published on CD-ROM, pastors and worship planners would be able to search for materials as well as to download and print portions of these resources for inclusion in worship bulletins. Although the 1996 General Synod instructed the commission
to produce supplemental worship resources (*MGS* 1996, R-5, p. 232), no funding to carry out this instruction was provided. While the RCA Distribution Center will capitalize the duplication, packaging, and marketing costs of electronically published worship resources, development costs (estimated to be $8,000-$10,000) need to come from another source.

**R-1.**

To fund $9,280 ($8,000 plus $1,280 basic service cost) from the 1998 General Synod assessment budget for the development of electronically published worship resources.

> Upon recommendation of the advisory the following was substituted for R-1:

To request the Office of Worship, in consultation with Congregational Services, to explore the development of electronically published worship resources. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The advisory committee did not want to increase the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget with another item.

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**REJOICE IN THE LORD**

The *Rejoice in the Lord* hymnbook is now out of print. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company approached the RCA Distribution Center and the Commission on Christian Worship about sharing costs for an additional printing due to orders waiting to be filled. However, since the average life of a hymnal is now only about fifteen years (*Rejoice in the Lord* was first published in 1985), and since the 1996 General Synod instructed the commission to begin producing supplemental worship resources, the commission decided against an expenditure for an additional printing. In its lifetime *Rejoice in the Lord* went through five printings and sold more than eighty thousand copies, approximately twenty-eight thousand of which were sold to RCA congregations.

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**CONTEMPORARY AND ECUMENICAL TEXTS: PRAYING TOGETHER**

The RCA is part of the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT), the Canadian and United States segment of the international English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). Over twenty English-speaking Christian denominations are represented in CCT. *Prayers We Have in Common* was a project begun by CCT, which sought to provide a contemporary English version of prayers for English-speaking churches around the world. The project grew out of the "realization that, at least in regard to those prayers and creeds which are common to all Christians, this work should not be done independently by the various churches, but should be done by them together" (*Praying Together*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988, p. 4.) The results of this work, which subsequently became part of the work of the International Consultation on English Texts and its successor, the English Language Liturgical Consultation, were published under the title *Praying Together*. Among the ELLC texts are the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Nicene Creed.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed
I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed
We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. 
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

R-2.
To commend the use of the above (in bold) English Language Liturgical Consultation texts for the Lord’s Prayer, Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed for use in the Reformed Church in America. 
(ADOPTED)

ORDER FOR BAPTISM FOR OLDER CHILDREN

The Commission on Theology communicated to the Commission on Christian Worship its response to a 1996 General Synod request for the Commission on Theology to evaluate the need for a revised wording of the baptismal liturgy to accommodate the emerging faith of older children presented for baptism by their parents (MGS 1996, R-3, p. 231). The Commission on Theology is reporting to this General Synod that no change in the 1994 baptismal liturgy is necessary. The Commission on Christian Worship agrees with the position of the Commission on Theology (see Report of the Commission on Theology, “Baptismal Liturgy Alternate Worship for Adolescent Children,” in the Theology section).

WORK IN PROCESS

The commission continues to work on a revised order for “The Ordination of a Minister of Word and Sacrament,” an order for the profession of faith, and a liturgy for the organization of a new church. The commission was also asked by Christian Educators, RCA (CERCA) to develop a liturgy for the commissioning of Associates in Ministry, most notably certified directors of Christian education. The commission is working on a liturgy that will recognize the importance of such ministries while avoiding any notion of office or ordination.

The commission is cooperating with the Office of Worship and the Office of Education and Faith Development in exploring approaches to Christian initiation for adults. Several denominations are adapting and developing the ancient practice of the catechumenate as a process for preparing inquirers and new Christians for the life of faith. As more people in the culture are unchurched or have been separated from the church for a long time, it is realized that many people do not come to churches with either spiritual content knowledge or spiritual commitment. The catechumenate process includes a period of spiritual formation with a sponsor as well as a series of liturgical rites that involve the entire congregation in prayer for the candidates. Some members of the commission will be attending training events sponsored by the North American Association of the Catechumenate and by denominations who are developing this ministry in their congregations.

WORSHIP EDUCATION

The commission is grateful to the many RCA consistory, worship committees, and members who sent responses to its paper “The Theology and Place of Music in Worship” (MGS 1996, pp. 223-28). The paper continues to stimulate discussion and offer guidance to congregations. The video and accompanying study guide, Liturgy and Life: A Reformed Understanding of Worship, produced in 1996 by RCA Productions and the RCA Office of Worship, has also been well received by the RCA. More than one hundred congregations have purchased or rented the materials. There has also been interest and sales outside of the denomination. Members of the commission are working with the Office of Worship in developing worship workshops that will use this paper, the video and study guide, and other resources.
More and more the commission is going beyond its initial purpose as stated in the Bylaws of the General Synod to advise the church of changes needed in the Liturgy and to be responsible for hymnals (the Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 10b). While the commission continues to perform these responsibilities, the work of providing resources and education for worship in the RCA increases. This work is carried out in cooperation with the Office of Worship, but it is noted once again that this position for the entire denomination is staffed by half of one staff person's portfolio.

Continuing a practice begun at the 1995 General Synod, the commission is responsible for worship services at General Synod. Members met several times with worship leaders for this year's General Synod. It remains the tradition, however, that the president of General Synod appoints the preachers for daily morning worship.

The commission expresses its deep appreciation to the Rev. Dr. Richard Otterness, who has completed his second three-year term of service on the Commission on Christian Worship. He cares deeply about the church's worship of God, and it has been a blessing to have him as a colleague on this commission.

From the Report of the General Synod Council's Congregational Services Committee

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF WORSHIP

The Office of Worship provides RCA congregations with resources for worship and worship education through its Worship newsletter, articles in Servant Leaders, and occasional resource packets. Last year the office also produced a new educational video, Liturgy and Life: A Reformed Understanding of Worship. To date more than one hundred congregations have made use of this resource. Many have purchased the video and study guide for repeated use in consistory and worship committee training, new member education, and adult study groups. The Office of Worship is also available to help design or lead congregational or regional workshops on worship.

The 1996 General Synod president, the Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink, raised serious concerns about worship practices in the RCA, noting in particular little commonality across the denomination, lack of attention to Reformed theology and liturgy in many RCA congregations, and the need for greater variety in some of the RCA liturgical forms (1996 MGS, p. 32). In response to a proposal by Hesselink in his presidential report, the 1996 General Synod instructed the Commission on Christian Worship to produce supplemental worship resources that reflect the Reformed faith and speak to our time (MGS 1996, R-5, p. 232).

The Office of Worship is working closely with the Commission on Christian Worship in developing new worship resources. The Office of Worship and the Commission on Christian Worship hope to present to the 1998 General Synod a collection of alternative orders for the celebration of the Lord's Supper and to make available to the RCA a CD-ROM edition of worship materials that will include previously published liturgical orders as well as some new resources. The Office of Worship is also working with the Commission on Christian Worship in developing a supplemental hymnal.

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An increasingly common experience for many RCA congregations is receiving new members who come to the church with little or no previous experience in a church community or even exposure to the Christian faith. As the RCA becomes more and more a missionary church in a secular culture, it is important that the RCA become more intentional about the spiritual formation of new Christians. The Office of Worship, the Commission on Christian Worship, and the Office for Education and Faith Development are exploring the possibilities of developing and adapting the catechumenate process (Christian initiation of adults) for the RCA.

The catechumenate is an ancient practice of the church for discipling new Christians. Several denominations are recovering this ancient practice and have begun to develop materials and to train people for implementing this ministry in their congregations. The process involves accompanying adult inquirers on a journey from a point of asking basic questions of the Christian faith toward a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. This ministry includes both a one-on-one mentoring process and a series of liturgical rites that involve the entire congregation in prayer for the catechumens and their sponsors. The process includes regular worship, reflection on biblical passages, modeling a life of prayer, and engagement in some form of ministry. The catechumenate process culminates in baptism and admission to the Lord's Table. Newly baptized adults continue to receive support for several weeks from their sponsors and church leaders, who help them explore ways of living out their faith. The process can also be adapted for previously baptized adults who are making reaffirmation of their faith and for baptized children and young people who are making their first public profession of faith. Over the course of the next several months some members of the Congregational Services staff, members of the Commission on Christian Worship, and RCA pastors and lay persons will be participating in training events sponsored by the North American Association of the Catechumenate and by some of the denominations who are developing this ministry for use in their churches.

The Office of Worship also responds to numerous requests from RCA congregations for information and resources, represents the RCA on the Council of Common Texts, provides staff assistance for the Commission on Christian Worship, and works with the Commission on Christian Worship and the General Synod Theme Planning Committee in planning the worship services for General Synod.

Overture

Use RCA-Approved Liturgies and Orders for the Sacraments

1. The Classis of Albany and the Regional Synod of Albany overture General Synod to exhort, with gentleness and care, all congregations of the Reformed Church in America to use RCA-approved liturgies and orders for the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

Reasons:

1. The Belgic Confession states that the marks of the true church include “the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them” (Article 29). Using the RCA-approved sacramental liturgies is meant quietly to contribute to “the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.”
2. The Book of Church Order states:

The sacrament of baptism shall be administered, if possible, at a time and place of public worship. "The Office for the Administration of Baptism' shall be read" (BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 6b).

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall be administered, if possible, at least once every three months in every church. "The Office for the Administration of the Lord's Supper' shall be read" (BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 6c).

3. The RCA-approved sacramental liturgies are part of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. For RCA congregations or ministers to set them aside, unilaterally or arbitrarily, is no different from picking and choosing to ignore other parts of the RCA Constitution, such as the Doctrinal Standards or the Book of Church Order.

4. The Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, which ministers orally declare at the time of ordination and installation, states:

I will conduct the work of the church in an orderly way and according to the Liturgy and the Book of Church Order (BCO, Appendix 3, The Formularies of the Reformed Church in America).

5. The approved liturgies for the sacraments are carefully written and studied before being adopted by General Synod and approved by at least two-thirds of the classes as faithful expressions of Reformed theology. When RCA congregations and ministers increasingly substitute non-RCA-approved liturgies for the sacraments, both a Reformed understanding of the sacraments and a congregation's covenantal accountability may be lost.

6. There are several RCA-approved orders for both sacraments, as well as options within the different liturgies. If RCA congregations nonetheless believe that none of the RCA constitutional liturgies are appropriate, they should address these concerns to General Synod.

7. At a time when there is increasing diversity and division about worship in the Reformed Church in America, sharing common sacramental liturgies within the RCA is one way of expressing our unity and common heritage.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-3.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: It is not necessary to exhort on matters that are already mandated in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 6; and in the Formularies of the Reformed Church in America (Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament). <

➢ The moderator of the Advisory Committee on Christian Worship informed Synod that although the advisory committee recommended denial of the overture, the advisory committee encouraged the RCA communication vehicles (i.e. Church Herald, Servant Leader, et al) to address the issue raised in Overture 1. Overture 1 is an education matter. The advisory committee also advocated the substance of Overture 1 to be communicated to non-English speaking congregations in their primary language. Finally, the advisory committee urged the RCA seminaries, the Theological Education Agency, and the racial/ethnic councils to call attention to the Book of Church Order provision that addresses the substance of Overture 1. <
REPORTS ON CHURCH ORDER

Report of the Commission on Church Order

Since the 1996 meeting of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order (CCO) met October 4, 1996, and February 28, 1997, near O'Hare airport in Chicago, Illinois, to consider referrals from the General Synod and other matters related to church order.

APPROVAL BY CLASSES FOR NEW GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT BUDGET ITEMS THAT EXCEED 5 PERCENT OF TOTAL GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT

The Classis of South Grand Rapids submitted the following overture to the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 277-78):

The Classis of South Grand Rapids overtures General Synod to proceed with the following recommendation adopted by the 1995 General Synod:

... to prepare an amendment to the Book of Church Order to require that all new assessments approved by the General Synod—if they are for ministries or programs not previously funded by assessments, and if they exceed by 5 percent the prior year's total General Synod assessment—be approved by a majority vote in two-thirds of the classes (MGS 1995, R-9, p. 354).

Upon recommendation of its Advisory Committee on Church Order, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare an amendment to the Book of Church Order to require that all new assessments approved by the General Synod—if they are for ministries or programs not previously funded by assessments, and if they exceed by 5 percent the prior year's total General Synod assessment—be approved by a majority vote in two-thirds of the classes (MGS 1996, R-14, p. 278).

R-14 above reiterates the instruction given to CCO by the 1995 General Synod (MGS 1995, R-9, p. 354). The commission, in its report presented at the 1996 General Synod, deemed an amendment to the Book of Church Order (BCO) highly inadvisable for a number of reasons (MGS 1996, pp. 240-41).

Although the 1995 General Synod (MGS 1995, R-9, p. 354) and the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-14, p. 278), instructed the Commission on Church Order to prepare an amendment to the Book of Church Order, the commission requests from this General Synod further clarification of its above mandates from the two previous years. It is not possible to prepare a simple BCO amendment within the structure of the current Book of Church Order for the following reasons:

1. The preamble of the Book of Church Order states:

The Representative Principle. The power which Jesus Christ bestows upon his church is mediated by the Holy Spirit to all the people. Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be
established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.

The above paragraph articulates the long-standing principle of RCA order that assemblies are gatherings of offices. Furthermore, the office-bearers cannot be instructed by their respective sending bodies on how to vote on particular issues. Thus, it is understood, that God can and does lead God's church through the Spirit's guidance of those offices gathered in various assemblies.

In addition, the “greater” assemblies, those that encompass larger geographic areas, are authorized to act in those matters where the “lesser” assemblies are unable.

The instruction of the 1995 General Synod and the 1996 General Synod requires, in fact, the Commission on Church Order to reflect on the nature of the offices themselves. For it is the offices that are granted the authority to decide in assembly. Does the authority of the offices obtain at the level of consistory and classis, for example, but not as these offices are gathered in synods?

Compliance with the instruction of the 1995 General Synod and the 1996 General Synod would require the Commission on Church Order to eliminate or radically rewrite the above cited paragraph from the BCO preamble, and thus to alter profoundly a principle of church order followed by the Reformed Church in America since its inception. It would, in effect, move the RCA away from a presbyterial order toward a congregational order in which the RCA would no longer hold that God leads the church through the offices.

2. The Commission on Church Order noted the practical consequences of such a shift in church order in its report to the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 239-41). This report remarked that such a BCO amendment would, in effect, second guess the decisions of the General Synod. The General Synod would no longer be a true Synod, but a body that only proposed certain actions to the lower assemblies. The result would raise certain synodical decisions to a constitutional status. Also, since budgetary considerations are so central in proposing new programs, the Synod's ability to act would be severely restricted.

The commission emphasizes that its request for clarification of the 1995 General Synod and 1996 General Synod mandates is not relevant to the wisdom of Synod's decisions concerning assessments. The assessment is not at issue for the commission. Rather, the commission is requesting General Synod to be cognizant of the significance of its request to prepare such a proposed BCO amendment.

The commission submits this response to MGS 1996, R-14, p. 278 in fulfillment of the responsibility incumbent upon it as outlined in the BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4b, which states:

1. The commission shall have responsibility for making recommendations concerning the content, structure, and style of the Book of Church Order.

CALLING OF PASTORS IN NEW CHURCH STARTS

The Classis of Illinois submitted the following overture to the 1996 General Synod:

... to instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 2, in order to clarify how Section
2 applies to new church starts in which the pastor is present in the community before any church or consistory is organized (MGS 1996, pp. 279-80).

Upon recommendation of its Advisory Committee on Church Order, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions of the Book of Church Order to clarify how and when new church start pastors are installed (MGS 1996, R-16, p. 280).

At its October 1996 meeting the Commission on Church Order noted the BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 2 is difficult to apply to some more recent new church starts. Section 2 fits the older model of starting churches, in which the congregation was organized first and then its consistory called a pastor. Under the new model for a new church start, however, the pastor arrives first, calls a congregation together, and together the pastor and congregation organize as a church.

The commission then noted that if the current BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 2, is strictly observed, the church “planting” pastor cannot be installed in that church until at least three weeks after the organization of the church and consistory. The extra service required for the installation of the pastor three weeks after the church and consistory organization service creates an unnecessary logistical problem for a classis, especially when the new church start is geographically distant from other churches within the bounds of the classis. Also, this procedure in Section 2 gives an impression that there might be some question whether the new church start will call the “planting” pastor.

R-1.
To adopt the following revision to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 2, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 2. The consistory shall provide a minister, or ministers, for the church. It has the authority to call persons to the ministry of the church if the charter of the church has not made other provisions. The consistory shall endeavor to learn the mind of the congregation with respect to any person who may be called to the ministry of the church. The judgment of the congregation in such matters shall be considered to be of significant weight, but not binding. The instrument of the call to a minister shall be signed by the members of the consistory... If the call is approved by the classis and accepted by the person called, the latter’s name shall be published in the church on three successive Sundays, so that opportunity may be afforded for the raising of lawful objections. (For organizing churches, the classis may waive the three successive Sundays requirement.) If no such objections are raised, the classis or its committee shall install the minister according to the office for installation in the Liturgy. (ADOPTED)

MEMBERSHIP ON COMMITTEES OF REGIONAL SYNODS

In response to an overture from the Regional Synod of Canada for deacon representation at the regional synod level, the 1996 General Synod voted:
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions to the Book of Church Order to allow confessing members to serve on regional synod committees, commissions, or boards (MGS 1996, R-19, p. 282).

At its October 1996 meeting the Commission on Church Order noted that the Book of Church Order already allows confessing members to serve on classis committees (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 6, Section 4) and General Synod agencies and commissions (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 2). Membership is not limited to elders.

R-2.
To adopt the following revision to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part III, Article 3, Section 2 and BCO, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 6, Section 5 (new), for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined; deletion is stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part III, Article 3, Section 2 Delegates

Sec. 2. The elder delegate to regional synod, or the elder who serves on committees, commissions, or boards of the regional synod, shall be chosen from the entire body of elders in a church whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders.

Chapter 1, Part III, Article 6, Section 5 (new) Transaction of Business

Sec. 5. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, members of regional synod committees, commissions, or boards shall be confessing members of the churches in the regional synod. (ADOPTED)

In preparing the above proposed amendment, the Commission on Church Order reviewed BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 3, Section 4 for membership on committees, commissions, and boards of classes. In its review, the commission determined some revisions of Section 4 were necessary.

The Commission on Church Order noted that the classis (or the regional synod) retains the prerogative for membership on committees, commissions, or boards. It is an option for the classis (or the regional synod) not to limit membership to elders. The commission presents the below proposed revision of Section 4 in order to have consistency with the above proposed revision of Section 5.

R-3.
To adopt the following revisions to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 6, Section 4, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, membership on of classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be open to all confessing members of the churches in the classis. (ADOPTED)
INSTALLATION OF MINISTERS INTO SPECIALIZED MINISTRIES

The Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 4a states:

The classis shall install every minister to a form of ministry appropriate to the office, whether under a call or contract, full-time or part-time, traditional or specialized ministry, and regardless of remuneration.

The above BCO requirement has caused classes considerable difficulty and has raised a number of questions. How does a classis, for example, install a minister into a chaplaincy in a nonchurch body such as the military, a hospital, or a college? Can a classis declare a "pastoral relationship to be fully constituted" when such a nonchurch body is not under the auspices of the classis? The classis has no authority over the nature of the relationship between the minister and the body he or she serves.

Further problems emerge when the classis installs a minister under contract. While technically the classis installs the minister to the "ministry" and not to the "church," it is unclear to the participants just what has happened. What effect does this installation have on the ministry? What happens when the ministry ends? Is a dissolution required? Dissolution would appear to serve no purpose, and yet the installation implies a pastoral relation that requires dissolution.

The rationale for the 1989 General Synod recommending approval by classes to amend the above BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 4a (MGS 1989, R-5, p. 195) and two-thirds of the classes approving the amendment (MGS 1990, p. 40) is articulated as follows in the Report of the Committee on Plurality and Flexibility of the Ministry presented at the 1984 General Synod:

Ministers in specialized ministries are often lonely and feel isolated. They have a sense that their ministries are not considered valid and authentic by others in the church. Many times classes have little time for their special interests or the problems they encounter in their ministries. The RCA must recover an adequate system of mutual accountability between classis and those in specialized ministries. New relationships must be worked out so that those in specialized ministries do have a significant relationship to a local classis (MGS 1984, p. 180).

This 1984 report expressed a genuine concern. However, installation of all ministers does not satisfy that concern. Installation of a minister does not by itself validate the ministry of Word and sacrament. It only establishes a pastoral relationship with a particular congregation. The validity of the office of minister of Word and sacrament is established by ordination.

Ministers of Word and sacrament are responsible and amenable to their respective classes; a classis is a minister's "ecclesiastical home." The classis is charged with care for all its ministers. Nonetheless, a requirement for installation to specialized ministries that is difficult to execute and has little theological justification does not further this end.

The commission does envision times, however, when a classis may wish to install a minister to a specialized ministry (for example, as a classis chaplain, pastor of a new church start, etc.). The commission therefore recommends the following BCO revision that will allow, but does not require, installations of all ministers of Word and sacrament.
To adopt the following revisions of the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 4a (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

**Article 13, Section 4**

a. The classis shall install every minister to a form of ministry appropriate to the office, whether under a call or contract, full-time or part-time, traditional or specialized ministry, and regardless of remuneration, which meets the following requirements:

1. Is a ministry which makes a responsible use of the minister’s education and gifts;

2. Is performed under the jurisdiction or with the approval of a classis of the Reformed Church in America;

3. Is intended to witness to the Word in the world or to nurture and train Christians for their ministry in the world.

All ministers shall be responsible to a classis which shall oversee their function as pertains to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament (see also Section 2 above and Section 6 below in this Article 13).

b. When ministers move from one classis to another, they shall sign the “Declaration for Ministers” in the classis which they join. (ADOPTED—see Editorial Report p. 427)

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**Report of the Task Force to Revise Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures**

**REVISIONS OF DISCIPLINARY AND JUDICIAL PROCEDURES**

**Background**

Upon a motion from the floor, the 1994 General Synod voted:

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint an eight-member task force to study, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Judicial Business, Chapter 2 of the *Book of Church Order*, “The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures;” and further,
to include in the membership of the task force one representative from the Commission on Church Order, one representative from the Commission on Judicial Business, and six at-large members with experience in classis-level disciplinary and judicial procedures; and further,

to instruct the task force to present a preliminary report to the 1996 General Synod; and further,

to instruct the task force, following the 1996 General Synod, to refer and distribute this preliminary report to RCA agencies, institutions, pastors, consistories, classes, and regional synods for prayerful consideration, study, discussion, and response; and further,

to instruct the task force to present a final report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1994, p. 51).

The reasons presented to the 1994 General Synod for the above motion were:

1. The Commission on Church Order recognized and sought to correct serious deficiencies in the existing disciplinary and judicial procedures of the Book of Church Order and submitted proposed amendments to the 1993 General Synod (MGS 1993, pp. 225-46). Debate on these proposed amendments and the subsequent defeat by over two-thirds of the classes (MGS 1994, p. 50) indicate the need for continuing attention to issues raised in this process.

2. The significance of the disciplinary and judicial procedures in the life of the RCA makes it important to have a year of consultation throughout the church. Open discussion allows different areas of the RCA to offer modifications prior to the whole report being presented to General Synod and classes for approval.

3. A task force will provide broader representation from the RCA.

4. A task force is able to focus entirely on this one important issue without being encumbered with other diverse responsibilities (MGS 1994, p. 51).

As noted in the above reasons, the vote by the 1994 General Synod followed proposed major revisions in the disciplinary and judicial procedures that were not ratified by classes (MGS 1993, pp. 225-46 and MGS 1994, p. 50). Nonetheless, the 1994 General Synod determined that the RCA found the current procedures still seriously deficient and desired a task force to focus solely on this issue and to also establish a means for the entire RCA to confer on this matter of crucial importance.

At its October 1994 meeting the General Synod Council appointed a Task Force to Revise Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures consisting of the following persons:

John De Koster
Ronald Geschwendt
Allan Janssen
Wesley Kiel

Carol Myers
Andrea Van Beek
David Van Lant
Susan Vogel-Vanderson

David Schreuder served as the staff resource person for the task force.

The task force met in Holland, Michigan, on December 13, 1994; March 9-10, 1995; May 8-9, 1995; July 13-14, 1995; October 30-31, 1995; and November 27-28, 1995. The task force also met via a telephone conference call on January 31, 1996. The task force held its final meeting in San Juan Capistrano, California, on January 24-25, 1997. The following final report is presented to the 1997 General Synod.
Final Report

Following a review of the preliminary report presented by the task force at the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 248-65), the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Task Force to Revise Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures to distribute the proposed revisions of the Book of Church Order, Chapter 2 . . . to the agencies, institutions, pastors, consistories, classes, and regional synods of the RCA for prayerful consideration, study, discussion, and response to the task force by January 1, 1997; and further,

... to instruct the Task Force . . . to present a final report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-7, p. 250).

At its January 24-25, 1997 meeting, the task force reviewed the comments received. All the comments responded positively to the general direction of the preliminary report, and many comments included proposed revisions. The task force carefully reviewed all the suggestions and proposed revisions and made a number of minor changes in the preparation of this final report.

In the revision of Chapter 2 of the Book of Church Order, the task force strove for clarity and consistency of language to assist judicatories as they work through what is often a painful and exacting task. The task force also attempted to avoid language of the secular court in order to indicate the peculiarly ecclesiastical nature of discipline.

The following major revisions of Chapter 2 of the BCO are proposed by the task force:

1. The distinction between private and public offenses is deleted. The “private” and “public” division caused confusion.

2. The process of bringing a charge is amended so that either an individual or a committee of a judicatory can bring a charge. Also, a committee of the judicatory (rather than the entire judicatory) ascertains whether a charge is of sufficient merit to warrant further consideration. This committee will not then be involved in the trial of a charge. This eliminates a fundamental unfairness present in the current procedures, in which members of the judicatory act as “prosecutor, judge, and jury.”

3. A set of procedural rules for a trial is added to clarify and to assist judicatories in the fair adjudication of a charge(s) that comes before the entire judicatory.

4. The procedures for complaints and appeals are separated into Part II and Part III to avoid confusion between a complaint and an appeal.

In addition, the task force proposes the publication of a commentary. The commentary will be printed as footnotes to Chapter 2 of the Book of Church Order. However, the commentary footnotes will not be constitutional material.

The task force offers the commentary to assist judicatories as they proceed with disciplinary matters. The commentary notes important distinctions and describes, in a more narrative style, how a judicatory can employ the disciplinary procedures when discipline becomes necessary. The commentary can aid judicatory members in determining how the church works its way through a disciplinary procedure.

The task force emphasizes again, however, that the commentary is not constitutional. It is not to be taken as the BCO procedure. The text of Chapter 2 of the BCO is the procedure.
The task force recommends the following: (The commentary that follows various sections is not in bold and is not part of the recommendation printed in bold.)

R-5.  
To adopt the following revisions of the Book of Church Order, Chapter 2, “The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures,” Part I, “Discipline,” Part II, “Complaints,” and Part III, “Appeals,” for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Discipline

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1. Nature of Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sec. 2. The exercise of discipline may take the form of admonition, rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership in the church or from office, deposition from office, or excommunication, as the gravity of the offense in the opinion of the judicatory may warrant. Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings. All further steps of discipline—suspension, deposition, and excommunication—are judicial in nature and require the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory.

Article 1 provides a definition of “discipline.” The authority exercised by any judicatory is given only by God. The judicatory is responsible to the accuser, the accused, the church, and Jesus Christ.

The exercise of discipline may begin informally. The body exercising informal discipline may never have to resort to Chapter 2 of the Book of Church Order. Many times an assembly addresses discipline issues through its executive committee, pastoral relations committee, or judicial business committee. However, only admonition and rebuke may be imposed without implementing the provisions of Chapter 2, Part I of the BCO as a formal judicatory. (A body is an “assembly” for non-judicial proceedings. An “assembly” becomes a “judicatory” when it enters into judicial proceedings.)

When a judicatory conducts a trial, Robert’s Rules of Order do not apply. The administrative rules established in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 11a and the other rules throughout Chapter 2, Part I govern the proceeding.

The deletion of the words “and trial” allows for an issue to be settled short of a formal trial.

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2. Nature of Offenses

Sec. 1. 2. Private Offenses are those which are known at most to a very few persons. They shall be dealt with first in the manner indicated by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 18:15-17. If this procedure fails, the matter shall be presented to the judicatory to which the offender is amenable.
Sec. 23. Public offenses are those of a notorious and scandalous nature. Offenses require immediate action by the responsible judicatory shall take immediate cognizance of a public offense.

Sec. 24. Those only matters only shall to be considered as offenses, or subject to accusation, are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America, or which are sins or offenses which cause their perpetrators to become dishonorable in reputation before the world.

Article 2 defines offenses requiring discipline. Because the distinction between “public” and “private” is open to interpretation, and “public” or “private” offenses do not necessarily require different discipline procedures, the terms are deleted. It is the responsibility of the judicatory to define “notorious” or “scandalous.” Some “notorious” or “scandalous” situations may require immediate attention such as closing the pulpit (see commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 3b below), and formal proceedings addressing these situations occur later. In such situations, it is assumed that the judicatory will appoint a committee to investigate the situation(s) and under appropriate circumstances file a charge.

The procedure outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 does not always apply for all offenses. Under certain circumstances, it may be difficult or impossible for the offended party to face the offender (see also commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 7 below). In the case of such an offense, as well as with other offenses not lending themselves to the procedures outlined in Matthew 18:15-17, Article 2 applies.

Because the phrase “dishonorable in reputation before the world” is difficult to define and is subject to varied interpretation, the phrase is deleted. A situation that violates Holy Scriptures or the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America is sufficient for a judicatory to take action.

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3. Responsibilities for Discipline

Sec. 1. Discipline of a Member

All members of a local church are under the care of that church and are subject to its government and discipline, as administered by its board of elders. The board of elders may suspend from the privileges of membership in the church a member who persistently rejects its admonitions or rebukes. If a member fails to show marks of repentance after suspension, the board of elders may, with permission of the classis, proceed to excommunication. The board of elders shall publicly notify the congregation of its intention to excommunicate, and later, of its final action. If the board chooses to may omit such public notification, if in its judgment, the such omission will not impair the purposes of discipline and will best serve the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Such omission shall require a two-thirds vote of the board of elders.
The word "rebukes" is added to make it consistent with Chapter 2, Article 1, Section 2 above. The requirement of notification is not new (see also commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 14 below). The civil courts generally are in agreement not to interfere with ecclesiastical courts, provided these ecclesiastical courts follow their respective church orders. This Section 1 assumes that a board of elders is concerned for both the welfare of the member and of the congregation.

Sec. 2. Discipline of an Elder or Deacon

The board of elders shall have jurisdiction in the case of a charge against an elder or deacon. If convicted the charge is proven, the elder or deacon may be suspended or deposed from office, or from the privileges of membership in the church, or from both together with such other discipline as may be imposed in accordance with Section 1 of this article.

The discipline of an elder or deacon in this Section 2 refers to the "office" of elder or deacon. If a minister is serving as an elder or deacon, the minister (serving as elder or deacon) may be disciplined only by the classis (see Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 3a below and commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 3c below).

Sec. 3. Discipline of a Minister of Word and Sacrament

a. Ministers are under the care of the classis and are subject to its government and discipline.

b. The consistory has the right to close the pulpit to a minister who has been charged accused of with any public sin or gross notorious or scandalous offense which would render appearance in the pulpit inexpedient or offensive inappropriate. Proceedings of the consistory in such a case are at its peril, but are undertaken to prevent scandal. This action is not to be considered a trial. The consistory must report its action to the classis immediately.

The terms "public sin or gross" are deleted and the terms "notorious or scandalous" are added in order to be consistent with the definition of offenses in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2 above.

When a consistory "closes a pulpit," this is an immediate and short-term action only (see commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1 above).

c. The classis shall have exclusive jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a minister. If convicted the charge is proven, the minister may be suspended or deposed from office, or suspended from the privileges of membership in the church, and/or from both excommunicated.

The word "exclusive" is added to make it very clear that only the classis has authority to discipline a minister (see Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 3a above). Also, as noted in the commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 2 above, only classis may administer discipline to a minister who is serving as an elder or deacon.
A minister may apply for demission (see Chapter I, Part II, Article 13, Section 12a). However, demission is not the exercise of discipline. When demission occurs, the classis must keep a record of the facts and circumstances surrounding demission (see commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 4c below).

Sec. 4. Discipline of a General Synod Professor of Theology

Professors of theology are under the care of the General Synod and are subject to its government and discipline. The General Synod shall have jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a professor of theology. If convicted the charge is proven, the professor of theology may be suspended or deposed from the Office of General Synod Professor of Theology or the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament or both, or suspended from the privileges of membership in the church, and/or from both excommunicated.

Although a minister is amenable to classis (Chapter I, Part II, Article 13, Section 2), a General Synod professor of theology is amenable to the General Synod (Chapter I, Part IV, Article 8). As stated in this Section 4, the General Synod may suspend or depose a General Synod professor of theology from the Office of General Synod Professor of Theology and/or the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Sec. 5. Discipline of a Consistory

Consistories are under the care of the classis and are subject to its government and discipline. A classis has the authority, after due process and trial, to suspend or depose from office a consistory accused of unfaithfulness to duty, or of disobedience to the classis, or of violation of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America; or of the laws and regulations of the church. If a consistory is deposed from office suspended, all of its members shall be disqualified for re-election until the classis has removed the disqualification. The classis shall fulfill the duties responsibilities of the consistory (including those of the boards of elders and deacons) so deposed suspended until a new consistory has been legally constituted.

The deletion of the words "due process" is an attempt of the task force to forego (throughout Chapter 2) the usage of common civil law phrases or legalisms. This deletion also makes this Section 5 consistent with the other sections 1-4 in this Article 3 (see also commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 11e below).

The classis has authority only to suspend a consistory and not to depose a consistory, since a consistory is not an office.

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4. Presentation of Procedure for Bringing a Charge

This Article 4 outlines the procedure for handling a charge. A new Formulary I1 (see below) is the form to use for the charge. An accusation or an allegation becomes a charge upon compliance with this Article 4.
Sec. 2. Persons accused of an offense A charge may be brought for trial by an individual accusation or on-the-initiative who is subject to the jurisdiction of the responsible judicatory. Proceedings by individual accusation If the charge is brought by an individual, it must be signed by and made in the name of the accuser or accusers individual who must come forward openly to support the charge(s) throughout the proceedings. Individual accusations shall be admitted only if they are signed by persons subject to the jurisdiction of the judicatory.

Either an individual or a committee of the judicatory (see Section 3 below) may begin the process of bringing a charge(s). If a charge(s) is brought by an individual, the individual accuser must be subject to the discipline of that judicatory or a lower judicatory within its bounds. This restriction holds the individual accuser to the same standards of discipline as the individual accused and thereby minimizes the possibility of a frivolous or malicious charge(s). The individual accuser is responsible for supporting and proving the charge(s). If the individual accuser is not within the jurisdiction of the judicatory, lacks capacity to bring the charge(s), or chooses not to bring the charge(s), then the matter may be referred to a committee of the judicatory (standing committee, ad hoc committee, or committee of one), and this committee may bring the charge(s).

The factual foundation for the charge(s) must be the same whether the charge(s) is brought by an individual or by a committee of the judicatory.

Sec. 2. A charge is a written accusation of an offensive behavior filed with the clerk of the responsible judicatory specifying the name of the accused, the nature of the alleged offense, and the time, place, and attendant circumstances of the alleged offensive behavior. (For the form of the charge, see Appendix No. 1). The clerk of the judicatory shall provide a copy of the charge to the accused within three days of its receipt.

“Provide” means reasonable efforts to deliver, such as hand delivery or certified mail.

Sec. 3. The testimony of more than one witness shall be required in admitting accusations. If two or more witnesses bear testimony each to different acts of the same general nature, this shall be considered sufficient to support the accusation. A committee designated by the responsible judicatory may also bring a charge.

Sec. 4. If filed by an individual, the charge shall be referred to a committee appointed by the judicatory to determine whether there is sufficient merit to the charge to warrant further consideration. If a charge is filed by the committee designated by the judicatory, that same committee shall continue its proceedings to determine whether there is sufficient merit to the charge to warrant further consideration. In either case, in making this determination, the committee:

The members of this committee will not be part of the deliberations at trial (see Chapter 2, Part 1, Article 5, Section 6 below). The committee may be a standing committee, ad hoc committee, or committee of one.
This Section 4 outlines the criteria for determining sufficient merit to a charge(s). The committee of the judicatory may determine that even if a charge(s) is true, there should not be discipline.

a. May interview the accuser, the accused, or any witnesses.

b. Shall consider the number and credibility of witnesses and the length of time between the occurrence of the alleged offense and the date when allegations were made. The judicatory shall dismiss a written charge if the alleged offensive behavior occurred more than two years prior to the date of the charge, the charge shall be dismissed by the committee except when it shall appear the committee concludes that circumstances prevented the accusation from being brought earlier.

In considering the dismissal of charges because of failure to bring the charge(s) within two years of occurrence, the burden is on the accuser to show what circumstances prevented the accuser from bringing the charge(s) earlier.

c. Shall determine whether efforts to resolve the matter short of trial would be appropriate. Such efforts may include mediation, admission by the accused that the charge is true and acceptance of appropriate sanctions, or any other disposition to which the committee and the accused may agree. Any demission, suspension, deposition, or excommunication must be approved by the appropriate judicatory.

Mediation must include the accuser and the accused.

If the investigation of a charge(s) results in demission from office, the record must reflect the nature of the charge(s) in order to provide some history of why the demission occurred (see commentary following Chapter 1, Part I, Article 3, Section 3c above).

Sec. 5. The committee shall conduct its work in a confidential manner in order to protect the reputations of all persons involved and to preserve the impartiality of the judicatory if the charge moves forward.

Sec. 56. The judicatory shall determine whether there is sufficient merit in the charge to warrant further consideration. If there is not, the judicatory shall dismiss the charge. If there is sufficient merit, the judicatory shall proceed to try the charge. If the charge is not otherwise resolved, and the committee determines there is sufficient merit in the charge, the judicatory shall proceed to trial. If there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge by the judicatory.

Section 6 gives the committee of the judicatory great authority, including the authority to dismiss a charge(s) or to arrive at a negotiated agreement or to determine sufficient merit to have the judicatory proceed to trial.
This committee of the judicatory is necessary to preserve the objectivity of the judicatory in the trial process. By having a committee of the judicatory (instead of the entire judicatory) determine whether there is sufficient merit for proceeding to trial, the judicatory that later must weigh the evidence at trial is shielded from early knowledge of this evidence. Hearing this evidence prior to the trial could prejudice the judicatory's decision at trial. The members of the committee of the judicatory at the trial do not participate in the deliberation or decision (see Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 6 below). This separation of functions between the committee of the judicatory and the judicatory as a whole is essential to the appearance of fundamental fairness in the process.

If a member of the judicatory or the accuser is dissatisfied with the decision of the committee of the judicatory, a new charge(s) may be filed.

Sec. 7. The action of the committee shall be reported to the judicatory.

It is sufficient for the committee of the judicatory to report to the judicatory that a charge(s) was investigated and found to be without merit without reporting the details of the charge(s).

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5. Trying a Charge

At all times during the trial the parties are to act with fundamental fairness.

Sec. 1. The clerk of the judicatory shall issue a citation (for the form of the citation to an accused person or consistory, see Appendix, No. 12) signed by the president and clerk, requesting the accused to appear before the judicatory at a specified time and place. The citation and a copy of the charge shall be given or provided to the accused.

The clerk of the judicatory issues the citation and provides a copy of the citation to the accused by whatever means is fair.

Sec. 2. The accused shall file a written reply to the charge with the clerk within ten twenty days of the receipt. If the accused acknowledges guilt or fails to file a reply to the charge, the judicatory shall impose the appropriate discipline.

This Section 2 gives the accused twenty days to respond rather than ten days. Also, the accused may wish to end the process and accept the discipline of the judicatory. There is no need then to proceed to trial.

Sec. 3. The judicatory shall try the charge within thirty days of the filing of the reply, unless the trial is postponed to a later date by consent of the parties and the judicatory involved.

Sec. 4. The judicatory may try the charge, even though the accused is not present, if it is satisfied that proper notice was given provided.

Sec. 5. The clerk of the judicatory shall issue citations to persons who are requested to appear as witnesses for or against the accused and, at the same time, shall provide a
list of the witnesses to all parties. Persons who have not received a witness citation may be permitted to testify at the trial, if their testimony is desired by a party to the case and the presiding officer concludes that to allow the testimony is not fundamentally unfair.

Sec. 6. Neither the accuser, nor the accused, counsel for any party, witnesses, clerk of the judicatory, members of the committee of the judicatory as described in Article 4, nor any person with a conflict of interest shall act as a member participate in the deliberation or the decision of the judicatory at any stage of the trial. Nor shall any person who is a voting member of a board of elders, consistory, classis, or regional synod which is a party in said trial act as a member of the judicatory.

The persons listed in this Section 6 are not allowed to participate in the deliberation or in the decision of the judicatory at trial. However, these persons may participate in the imposition of discipline (see commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 4 above and Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 13 below).

Sec. 7. Unless the accused refuses or fails to appear after proper notice, witnesses shall be examined in the presence of the accused. The accused shall be permitted to cross-examine adverse witnesses. No affidavits shall be admitted.

Fairness requires witnesses to be examined in the presence of the accused. The new Section 8 below allows the taking of testimony outside of trial. There is a particular concern when minor children are witnesses. In these instances, the judicatory must determine the appropriate means of protecting both the accused and the witnesses. “In the presence” may include the use of screens, video testimony, or other means fair to both the accused and the witnesses (see commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2 above and the new Section 8 below).

Sec. 8. Testimony shall be recorded, transcribed; A verbatim record of the trial, including the judgment, shall be preserved and entered into the records of the judicatory together with its judgment. Parties to the case shall be given reasonable access to the record.

Sec. 9. The judicatory may, at its discretion, appoint a commission committee to take testimony of a party or witness at a location other than that of the place of hearing, upon request of any party. Ten days’ notice shall be given to all parties of the appointment and membership of the commission committee and of the time and place of its meeting. The parties shall examine the witness(es) and shall have the right of cross-examination.

(See commentary for Section 7 above and see also commentary for Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2 above.)

Sec. 10. Only ministers or elders of the Reformed Church in America may serve as counsel. Parties and the judicatory may be represented by counsel of their own choosing.
provided that such counsel is a minister, elder, or confessing member of the Reformed Church in America. Counsel shall not be compensated for their time or efforts but may be reimbursed for expenses.

Counsel does not need to be an attorney. Counsel does not make decisions, but gives advice. Allowing confessing members of the Reformed Church in America to be counsel rather than limiting counsel only to ministers or elders increases the availability of counsel to all parties. Authorization for counsel to be reimbursed for expenses is added to reduce the burden on counsel.

Sec. 11. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating at length the reasons therefor. Procedural Rules

This Section 11 provides direction for procedures to follow at trial. Even if the accused pleads guilty, the judicatory must still render a decision and impose discipline (see Section 12 and Section 13 below). (This Section 11 and Sections 12-13 below clarify the steps of discipline.)

A sample trial format procedure is available upon request to the Office of the General Synod.

a. The judicatory shall establish such administrative rules for the trial as it deems appropriate to ensure that the trial will be conducted in a fair and impartial manner.

Sec. 12 b. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person connected with the case, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any charges before the final disposition of same, including appeals, if any.

c. The required quorum for a judicatory conducting a trial shall be the same as is required for a regular or stated session of that assembly.

d. The accuser shall be responsible for moving forward with the evidence.

e. The charge(s) must be proven with a high degree of probability.

Currently the Book of Church Order sets no standard of proof. The "high degree of probability" gives definition and uniformity to the standard of proof. This standard was deliberately chosen by the task force so as to avoid the use of "legal terms," since the trial under this Article 5 is an ecclesiastical proceeding and not a criminal or civil proceeding (see also commentary following Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 5 above)."High degree of probability" is the standard definition of the legal term "clear and convincing evidence."

f. Receipt of evidence shall not be controlled by formal rules of evidence. However, the presiding officer may exclude any evidence if the officer determines that to admit such evidence would be fundamentally unfair.

g. The only persons who may attend the trial are the parties, their counsel, the members of the judicatory, and such other persons as the judicatory deems appropriate.
"Such other persons" may include the counsel for the judicatory.

h. Only members of the judicatory shall be present for the deliberation on the evidence. However, the counsel for the judicatory, if any, may be present.

Council for the judicatory acts as an advisor and does not represent either the accused or the accuser.

Sec. 12. Decision

a. The vote on whether the charge(s) has been proven shall be by written ballot. A simple majority of those present and voting shall be required to reach a decision.

b. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating the reasons therefor. A copy shall be provided to the parties.

Sec. 13. Imposition of Discipline

a. The judicatory shall impose such discipline as is appropriate for the offense and as is consistent with the Holy Scriptures and the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

(See commentary for Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 6 above.)

b. The judicatory shall record its actions, stating the reasons therefor. A copy shall be provided to the parties.

Sec. 14. The recorded decision and the disciplinary action shall be made available upon request to other assemblies within the Reformed Church in America and other appropriate ecclesiastical bodies. In addition, the judicatory, at its discretion, may distribute the recorded decision and disciplinary action to assemblies within the Reformed Church in America.

This Section 14 is added to clarify distribution of the decision by the judicatory. Without this Section 14, a judicatory may be concerned about liability in the civil courts for damage to the reputation of the individual disciplined. To conceal the decision may cause further harm to the church at large. Under this Section 14, the judicatory must take whatever action is necessary in order to honor the Lord Jesus Christ and to help heal all those involved (see also Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 1 above and commentary that follows).

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 6. Restoration and Reinstatement

Sec. 1. A member who has been suspended or excommunicated may be restored to the privileges of membership in the church upon repentance expressed before the judicatory to which amenable suspended or excommunicated the member. If public notice of the judgment of excommunication had been given, due public notice of reinstatement shall also be given the congregation.
Sec. 2. A person who has been suspended or deposed from office may be restored to office upon repentance and renewal of vows before the judicatory which suspended or deposed that person, provided that the judicatory is satisfied that the honor of the office will not be impaired and that the welfare of the church will be served by such a restoration, and provided that the restoration is approved by a two-thirds vote of those present at the meeting of the judicatory. Restoration after deposition shall include reordination to office.

Restoration and reinstatement occur only through the judicatory that imposed the discipline.

Complaints and Appeals

To avoid confusion in the complaint and appeal process, the existing Chapter 2, Part II of the Book of Church Order is divided into Part II for complaints and Part III for appeals. Part III is substantially the same language as in the existing Part II of the Book of Church Order. It is not a significant rewrite.

Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1. Nature of Complaints

Sec. 1. A complaint is a written statement alleging that an action or a decision of an assembly or officer of the church has violated or failed to comply with the Book of Church Order Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or other laws and regulations of the church.

Sec. 2. A complaint may be filed only with the judicatory that has immediate superintendence of the assembly or officer.

Sec. 3. A complaint may be filed only by:

a. One or more confessing members in good and regular standing against the consistory or board of elders having superintendence over them.

b. One or more members of an assembly against that assembly of which they are members.

c. An assembly against that assembly having immediate superintendence over it.

Sec. 4. Neither notice of intent to complain nor the complaint itself shall have the effect of suspending the action against which the complaint is made, unless within thirty days one-third of the members of the assembly complained against who were present when the action was taken file a request for such suspension until a decision is made in the higher judicatory.
Chapter 2, Part II, Article 3.2. Process for Complaints and Appeals

Sec. 1. Written notice of intent to complain or appeal shall be filed with the an officer or with the clerk of the assembly or judicatory which took the action in question. This filing shall be completed not later than twenty days after having received official notification of the action taken. In default of this requirement, the case shall not be heard.

Sec. 2. The complaint or appeal and the reasons therefor shall be filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory within twenty days after the filing of notice of intent. In default of this requirement, the complaint shall be considered to be dismissed and the clerk of the higher judicatory shall notify the parties involved.

Sec. 3. Within this same period the clerk of the lower judicatory assembly shall file with the clerk of the higher judicatory the original record of all the proceedings in the case pertaining to the complaint, including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments and any other documents bearing on the case complaint. These constitute the record of the case. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall forward upon receipt to each of the parties a copy of the record of the case and all documents subsequently submitted in the case to the higher judicatory. In cases of appeal, the higher judicatory shall not admit or consider as evidence anything not found in this record without consent of the parties in the case. If the clerk of the lower judicatory does not deliver these papers within the specified time, the clerk may be ordered by the higher judicatory to show cause why there should not be censure for such failure.

Sec. 3.4. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall, upon receiving the record of the case, promptly notify its judicial business committee, call a meeting of the committee at a suitable time and place, and give notice of such meeting to all the parties involved. The committee shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The committee shall promptly advise the several parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to correct such irregularities. The committee may request further written response or arguments to be submitted within the same twenty days. If less than thirty days remain before the next regular session of the judicatory to which the committee is to report and the committee determines that it is unable to prepare an acceptable report, it shall immediately record this determination and the reasons therefor with the clerk of such judicatory and request permission to delay its report until the next session. The clerk shall promptly confer with the officers of the judicatory who shall promptly rule upon the request.
Sec. 4. If the case is in proper order, the committee shall then consider its merits. It shall consider the record of the case and such additional arguments as may have been submitted. It shall also hear the original parties together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties, together and approved by the committee as complying with Counsel shall meet the qualifications set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 10. This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner with all parties present. If both an appellant and counsel or the complainant in person or by counsel for the same fails to appear, the committee may declare the case to be defaulted.

Sec. 5. The committee shall report in writing its findings and recommendations to its parent judicatory by a date determined by the parent judicatory prior to the next stated meeting or a special meeting and shall simultaneously therewith furnish a copy of its report to each of the parties. Within twenty days thereafter, any party may submit to the clerk of the judicatory a written response to the committee’s report. The clerk shall distribute copies of the committee’s report and any responses received to the members of the judicatory. After receiving the report of the committee and the responses thereto, the judicatory may request to hear the original parties in the case with their counsel. The report recommendation(s) of the committee may be adopted, rejected, amended, or referred back to the committee. The judicatory may confirm or reverse, in whole or in part, the judgment action of the lower judicatory or assembly, or remand the case matter to it with instructions.

Sec. 6. Persons who have voted on a case the matter in a lower judicatory assembly or who have prepared or conducted that case a conflict of interest shall not vote upon the case in a higher judicatory.

Sec. 7. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating at length the reasons therefor.

Sec. 8. When a complaint is filed, the complainant has the burden of moving forward and proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the respondent has violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or other laws and regulations of the church. A standard of review, “preponderance of the evidence,” is added to provide uniformity and clarity. This is the standard that has been used by the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business.

Sec. 9. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person submitting to the jurisdiction thereof connected with the matter, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any complaints before the final disposition of same, including appeals, if any.
Sec. 811. No complaint or appeal can be taken against any action or decision of the General Synod.

Appeals

Chapter 2, Part H III, Article 2.1. Nature of an Appeal

Sec. 1. An appeal is the transfer to a higher judicatory of a complaint, a charge, or an appeal on which judgment has been rendered in a lower judicatory. The right of appeal belongs to either of the original parties in a case. That right may be exercised when a party considers itself to be aggrieved or injured by a judgment of a judicatory.

Sec. 2. The grounds of appeal include such matters as the following: irregularity in the proceedings of the lower judicatory; refusal of reasonable indulgence to a party on trial; receiving improper, or declining to receive proper, evidence; rendering a decision before all the testimony is taken; manifestation of bias or prejudice in the case; and manifest injustice in the judgment.

Sec. 3. Notice of intent to appeal suspends the judgment of the lower judicatory until the appeal is finally decided. But when the judgment which is appealed from results in suspension, deposition from office, or excommunication, the person against whom the judgment has been pronounced shall be required to refrain from the sacrament of Holy Communion the Lord's Supper and from the exercise of office until the appeal is finally decided, unless exception is made in the judgment of the lower judicatory.

Sec. 4. The regional synod shall be the final court of appeal for all cases originally heard by a board of elders. However, the General Synod may hear such an appeal if one delegate to the regional synod from each of the classes in that regional synod, with the exception of the classis from whose action the appeal is taken, shall give written notice to the clerk of the regional synod within thirty days of its adjournment that there is just cause for appealing a case to the General Synod.

Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2. Process for Appeals

Sec. 1. Written notice of intent to appeal shall be filed with an officer or with the clerk of the judicatory which took the action in question. This filing shall be completed not later than twenty days after having received official notification of the action taken. In default of this requirement, the appeal shall not be heard.
Sec. 2. The appeal and the reasons therefor shall be filed with the clerk of the higher judicatory within twenty days after the filing of notice of intent. In default of this requirement, the appeal shall be considered to be dismissed and the clerk of the higher judicatory shall notify the parties involved.

Sec. 3. Within this same period the clerk of the lower judicatory shall file with the clerk of the higher judicatory the original record of all the proceedings in the case, including the notice of intent, the evidence, the arguments, and any other documents bearing on the case. These constitute the record of the case. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall forward upon receipt to each of the parties a copy of the record of the case and all documents subsequently submitted in the case to the higher judicatory. The higher judicatory shall not admit or consider as evidence anything not found in this record without consent of the parties.

Sec. 4. The clerk of the higher judicatory shall, upon receiving the record of the case, promptly notify its judicial business committee, call a meeting of the committee at a suitable time and place, and give notice of such meeting to all the parties involved. The committee shall determine whether the case and its attendant papers are in order. The committee shall promptly advise the several parties if it finds any irregularities. A period of not more than twenty days shall be allowed to correct such irregularities. The committee may request further written response or arguments. If less than thirty days remain before the next regular session of the judicatory to which the committee is to report and the committee determines that it is unable to prepare an acceptable report, it shall immediately record this determination and the reasons therefor with the clerk of such judicatory and request permission to delay its report until the next session. The clerk shall promptly confer with the officers of the judicatory who shall promptly rule upon the request.

Sec. 5. If the case is in proper order, the committee shall then consider its merits. It shall consider the record of the case and such additional arguments as may have been submitted. It shall also hear the original parties, together with such counsel as may be requested by the parties. Counsel shall meet the qualifications set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 10. This hearing shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner. Either party may elect not to appear in person or by counsel at the hearing.

Sec. 6. The committee shall report in writing its findings and recommendations to its parent judicatory by a date determined by the parent judicatory prior to
the next stated meeting or a special meeting and shall furnish a copy of its report to each of the parties. After receiving the report of the committee, the judicatory may request to hear the original parties in the case with their counsel. The recommendation(s) of the committee may be adopted, rejected, amended, or referred back to the committee. The judicatory may confirm or reverse, in whole or in part, the decision of the lower judicatory or assembly, or remand the case to it with instructions.

Sec. 7. Persons who have voted on the matter in a lower judicatory or assembly, or who have a conflict of interest shall not vote upon the appeal in a higher judicatory.

Sec. 8. The judicatory shall record its decision, stating the reasons therefor.

Sec. 9. When an appeal is filed, the appellant shall have the responsibility to establish that the lower judicatory erred in its decision.

Sec. 10. The judicatory hearing the appeal shall give deference to the decision of the lower judicatory, particularly in the matter of credibility of witnesses, and shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole.

A standard of review, "substantial evidence," is added to provide uniformity and clarity. This is the standard that has been used by the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business.

Sec. 11. No member or groups of the Reformed Church in America, nor any person connected with the case, shall circulate, or cause to be circulated, any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any appeals before the final disposition of same.

Sec. 12. No appeal can be taken from any decision of the General Synod.

The Formularies of the Reformed Church in America

New No. 11. (Current No. 11 and No. 12 renumbered)

No. 11. Charge

REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

NAME OF THE ACCUSER
From the Report of The Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund, Inc.

ADDITIONS TO CHURCH BUILDING FUND AND EXTENSION FOUNDATION FUND LOAN PROGRAMS, AND AMENDMENTS OF BYLAWS

Introduction.

In its continuing efforts to be responsive to the needs of RCA congregations, the board of directors of the Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund, Inc. (RCABEF) concluded that additional features should be added to its existing Church Building Fund (CBF) and Extension Foundation Fund (EFF) loan programs. The RCABEF board reached this conclusion only after consulting with, and receiving valuable input from, the General Synod Council (GSC) and the Council of Field Secretaries (COFS). During the consultation process careful consideration was given to: 1) the current structure and operation of the CBF and EFF loan programs of RCABEF, and 2) the issues and opportunities that lie before RCABEF.
In order to add the new features, the bylaws of RCABEF must be amended. Those bylaws provide that any such amendment must be proposed by the RCABEF board and then may be adopted by the RCABEF board only if it is approved by the General Synod Council and the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. The General Synod Council approved the proposed amendments at its April 1997 meeting.

This report does the following: 1) briefly summarizes the current structure and operation of RCABEF's CBF and EFF loan programs, 2) discusses some of the issues and opportunities that are before RCABEF, 3) describes the proposed additions to RCABEF's current loan programs that RCABEF, in consultation with GSC and COFS, believes are necessary, and 4) recommends amendments to RCABEF's bylaws which, if adopted, will enable RCABEF to add the proposed new features.

**Background.**

Generally, funds from CBF are loaned to pay the cost of constructing a first structure for worship purposes. Generally, funds from EFF are loaned to pay the cost of constructing a subsequent facility such as an education facility or a more formal worship facility (e.g., a sanctuary) when the original worship facility is converted to some other use.

Originally, CBF was administered by the Board of North American Missions of the Reformed Church in America. Through a series of mergers in 1968, responsibility for administration of the CBF was transferred from the Board of North American Missions to the Trustees of the General Program Council. In 1993 the Trustees of the General Program Council of the Reformed Church in America changed its name to the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America.

Since its creation in 1958, EFF has been administered by a New York not-for-profit corporation called the Reformed Church in America—Extension Foundation, Inc. In 1994 the General Synod voted to consolidate the administration of CBF and EFF (MGS 1994, R-13, p. 233). To effect this policy, a number of actions were taken, including changing the name of the Reformed Church in America—Extension Foundation, Inc. to the Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund, Inc., and transferring from GSC to RCABEF all assets related to CBF, as well as responsibility for the ongoing operation and administration of CBF. As a result of the foregoing, both CBF and EFF are now administered by RCABEF. As an accounting matter, however, the two funds remain separate.

**Issues and Opportunities.**

As the single board responsible for the operation and administration of both CBF and EFF loan funds, RCABEF receives various loan requests from many different sources. Unfortunately, given the stated purpose of RCABEF (namely, to "support the work of the General Synod Council of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America by rendering financial assistance in the erection of church buildings" [Bylaws of The Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund, Inc., Article IIA]) and the requirements that must be satisfied before a loan can be made, some loans, though for worthy purposes, simply cannot be made. The following are a few examples:

1. The Way Out Ministries (TWOM) provides a Christian alternative for youth in the Hawaiian Gardens area of Los Angeles County, California. It offers weekly programs in counseling and tutoring and sponsors clubs for children and young people. It also offers assistance in meeting human needs. Recently, having outgrown rented facilities on two prior occasions, its board determined that a facility should be purchased. An excellent facility was located. TWOM asked RCABEF whether loan funds were available to finance a portion of the purchase price. Because the building was not a
“church building” (as that phrase has been traditionally understood), RCABEF had no choice but inform TWOM that, although adequate funds existed in the CBF and EFF loan funds, these funds could not be loaned to TWOM.

2. The Warwick Center in Warwick, New York, is jointly owned by the regional synods of the Mid-Atlantics and New York. It is repairing and remodeling several of its buildings and has sought financing to pay a portion of the cost of the project. Commercial lenders have been reluctant to make loans to the Warwick Center, even at standard commercial rates. Consequently, the Warwick Center sought loans from assemblies within the RCA family. The Trustees of the General Program Council (the GSC's predecessor) agreed to make a short-term "bridge" loan but was unable to commit to long-term financing. RCABEF has the ability to make a long-term loan but is precluded from making it to the Warwick Center because, as with TWOM, the buildings are not "church buildings."

3. A small church (rural or urban) is able to meet its monthly financial obligations but is unable to save money for future maintenance, repair, or replacement obligations. During the winter months its furnace becomes inoperative. Repairs must be made promptly, but the church does not have the money to pay for them. Although a loan could be made from either the CBF or EFF, it is not practical to do so because of the time it would take to obtain the necessary recommendations and approvals.

RCABEF has also taken note of the proposals made by the general secretary in his report to the 1996 General Synod, especially those related to new church development in urban areas (with various models for different economic, cultural, and ethnic settings) and to the revitalization of existing congregations (MGS 1996, P-2, p. 46). As the RCA develops visions, plans and strategies that address these vital issues, funding will be needed. Such funding can take the form of loans, grants, or some combination of the two, and can come from any number of sources. One potential source of loan funds is RCABEF. As its loan programs are currently established, however, it may not be possible to make loans for some vitally important projects, despite the availability of loan funds.

Proposed Additions to Current Loan Programs.

In light of issues and opportunities such as those set forth above, the RCABEF board, in consultation with GSC and COFS, concluded that certain additions should be made to its existing loan programs. The additions are as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of Addition</th>
<th>Additions Affecting CBF Fund</th>
<th>Additions Affecting EFF Fund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loans to local churches or classes for restoration, repair, or replacement of existing capital items at local churches in the RCA (e.g., roof repair, furnace repair or replacement), but not for appearance-related items such as painting, landscaping, and similar items that are not essential to the continuing operation of the church.</td>
<td>Loans for the same purposes as CBF and EFF loans are available, except that the party for whose benefit the loan is made shall be an agency or instrumentality of the RCA (other than a local church or collegiate church) that is subject to the general supervision and oversight of the RCA or any of its regional synods or classes (e.g., camps, conference centers, educational institutions, broadcast and publication ministries, and other education, care, evangelism or outreach-oriented ministries).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Funds</th>
<th>A portion of the existing CBF funds, not to exceed $100,000.</th>
<th>A portion of the existing EFF funds, not to exceed $1,000,000.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Loan Amount</td>
<td>Not to exceed $10,000.</td>
<td>Not to exceed $300,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Loan Term</td>
<td>Five (5) years.</td>
<td>Twenty (20) years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Rates</td>
<td>The same interest rate structure as is in effect from time to time for other CBF loans.</td>
<td>The same interest rate structure as is in effect from time to time for other EFF loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Process</td>
<td>Final approval to be granted by a three-member body consisting of RCABEF's president, treasurer, and fund executive, and ratified by the full board at its next regularly scheduled board meeting. No prior recommendation of approval is required from the regional synod executive, Council of Field Secretaries, or Loan Evaluation Group (on behalf of the GSC).</td>
<td>The same as the existing approval process for EFF Loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents of Loan Application</td>
<td>Additions Affecting CBF Fund</td>
<td>Additions Affecting EFF Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name, address, and phone number of borrower; name, address, and phone number of contact person for borrower; amount requested; intended use of funds; a schedule of the borrower's other debt (by original amount, current balance, creditor, periodic payment amount, and maturity date); and the same membership and financial table which presently is a part of the RCABEF's standard loan application form.</td>
<td>The same as is in the application form used by the RCABEF for CBF and EFF loans, modified to the extent necessary to eliminate items which may not be applicable (e.g., congregational information).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loan Documentation and Closing Requirements</td>
<td>Promissory note; no mortgage or trust deed, title insurance, opinion letter, environmental audit, or similar items.</td>
<td>The same as are in effect from time to time for EFF loans.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To make the foregoing additions to RCABEF's existing loan programs, amendments to the RCABEF's bylaws are required. The proposed amendments to RCABEF's existing bylaws were submitted to the RCABEF's board members in writing prior to their regular meeting on February 24, 1997. At that meeting the RCABEF voted to forward them to the General Synod Council (approved by GSC at its April 1997 meeting) and to the 1997 General Synod for approval.

R-6. To adopt the following amendments to the Bylaws of the Reformed Church in America Building and Extension Fund, Inc. (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

**ARTICLE II PURPOSE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

B A. The corporation shall be the successor in interest to the Reformed Church in America Extension Foundation, Inc.; shall receive and manage its assets; shall assume its liabilities; shall establish a fund to be known as the Reformed Church in America Extension Foundation Fund of the Reformed Church in America; shall solicit monies for said fund from members, agencies, and instrumentalities of the Reformed Church in America by the issuance of notes and other evidences of indebtedness; and shall disburse said monies as loans to churches of the Reformed Church in America that are engaged in building or capital improvement programs and to other agencies or instrumentalities that are authorized by, and subject to, the general oversight of, the Reformed Church in America or any of its regional synods or classes and that are engaged in building or capital improvement programs.
B. The corporation shall be the successor in interest to the Church Building Fund of the Reformed Church in America; shall receive and manage its assets; shall assume its liabilities; shall establish a fund to be known as the Church Building Fund of the Reformed Church in America; shall solicit monies for said fund from members, agencies, and instrumentalities of the Reformed Church in America by gifts, bequests, and grants; and shall disburse said monies as loans to churches of the Reformed Church in America engaged in building or capital improvement programs.

C. The purpose of the corporation shall be to support the work of the General Synod Council of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America by rendering financial assistance in the erection or improvement of church buildings for 1) churches and 2) in the case of loans from the Extension Foundation Fund, other agencies or instrumentalities that are authorized by, and subject to, the general oversight of the Reformed Church in America or any of its regional synods or classes. The corporation shall function under the ecclesiastical authority of the Reformed Church in America through the General Synod Council.

D. The purpose of the corporation shall be fulfilled on a nonprofit basis, and no part of the corporation’s earnings shall inure to the benefit of any individual or organization; but such earnings may include reasonable charges designated for administrative services. It shall be understood that upon the dissolution of the corporation all of the assets, if any, remaining after payment of liabilities shall become the property of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America, or its successor. In the event that said organization is not then in existence and has not been succeeded by a qualifying corporation, then the property or net assets of the corporation shall be made available to other corporations located within the United States which qualify as tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service Code, subject to the approval of the Supreme Court of the State of New York.

E. The corporation shall have the authority to acquire, hold, and dispose of real property. Any and all real property acquired by the corporation through foreclosure of any mortgage or, deed of trust, or other lien, or through the exercise of any right of equity of redemption belonging to the corporation or in any way acquired by it, may be sold, conveyed, mortgaged, or otherwise transferred as in the ordinary course of business, by order of the Board of Directors.

F. The corporation shall consider all applications for loans only on the recommendation of 1) the classis of which the loan applicant is a member, and 2) in the case of loans with an original principal amount in excess of $10,000, the Council of Field Secretaries of the Reformed Church in America and the General Synod Council. The Board of Directors shall review for the determination of investment validity and act upon all
applications for loans and report its actions to the General Synod Council and the Council of Field Secretaries.

ARTICLE V  OFFICERS

A. The officers of the corporation shall be a president, a vice-president, an assistant vice-president, a secretary, an assistant secretary, and a treasurer. The president, vice-president, and secretary shall be elected by and from the directors. The Board of Directors shall designate the fund executive of the corporation as the assistant vice-president, shall designate the treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America as treasurer, and shall designate the assistant secretary of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America as assistant secretary. The board may elect such other officers as it may from time to time deem appropriate.

B. The officers, with the exceptions of the assistant vice-president, the treasurer and the assistant secretary, shall be elected for one-year terms and shall be eligible for no more than two consecutive terms.

ARTICLE VII  OPERATING PRINCIPLES

A. All loans with an original principal amount in excess of $10,000 made by the corporation in pursuit of its corporate purposes shall be made upon the security of deeds of trust or mortgages upon real property or improvements situated in, upon, or appurtenant thereto. Any and all such deeds of trust and mortgages may be made subordinate, however, to such liens, mortgages, and deeds of trust upon such property as the Board of Directors may deem appropriate. (ADOPTED)

From the Report of Western Theological Seminary

CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS FOR WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In its report presented to the 1992 General Synod, the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) Ad Hoc Committee on Services, Structures, and Funding suggested separate boards of trustees to govern each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church in America and a separate incorporated Board of Trustees for the Theological Education Agency (MGS 1992, p. 64). The 1992 General Synod instructed the RCA seminary boards and TEA to develop appropriate documents for separate governance of theological education (MGS 1992, R-24, p. 68). The 1993 General Synod adopted amendments of TEA’s bylaws to serve also as its constitution (MGS 1993, R-16, pp. 268-70), and the 1993 General Synod adopted a new constitution and bylaws for New Brunswick Theological Seminary (MGS 1993, R-16, pp. 270-78).
At present, the corporate entity in the State of Michigan still exists for Western Theological Seminary, but the corporation has no constitution and bylaws. The following constitution and bylaws for Western Theological Seminary were approved by its Board of Trustees at its February 11, 1997 meeting, for presentation to the 1997 General Synod for adoption.

R-7.
To adopt the following Constitution and Bylaws for Western Theological Seminary (additions are underlined):

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS

Article I

Name

Sec. 1 The name of this corporation shall be The Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America, hereinafter referred to as the Corporation.

Article II

Members

Sec. 1 The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, or its successor by any merger or consolidation, shall be the sole member of the Corporation for all purposes of the corporate statutes of Michigan. The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, acting in accordance with the governing law, shall exercise all rights granted to members by the laws of Michigan.

Sec. 2 The General Synod entrusts to the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary (hereinafter the "Board") all authority and power necessary for the proper oversight and direction of the seminary, as well as the control of its finances, securities, and property.

Sec. 3 The Board shall assume responsibility for providing the seminary with such property and buildings, information resources, equipment, and supplies as are necessary for the effective accomplishment of the seminary's mission.

Article III

Purpose

Sec. 1 The purpose or purposes of this Corporation are as follows: To maintain and operate a theological seminary for the purpose of providing courses of study in theology, religion, church history, and other subjects suitable for the training of men and women for the gospel ministry, and for the teaching of religion according to the doctrines and standards of the Reformed Church in America, as based on the Holy Scriptures. To acquire by purchase, gift, or otherwise,
property of every description, real and personal, for the use and benefit of said seminary; to exchange, sell, or dispose of the same and to do each and everything necessary, suitable, or proper for the accomplishment of the purpose herein stated or which shall at any time appear convenient for or conducive to the accomplishment of such purposes.

Article IV

Membership

Sec. 1 All members of the Board shall be confessing Christians who acknowledge a commitment to the authority of the Bible over all matters of faith and practice, the sovereignty of God, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. They also must be interested in and willing to give of their time and talents to further the mission of the Western Theological Seminary.

Sec. 2 The Board shall consist of a minimum of twelve and a maximum of twenty-four members who shall be elected for a term of three years beginning the first day of July following their election by the General Synod and continuing until the end of June when their successors have been elected. Members may serve two consecutive full terms, but shall be off the Board for two years before becoming eligible again for re-election to the Board.

Sec. 3 The membership of the Board shall at all times include one member from each of the regional synods of the Reformed Church in America. Members of the Board shall be elected by the General Synod upon recommendation of the Board of Trustees.

Sec. 4 The president of the Seminary shall be an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.

Sec. 5 One member of the faculty who is tenured or who holds the office of General Synod Professor of Theology shall be elected by the faculty to serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, as a member of the Board.

Sec. 6 The student council president shall serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.

Sec. 7 The general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, or a representative appointed by the general secretary, shall be an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.

Article V

Nomination and Election

Sec. 1 All trustees shall be recommended by the Board and elected by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America at its annual meeting or at any special meeting.
Sec. 2 The death, resignation, inactivity, or incompetence of a trustee (determined conclusively by the remaining trustees) shall create a vacancy. The transfer of a member to a classis or church outside the regional synod which the member represents shall create a vacancy. The disciplinary suspension or disciplinary termination of the membership of a trustee in his/her church or classis shall create a vacancy. Vacancies shall be filled for the remaining portion of the term by General Synod at any regular or special meeting.

Article VI

Meetings

Sec. 1 The Board shall meet at least three times per year. The annual meeting shall be in the spring. The date, time, and place of meetings shall be determined by the Trustee Affairs Committee. Written notice of each stated meeting shall be by mail, thirty days prior to the date of the meeting.

Sec. 2 Special meetings may be called by the moderator of the Board or by the officers. The moderator is obliged to call such a meeting if so requested in writing by any five members of the Board. If the moderator fails to call such meetings within ten days of such request, the secretary shall issue the call to meeting based on the members' written request. Written notice of special meetings, stating the nature of the business to be considered, shall be given to the trustees not less than ten days prior to each such meeting. No other business shall be considered at such special meetings except by two-thirds vote of those present at the meeting.

Sec. 3 A majority of all voting members of the Board shall constitute a quorum; but if there is less than a quorum present, the meeting may be adjourned from time to time. Motions may be passed by a majority of those present.

Sec. 4 The agenda shall be mailed to the trustees at least ten days prior to the meeting of the Board.

Sec. 5 Every meeting of the Board shall be opened and closed with prayer.

Sec. 6 The Board may meet in executive session for a portion of any business meeting at which time only voting trustees shall be present unless the Board shall expressly invite other persons to be present.
Article VII

Officers

Sec. 1 The elected officers of the Board shall consist of a moderator, a vice-moderator, a secretary, and a treasurer, all of whom shall be members of the Board.

Sec. 2 The president of the seminary shall serve as the chief executive officer of the Corporation.

Sec. 3 Officers shall be elected from the membership of the Board at its annual meeting.

Sec. 4 The term of each office shall begin July 1, and shall be for one year or until successors are elected and properly qualified. A vacancy in any office shall be filled at the next regular or special meeting of the Board.

Sec. 5 The officers of the Board will discharge the duties which ordinarily pertain to those offices.

Sec. 6 In the event of the death or disability of both the moderator and the vice-moderator, the Executive Committee shall appoint a member of the Board to serve as moderator until the next annual meeting of the Board.

Sec. 7 The president of the seminary shall be elected by a majority of the Board by secret ballot.

Article VIII

Duties Of Officers

Sec. 1 The moderator shall call and preside at all regular and special meetings of the Board, shall be an ex-officio member of all committees of the Board, and shall perform such other duties and exercise such other powers as usually pertain to the office. The moderator shall be entitled to vote on all matters coming before the Board for decision.

Sec. 2 The vice-moderator shall assist the moderator in the performance of the duties of the office of moderator, and in the absence of the moderator, shall perform all the duties and exercise all powers of that office. The vice-moderator shall be responsible for worship and new member orientation.

Sec. 3 The secretary shall keep a true and accurate record of all proceedings of the Board, a separate minute book for all actions taken in executive session, and perform such other duties as usually pertain to the office.
Sec. 4 The treasurer or his/her agent shall be the fiscal officer of the corporation and shall be responsible for the proper custody of all corporate funds and securities. The treasurer shall be responsible for making certain that proper books of account setting forth all corporate receipts, disbursements, and assets are kept and shall be responsible for making certain that all corporate funds are deposited in such banks and other depositories as the Board shall designate. The treasurer shall be bonded with the premium being paid by the seminary. The treasurer shall also perform such other duties as may be directed by the Board.

Sec. 5 The president of the seminary shall be the chief executive officer of the Corporation whose duties shall include the position description as adopted by the Board and the provisions of the contract at the time of employment.

Article IX

Committees

Sec. 1 The Board has established the following standing committees: Executive, Trustee Affairs, Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Advancement, and Financial Affairs. The Board may establish such committees as it deems necessary to carry out the business of the seminary.

Sec. 2 The Executive Committee shall consist of the officers of the Board. The Executive Committee is empowered to conduct all the business of the Board between its stated meetings, with the exception that the Executive Committee shall not be empowered to elect members, amend the Articles of Incorporation or the Bylaws, or change the mission of the institution. Further, its actions are to be reviewed and ratified by the Board at its next meeting. Also, the Executive Committee shall be responsible for the annual performance review of the president of the seminary with recommendation to the full Board regarding compensation. When vacancies on the Executive Committee occur, they shall be filled by election by the remaining members of the Executive Committee. They shall serve until the next annual meeting.

Sec. 3 The Trustee Affairs Committee shall consist of the Executive Committee and the moderators of the other standing committees. The duties of the Trustee Affairs Committee are: review the vitality, effectiveness and appropriateness of the Board of Trustees' functioning and make recommendations for change; continuously develop a list of potential Board members; gather information regarding their qualifications and preparedness to serve if nominated; prepare nominations of Board members for consideration by the Board of Trustees; arrange and oversee the orientation and training of members of the Board; arrange for the full involvement of members of the Board in the activities of the
Board of Trustees; give leadership in encouraging members to evaluate their own performance; and provide appropriate recognition for the service of members of the Board.

Article X

Amendment of the Bylaws

Sec. 1 These bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the Board at any regular meeting after ten days notice to Board members and the approval of the General Synod.

Article XI

Adoption of the Bylaws

Sec. 1 The bylaws, when adopted by the Board and the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, shall supersede all previous documents controlling the affairs of Western Theological Seminary.

Article XII

Distribution of Assets on Dissolution

Sec. 1 In the event of dissolution of the Corporation, its assets and properties remaining after payment of its liabilities shall be distributed and assigned to the General Synod as the sole member of the Corporation. (ADOPTED)

From the Report of the Theological Education Agency (TEA)

AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS FOR THE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AGENCY

TEA Certification Committee

The TEA Board of Trustees reviewed the membership of the TEA Certification Committee and recommends an increase in the membership size of the committee by adding a seminary professor (a member of the RCA) teaching at a non-RCA seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The TEA Board of Trustees believes a seminary professor representative from a non-RCA seminary will provide expertise, understanding, and perspective to the issues TEA students face in the certification process as non-RCA seminary students.
R-8.
To adopt the following amendment to the Constitution and Bylaws for the Theological Education Agency, Article X, Section 1 (additions are underlined; deletion is stricken out):

Article X
The Certification Committee

Sec. 1 a. The certification committee shall consist of six seven persons elected by the Board of Trustees. Two shall be professors or associate professors, one of whom shall hold the Fourth Office, nominated by and from within the faculty of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Two shall be professors or associate professors, one of whom shall hold the Fourth Office, nominated by and from within the faculty of Western Theological Seminary. One shall be a professor teaching at a non-Reformed Church in America seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Two shall be persons nominated by and from the Board of Trustees of the Theological Education Agency. All nominees shall be members of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED—see Editorial Report, p. 427)

THE FOURTH OFFICE

The Office of General Synod Professor of Theology, known as the “fourth office,” is restricted in the Book of Church Order to full-time associate or full professors on the faculty of New Brunswick Theological Seminary or Western Theological Seminary (BCO, Chapter I, Part IV, Article 8, Section 3). A number of individuals have stated that the director of TEA functions in a role similar to teaching faculty at the RCA seminaries. The current General Synod professors of theology, at a January 1997 meeting, discussed the possibility of opening the fourth office to the director of TEA and to professors (ordained as RCA ministers of Word and sacrament) teaching at non-RCA seminaries.

The TEA Board of Trustees unanimously concluded that the current TEA director, the Rev. Dr. Cornelis Kors, is qualified to hold the fourth office even though the BCO does not currently have this provision. The TEA Board of Trustees also recognized that there is a significant benefit to having the director of TEA amenable to General Synod rather than to the Classis of California.

R-9.
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions of the BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8 (The Office of General Synod Professor of Theology), Section 3, to provide for the director of the Theological Education Agency to become a General Synod professor of theology, for report to the 1998 General Synod.

Upon recommendation of the advisory committee to refer R-9, Synod

VOTED: To refer R-9 to the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, for study and report (along with proposed Book of Church Order revisions, if applicable) to the 1998 General Synod.
Reasons:

1. R-9 raises significant theological issues concerning the fourth office.

2. The history of reports and studies of the fourth office need to be reviewed when considering such a change.

The TEA Board of Trustees also agrees with the current General Synod professors of theology that consideration should be given to opening the fourth office to professors (ordained as Reformed Church in America ministers of Word and sacrament) teaching at non-RCA seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

R-10.
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions of the BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8 (The Office of General Synod Professor of Theology), Section 3, to provide for professors (ordained as Reformed Church in America ministers of Word and sacrament) teaching at non-RCA seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools to become General Synod professors of theology, for report to the 1998 General Synod.

 Upon recommendation of the advisory committee to refer R-10, Synod

 VOTED: To refer R-10 to the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, for study and report (along with proposed Book of Church Order revisions, if applicable) to the 1998 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. R-10 raises significant theological issues concerning the fourth office.

2. The history of reports and studies on the fourth office need to be reviewed when considering such a change.

From the Report of the Commission on Theology

THE COMMISSIONING OF PREACHING ELDERS

The Commission on Theology presented a report on the subject of preaching elders to the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 391-98). In response, the 1996 General Synod voted:

 To distribute the study, “The Commissioning of Preaching Elders,” to RCA congregations for study, comment, and response to the Commission on Theology by January 31, 1997 (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 398).

The commission was further directed to consult with the Commission on Church Order and the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America to:
determine from the responses received from RCA congregations if it is appropriate to propose revisions in the *Book of Church Order* which would incorporate the principles of the study, "The Commissioning of Preaching Elders"; and further,

to instruct the Commission on Theology to report to the 1997 General Synod its findings from responses received from RCA congregations and to present, if appropriate, any proposed revisions for the *Book of Church Order* (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 398).

The commission received almost thirty responses from individuals and congregations containing comments and suggestions. Of these responses, a small minority opposed the concept of preaching elders in its entirety. More than three-quarters of the responses supported the concept, but had various concerns or suggestions regarding its implementation. The commission has attempted to respond to many of these concerns in its redrafting of the original study, and now presents a revised study, along with proposed revisions for the *Book of Church Order* to facilitate its implementation.

The Context of the Question

The Commission on Theology received from the 1995 General Synod a request to study the question of the licensure or certification of lay preachers (MGS 1995, p. 218). This is a question that has been explored for some time now in the RCA. A Committee on Plurality and Flexibility of the Ministry issued a report to the 1984 General Synod that, among other things, called for changes in the *Book of Church Order* to create a position of a licensed elder, authorized to preach and administer the sacraments. The recommendation was not adopted by the 1984 General Synod (MGS 1984, 174-182).

In 1988 a Committee on Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry issued a report. This report affirmed the importance of lay ministry in general, and while it made no recommendations regarding lay preachers, it did say that "the RCA may also want to consider opening the ordained ministry of the Word to gifted elders who have proven their effectiveness in the area of pastoral leadership for an appropriate period of time" (MGS 1988, 135).

Again in 1995 the question arose by way of an overture from the Classis of Mid-Hudson (MGS 1994, pp. 248-49), which led to the current referral to this commission.

A number of general observations were arrived at as the commission discussed this referral from the 1995 General Synod and heard reports about areas of the church's life where this issue has arisen. It is clear that some congregations, classes, and regional synods have already begun various strategies for using nonordained people in preaching ministries and also for training and recognizing them in a variety of ways, even though there are currently no provisions for such practices within the *Book of Church Order*. This was a genuine cause for concern to the commission and underscored the need to address the situation both theologically and in terms of church polity as quickly as possible.

The commission also noted the complex and diverse ways in which the question of lay preachers has arisen within the life of the church. Because the question has arisen in a number of very different contexts, a variety of issues must be addressed in a comprehensive way if the problem is to be dealt with adequately on a denominational level.

One of the issues is financial. Many small-membership congregations find it difficult to afford a full-time ordained minister of Word and sacrament but find that there are lay people with gifts of preaching in their midst. Such congregations may believe that the presence of such gifted persons offers not only an opportunity for ministry, but also a way out of a difficult economic constraint. From the perspective of one licensed to such a ministry, the possibility
of such licensure raises additional questions. Would such a person be classified as a minister for federal and state tax purposes, with the accompanying economic benefits and/or burdens such classification would bring? Would such a move evoke legal challenges from federal, regional, or local governing authorities?

In other congregations the issue is empowerment of the laity. Some churches seek to use lay preachers, not as a substitute for the preaching ministry of an installed pastor, but as a supplement to that ministry and as a sign of the priesthood of all believers and the giftedness of all God’s people.

Another issue has to do with the difficulties some candidates for ministry experience in obtaining formal theological education. Lay people with gifts for preaching and church leadership may feel called to exercise those gifts but may find it difficult or impossible to pursue theological education to fulfill ordination requirements. Such persons may find the option of a certified or licensed lay preaching ministry an attractive one. This may be particularly true among immigrant congregations where access to theological education in one’s own language is difficult.

The relationship between “licensed lay preachers/preaching elders” and other avenues into ministry that are currently provided for in the Book of Church Order is an issue in some RCA judicatories. For example, the BCO currently allows for a person without formal theological education to seek a dispensation and be ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 2). The request for a different kind of licensure or other authorization apparently arises, however, out of a desire to authorize a ministry of preaching that is not as broad as that of minister of Word and sacrament, and that does not involve the need to pursue a dispensation from the requirements of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

A final issue has to do with the integrity and high standards that the RCA seeks to maintain for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. Concerns have been raised regarding the long-range impact upon that office as a result of the addition of a second preaching office or role with less stringent requirements.

Lay Preacher or Preaching Elders?

Recently in the life of the RCA, two different approaches have been proposed for an authorized preaching ministry exercised by those not ordained to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. Some have requested the RCA to establish a process for licensing or certifying “lay preachers.” Others have requested a process for certifying or licensing “preaching elders.” The commission believes that the choice of terms is significant and must be clarified before further action is taken. In what follows, this study argues that the term “lay preacher” is inappropriate within the Reformed tradition and that any action taken in this area would be more helpfully taken under the category of “preaching elder.”

Preaching as the proclamation of the gospel and as a witness to God’s action in the world is a function of the whole Christian community. Preaching in this broad sense arises from the experience of divine power and life, to which the believer is constrained by God to bear witness (e.g., Mark 5:20, Luke 8:39, Acts 8:5, 12, Acts 11:20). In this broad context it is inappropriate and theologically dubious to speak of any kind of “licensure,” “authorization,” or “certification” to announce the gospel. This would restrict the freedom and obligation of all Christians to proclaim the good news by word and deed. Ultimately, the authorization to witness to the gospel is granted by the Holy Spirit, who moves men and women to bear witness to the reality of God’s reign in their lives and in the world.
But if all Christians are called to witness to the gospel, what then is the role of ordained ministers? The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is intended to guide and empower the whole church in its proclamation of the gospel in word and deed (e.g., Eph. 4:12). The minister of Word and sacrament does not preach as a substitute for the congregation's proclamation. Rather, the preaching office exercised by the minister of Word and sacrament empowers and guides the congregation to witness to the presence and power of God. The ordained preaching ministry has this particular focus and responsibility as one part of the broader mandate given to all Christians to bear witness to God's power and presence disclosed in the gospel. The preaching office is thus a particular means of grace by which God's salvation extends to the church, and through the church to the world.

Why then are not all Christians "ordained?" In a limited sense, all Christians are, since they are set apart from the world and charged by God with the task of offering themselves to God as spiritual sacrifices (Rom.12:1-2, John 15:16, 1 Pet. 2:9-10). But ordination also commonly refers to something more specific. The church recognizes certain gifts and sets certain people apart for specific ministries through the laying on of hands and prayer (e.g., Acts 6:6, 13:3. For further discussion, see the report on the laying on of hands in the 1995 Minutes of the General Synod, pp. 369-81). The church has found it expedient to single out certain gifts and ministries for special treatment—those that pertain to the overall health, welfare, and functioning of the church itself. These gifts and ministries require the acknowledgment and consent of the church in order to be exercised effectively. The church formally and publicly acknowledges these gifts and ministries, not because they are more important, but because such acknowledgment and consent by the church is essential if these ministries are to be exercised effectively by those who hold them (cf. Heb. 13:17).

The question of the certification of lay preachers or preaching elders needs to be viewed in the context of this understanding of the place of ordination. All Christians are witnesses, since the announcement of God's reign is the work of the laos, the people. Yet this does not eliminate the need for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, which is devoted to guiding and equipping the church for this central task.

Yet if one speaks of the certification or licensure of "lay" preachers, there is a danger of losing this crucial distinction between the proclamation of the gospel carried out by the whole church (the laity), and the role of the ordained ministry in guiding the church through the preaching of the Word. The people of God, the laity, need no additional "certification" or "licensure" to carry out their basic task of announcing the reign of God. The call for the laity to witness to the gospel is given in their incorporation into the body of Christ in baptism (1 Pet. 2:9). The attempt to single out only certain individuals as "lay preachers" is therefore unhelpful and should be avoided. All God's people are "lay preachers."

The language of "lay preachers" is unhelpful not only because it weakens the involvement of all God's people in witnessing to the gospel, but also because it confuses the distinction in role between the ordained and nonordained. In 1988 the Committee on Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry urged that the word "lay" be used consistently to refer to the unordained ministries of the church, meaning those ministries that were not directly involved with the oversight and guidance of the church in its mission in the world (MGS 1988, p. 131). The laity is called to witness to the gospel in encounter with the world; it is not called to the oversight and guidance of the church in that mission. That is the responsibility of the ordained offices.

However, the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is not alone in its responsibility to guide and direct the whole church in its proclamation of the gospel. From a Reformed understanding of office, elders are not "laypersons" but are also officeholders in the church. The elders bear special responsibility, along with the ministers of Word and sacrament, for evangelization, catechesis, discipline, and the proper interpretation of Scripture. Hence it
may be more helpful, in achieving the intent of language about “certification of lay preachers,” to speak of a process whereby elders might receive some form of authorization to preach in a local congregation.

But why, in the first place, should the Reformed Church in America consider a second preaching role? Why should elders be authorized to preach at all? Is not the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament sufficient to guide and direct the church in its mission in the world? In 1984 the General Synod rejected a proposal for licensed preaching elders, arguing that such a move would remove the need for a congregation to call a minister of Word and sacrament, that it would bypass normal supervision of theological education, that it would weaken opportunities for alternatives such as yoked congregations, that it would weaken the Reformed concept of an educated clergy, and that it would make the (then) present oversupply of ministers even worse (MGS 1984, pp. 181-82).

The RCA must continue to discern whether these reasons are of sufficient weight to prevent it from proceeding with the creation of a second preaching role in the RCA. This paper will not offer all the answers to these issues, but is intended to guide the RCA in its consideration of them. While this paper will address some of these practical concerns, it will also address the theological issues at stake in the question. There are a number of both practical and theological issues that invite a further look at the question. From a theological perspective, the subject provides an opportunity to address the question of the relationship of elder to minister of Word and sacrament in more detail than has been done in the past, and further to clarify the church’s understanding of ordination and its relationship to lay ministries.

From a practical perspective, although there may be an oversupply of ordained ministers in some parts of the RCA, this is not at all universally the case now, particularly in some rural areas and among racial/ethnic congregations. Several sectors of the RCA have spoken out with some urgency about the need for strategies that will effectively deal both with a shortage of ordained ministers and with the need for classes to oversee effectively the preaching of the Word in their bounds. The present wording of the Book of Church Order grants extraordinary freedom to local consistories to invite unordained people to preach “in occasional or special circumstances” (ECO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 6e). The frequent appeal to “special circumstances” in the use of unordained preachers leaves classes needing more guidance from the church in overseeing such situations. The commission felt that these concerns were of sufficient weight to deem the question of authorized preaching elders worthy of fuller exploration.

Some Basic Assumptions Regarding Preaching Elders

The idea of a “preaching elder” requires some clarification. What is the nature of such a function and its relationship to the offices, life, and polity of the church? This understanding of the Office of Elder varies, even within the Reformed family of churches. Some Presbyterians, for example, speak of ministers as “teaching elders” and elders as “ruling elders.” This distinction has not played a significant role in the polity of the Reformed Church in America, however, and it does not seem to be helpful in addressing the issue now faced. In what follows, this study attempts to clarify how such a function should be interpreted within the context of the offices, life, and polity of the Reformed Church in America.

If elders are to be authorized to preach, they should continue to be elders, and the distinction between ministers and elders should be maintained. This distinction has not always been articulated with theological precision in the RCA’s history. In general, however, Reformed theology understands that a crucial role of the elder is to participate in the oversight of the preaching of the Word, whereas the minister’s role is the actual preaching of the Word itself. In Acts 15 for example, it was the responsibility of Paul and Barnabas to proclaim the gospel,
whereas “the apostles and elders” in Jerusalem were called upon to assess the validity of their preaching. In traditional Dutch Reformed practice, these roles were often expressed by a handshake extended to the minister by the senior elder after the sermon, indicating the judgment of the elders that the sermon was in accordance with the Word of God. While this practice has now fallen into disuse, its theological underpinning persists in the use, for example, of the consistorial questions that must be answered by the elders and ministers (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1). In this way, discernment and proclamation complement each other in the governance of the church by the Word of God.

If elders are to preach, it must be recognized that this distinction of roles would become somewhat blurred. The commission does not believe that such blurring distorts the function of the offices unduly if other safeguards are in place. In fact, a modest preaching role for elders may help to emphasize what has always been true of a Reformed understanding of office. As the Preamble to the RCA Book of Church Order states, the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is not entirely distinct from the Office of Elder, but may be understood as a particular ministry within the Office of Elder, or as an elder of a special kind. Both ministers and elders are centrally concerned with the guidance and empowerment of the church by the Word of God (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Nevertheless, preaching elders must realize that when they enter the pulpit they relinquish their supervisory and discerning role and become subject to the discernment and supervision of their preaching by the board of elders.

There are other important distinctions between ministers of Word and sacrament and elders. In one of the few General Synod reports where this distinction is addressed, the 1980 study on the nature of ecclesiastical office and ministry states that the elder stands beside the minister in connection with both sermon and sacrament, but is distinguished from the minister of Word and sacrament by virtue of the elder’s continued involvement in the world. The elder does not forsake a worldly calling to engage in ministry but represents the “sanctification of the world,” the leavening of Christian faith in all of life (MGS 1980, p. 107). While this distinction should not be interpreted to preclude a “tent-making” approach to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, it does suggest that preaching elders should not be entirely dependent on the church for their livelihood but should also maintain a vocation in the world, though they should be able to receive a stipend for their preaching ministry. Congregations should not view preaching elders merely as an inexpensive way to obtain a preacher. A full-time preaching ministry should continue to be exercised only by ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

Another important distinction between the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament and that of elder has to do with the scope of the office. Through the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, ministers are certified for their calling, not merely by a local congregation or classis, but by General Synod, acting through one of the RCA seminaries or the Theological Education Agency as its agent. The ordination of an elder takes place in a local congregation; the ordination of a minister of Word and sacrament takes place in the classis and is preceded by a denominational certification.

Because of this difference, ministers of Word and Sacrament are empowered to represent the whole church and to serve the whole church in a way that elders are not. The state recognizes their authority to solemnize marriages and recognizes their distinctive social role in its tax code. The state does not recognize elders in these ways, nor has the church ever sought such recognition for elders. Moreover, although ministers are often invited to preach or celebrate the sacraments in congregations where they are not the installed pastor, elders are rarely if ever asked to exercise their functions in other congregations. Rather, the elder has always been centrally concerned with a particular local congregation and its life, though the elder also represents that congregation in the assemblies and judicatories of the RCA. To put it a bit differently, the difference in the process of ordination means that the authority
of the elder is bound more closely to a local congregation than the authority of a minister of
Word and sacrament. The commission believes that this distinction should be preserved if
elders are to be authorized to preach. Elders should be authorized to preach regularly only
in a particular congregation, rather than in the RCA as a whole or even in the classis as a
whole. (In unusual cases such as yoked parishes, it might be appropriate for the classis to
authorize a preaching elder to preach in more than one congregation.) The authorization of
a preaching elder is distinguished in this way from the license to preach granted by a classis
to a candidate for ministry, which does not carry the same restriction.

The commission is aware that this restriction of preaching elders to a local congregation is
more stringent than that currently placed upon “lay preachers” in some regions of the RCA.
The commission believes, however, that this practice in some regions is without sound
theological warrant. The practice of elders preaching in multiple congregations sunders the
relationship between the pastoral duties of eldership and the elder’s preaching ministry. The
elder’s primary calling is to the oversight of a local congregation. The preaching of the Word
by elders must always be supplementary to that central role. If elders are authorized to preach
in multiple congregations, this centrality of the oversight of a local congregation for the
Office of Elder is lost.

This link between preaching elders and the oversight of a local congregation also raises the
question of participation in the local consistory. The Book of Church Order states:

A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed
minister/s of that church, and the elders and deacons currently installed in office
(BCO), Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 1).

Section 1 assures that the preaching of the Word is carried out in conjunction with the
oversight and pastoral care of a congregation. This need is equally present when preaching
is carried out by a preaching elder. Yet a distinction should be made between those preaching
elders who exercise a regular preaching ministry in a congregation without a pastor, and
those preaching elders who serve as visiting preachers on an occasional basis. When a classis
authorizes an elder to preach in a congregation without an installed pastor, that elder should
ideally be a member of consistory, or at least meet regularly with the local consistory during
the period in which he or she is authorized to preach. Elders preaching only occasionally
need not actively serve on consistory.

The congregational preaching done by elders ought to be carried out under the supervision
of a classis, in order that the Scriptures might continue to guide the local congregation with
their full depth and richness. In some cases such supervision could be delegated by the
classis to the installed minister of the congregation in which the elder is preaching.

Careful consideration should be given to a case where there might be an authorized
preaching elder in a congregation with no installed minister. Since the celebration of the
sacraments is already within the purview of elders, no particular authorization from the
classis would be required here for a preaching elder to administer the sacraments. Only the
appropriate authorization from the local consistory would be necessary (cf. BCO, Chapter
1, Part I, Article 1 Section 8). However, any authorization of an elder to preach should not
imply authority to exercise any other pastoral or official functions beyond those normally
exercised by elders. The authorization of preaching elders does not confer the authority to
perform marriages, preside over consistories, preside over congregational meetings, use the
title “pastor,” engage in pastoral counseling (unless appropriately trained for this function
as an elder), or claim ministerial status for tax purposes. The authorization of an elder to
preach should convey authority to fulfill the normal functions of an elder and to preach in
a local congregation. That is all.
Finally, since the authorization to preach does not inhere in the Office of Elder as it does in the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, an elder should be authorized to preach for a particular period of time, in a particular place. In other words, the authorizing of elders to preach should not be construed as another ordination or office which would continue until it is demitted. Rather, it is a commissioning and authorizing of an elder for a specific task, in a specific time and place.

"Licensure," "Certification," or "Commissioning"?

The RCA has also heard different proposals regarding how such preaching elders should be authorized. While some proposals have spoken of "licensure," others have used the term "certification." The Reformed Church in America has also begun to use the term "commissioning" to speak of a special commitment to a task which does not involve ordaining or installing into an office of the church. The Commission on Theology believes that "commissioning" is a better term for this authorization than either "licensure" or "certification." Both licensure and certification are currently used with respect to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. (A license to preach is given to candidates for ordination during their seminary training, and the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry qualifies ministerial candidates to take their final theological examinations for ordination.) The use of "commissioning" avoids confusing the distinction between preaching elders and ministers of Word and sacrament. Moreover, it underscores the fact that the authorization of elders to preach is for a particular time and place.

Some Guidelines for Implementation:

With the previous considerations in mind, the commission suggests the following guidelines to govern the commissioning of preaching elders.

1. The congregation shall petition the classis to commission a preaching elder, and if the preaching elder is to serve where there is no installed minister, the congregation shall demonstrate in its petition that its circumstances make the calling of an ordained minister of Word and sacrament impossible.

2. The person seeking commissioning as a preaching elder shall be an ordained elder in the Reformed Church in America and should be a member of the great consistory of the congregation in which he or she will be preaching. If the elder is not serving on the active consistory and is commissioned to a regular preaching ministry in a congregation with no installed pastor, he or she should meet regularly with the consistory for the duration of the commission.

3. Commissioned preaching elders should not be involved in service to the congregation as their primary or full-time vocation.

4. The classis shall examine the candidate prior to commissioning as a preaching elder, in order to determine whether the requisite gifts, knowledge, and skills are present. Such examination shall be based on a program of study in the following areas: New Testament introduction and history, Old Testament introduction and history, biblical exegesis and interpretation, sermon composition and delivery, systematic theology, and RCA doctrinal standards. The particular form and content of this program of study shall be approved by the classis. The classis may waive all or part of the program of study if the elder can demonstrate that such study or its equivalent has already been completed. In no case, however, shall the classis waive the examination.
5. Since the normal safeguards of education and certification are not present for elders in the same way they are for ordained ministers, the classis shall supervise their preaching ministry more closely than that of ministers of Word and sacrament. Such supervision should be regular and thorough.

6. The commissioning shall be reviewed and renewed on a periodic basis not to exceed two years. Renewal of the commissioning should be preceded by an evaluation by the local consistory and the supervising classis. When the commissioned preaching elder has primary responsibility for preaching in a local congregation, commissioning is to be renewed only when the calling of an ordained minister continues to be impossible. The classis may revoke or refuse to renew a commission for the preaching elder if the classis believes that the Word of God is not being rightly proclaimed.

7. Commissioning is only for preaching in specific places designated by the classis, under the supervision of the classis and the local consistory. It does not authorize the preaching elder to accept invitations to preach regularly in places not designated by the classis, nor to engage in any other form of ministry outside the normal functions of an elder, except for the preaching of the Word. The commissioning of preaching elders does not imply an authorization to preside at consistories or congregational meetings, nor to celebrate the sacraments apart from specific authorization from the local consistory.

8. Because the commissioning is within the context of the Office of Elder, the authority of which is located in the local congregation, commissioned preaching elders are not permitted to exercise ministerial functions that assume recognition by the larger society. That is, they may not act as ordained ministers in the solemnizing of marriages. Likewise they should not be classified as ministers for tax purposes. They may be voting delegates to classis only if they are regular elder delegates from a local congregation. They also may serve as nonvoting delegates to classis at the discretion of the classis. In their preaching ministry they are amenable to the classis through the licensure and supervision process; in all other matters they participate in mutual oversight with their local consistory in the same way that all elders do.

R-11. To adopt the following BCO amendments regarding the commissioning of preaching elders, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined: deletion is stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 Responsibilities of the Consistory

c. The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special
circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14  (New Article 14. Existing Articles 14 and 15 to be renumbered 15 and 16)

Article 14. Commissioning and Supervision of Preaching Elders

Sec. 1. A congregation may request the classis to commission a preaching elder for that congregation. If a preaching elder is requested where there is no installed minister, the congregation shall demonstrate that its circumstances make the calling of an ordained minister of Word and sacrament impossible.

Sec. 2. A commissioned preaching elder shall be an ordained elder in the Reformed Church in America with gifts for preaching. If the elder is not serving on the active consistory and is commissioned to a regular preaching ministry in a church with no installed pastor, he or she shall meet regularly with the consistory for the duration of the commission.

Sec. 3. The classis shall examine the candidate prior to commissioning as a preaching elder, in order to determine that the necessary gifts, knowledge, and skills are present. Such examination shall be based on a program of study in the following areas: (1) New Testament introduction and history, (2) Old Testament introduction and history, (3) biblical exegesis and interpretation, (4) sermon composition and delivery, (5) systematic theology, and (6) RCA doctrinal standards. The form and content of this program of study shall be approved by the classis. The classis may waive all or part of the program of study if the elder demonstrates that such study or its equivalent has already been completed. In no case, however, shall the classis waive the examination.

Sec. 4. Preaching elders may be commissioned for up to two years. Representatives of the classis shall conduct a service of commissioning in the church where the elder is commissioned to preach. The commission may be renewed after evaluation by the local congregation and the classis. When the commissioned preaching elder is serving a church with no installed pastor, commissioning shall be renewed only when the calling of a minister of Word and sacrament continues to be impossible. The classis shall arrange for regular and thorough supervision of commissioned preaching elders. The classis shall revoke or refuse to renew a commission for a preaching elder if the classis determines that the Word of God is not rightly proclaimed.
Sec. 5. Commissioning is only for preaching in a specific place designated by the classis, under the supervision of the classis and the local consistory. Commissioning does not authorize the preaching elder to preach regularly in places not designated by the classis, nor to assume the responsibilities of the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, except for the preaching of the Word. Commissioned preaching elders may serve as regular elder delegates if appointed by their consistory, or as nonvoting delegates to classis at the discretion of the classis. In their preaching ministry they are amenable to the classis through the commissioning and supervision process; in all other matters they participate in mutual oversight with the local consistory in the same way that all elders do. (ADOPTED)

The advisory committee recommended:

R-12.
To commend the Commission on Theology for its fine work on the paper, “The Commissioning of Preaching Elders.” (ADOPTED)

From the Report of the General Synod Council’s Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee

REVIEW OF GENERAL SYNOD COMMISSIONS

One of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council (GSC) is “to review all General Synod commissions at least once during each five-year period and to recommend to General Synod a continuation of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of such commissions, with the understanding that necessity for continuation shall not be assumed (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6b). The first review under this section was conducted in 1984-85 for report to the General Synod in June 1985. The second review was conducted in 1989-90 for report to the General Synod in 1990.

At its April 1990 meeting, the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) voted to review at least two commissions each year, beginning in 1992, rather than review all commissions at one time every five years. A 1991-95 schedule for review of commissions was then approved at the January 1991 GSEC meeting.

GSC, at its March 1995 meeting, voted to continue reviewing at least two commissions each year, beginning in 1997. The following 1996-2000 schedule for review of commissions was then approved:

1996 - No review of commissions
1997 - Commission on Judicial Business
Commission on Church Order
Commission on Nominations
1998 - Commission on Christian Worship
Commission on Theology
For the review of the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Judicial Business, and the Commission on Nominations, GSC appointed the following special committee: the Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink, the Rev. Louis Benes, and Donald De Vries.

Following a review of its task, the committee proceeded as follows:

Each commission was sent a questionnaire on what it viewed as its major accomplishments over the previous five years, the value of its work for the life of the denomination, its plans for the future, etc.

The moderator of each commission was interviewed by the committee during the 1996 meeting of the General Synod in Orange City, Iowa.

GSC received the final report of its committee in April 1997 and makes the following recommendations for each commission. It should be noted that, in addition to specific recommendations, there are brief descriptions of the functions of each commission and sometimes a comment or suggestion.

Commission on Church Order

The commission sees its purpose not only in responding to the recommendations and instructions of the General Synod concerning the content, structure, and style of the Book of Church Order, but also in initiating amendments for the BCO to clarify ambiguities and to conform the BCO to the changing practices and policies of the Reformed Church in America. In addition, the commission sees a role in making the BCO more understandable to local RCA congregations and classes. Currently the commission is reviewing the format of the BCO and is considering alternative formats to make the BCO more user-friendly. The commission has also requested the Commission on History to consider publication in the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America a "commentary and notes" on the BCO.

The commission meets twice a year (fall and spring). The commission continues to encourage local congregations and classes to submit inquiries for interpretation of the BCO to the Commission on Church Order.

R-13.
To affirm the continuation of the Commission on Church Order as specified in the Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 4. (ADOPTED)

Commission on Judicial Business

The commission is responsible for duties assigned to it in the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (Chapter 2) of the Book of Church Order. The commission conducts fair, orderly, and careful reviews of complaints and appeals that reach the General Synod level. The commission exercises its responsibilities not only from a judicial point of view but also with a pastoral concern.

R14-
To affirm the continuation of the Commission on Judicial Business as specified in the Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 6. (ADOPTED)
Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations nominates members for the General Synod Council, for the boards of trustees of the RCA seminaries and the Theological Education Agency (TEA), and for all General Synod commissions and agencies, unless otherwise specified in the *Bylaws of the General Synod*. The commission, in consultation with the general secretary, searches the RCA for suitable and qualified nominees to serve on the various RCA committees, councils, boards, commissions, and agencies. The commission gives particular attention to eligibility and inclusivity (geography, gender, cultural and social diversity, occupation, and academic and other appropriate expertise).

The commission reviews Talent Bank Forms. These forms are completed by potential nominees and provide biographical information. The commission continues to urge wide distribution of these forms throughout the denomination. The commission also encourages RCA congregations to help increase awareness of the opportunities available for denominational service.

**R-15.**

*To affirm the continuation of the Commission on Nominations as specified in the Bylaws of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7. (ADOPTED)*

Overtures

*Consistory Appointments for Vacancies*

1. The Classis of Passaic Valley overtures General Synod to adopt the following revisions to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 10f, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletion is stricken out):

   **Sec. 10f.** When a vacancy is to be filled, the person may be elected shall and installed to serve the remainder of the unexpired term; or the consistory may appoint and install a member of the greater consistory to the same office of his or her previous service for the duration of the unexpired term.

Reasons:

1. Unofficially, some consistories are already making appointments to fill vacancies on consistories.

2. Calling a congregational meeting for a special vote to fill an unexpired term of a consistory member is often cumbersome for what is generally routine approval.

3. The amendment gives congregations/consistories the flexibility to choose an alternative method for filling a vacancy on a consistory.
The advisory committee recommended:

R-16.
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to incorporate the substance of Overture 1 in its proposed revisions to the Book of Church Order, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The Commission on Church Order is responsible for thorough review and appropriate wording for revisions to the Book of Church Order.

"Conscience Clauses"

2. The Classis of Montgomery overtures General Synod to study and report on the biblical and theological rationale for the "conscience clauses" in the Book of Church Order (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2h, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 7 and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 14) as they relate to the role of individual conscience in the corporate decisions of the Reformed Church in America.

Reasons:

1. It is unclear what role individual conscience plays in Christian discernment and moral decision-making. An individual's conscience does not take priority over the corporate decisions of the church guided by the Holy Spirit. If conscience, rather than the church, is the guide, individuals could refuse to go along with other decisions of the church.

2. "Conscience clauses" could be applied to other issues besides women's ordination. A "conscience clause" could be used to support slavery (Col. 3:22), opposition to braided hair and gold jewelry (1 Tim. 2:9), and against those who do not sell all their belongings and give them to the poor (Luke 18:22). Many similar examples could be listed. No one would propose adding such numerous "conscience clauses" to the Book of Church Order.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-17.
To refer the substance of Overture 2 to the Commission on Theology for consideration in its current work on "conscience clauses" in the Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The Commission on Theology is working on the subject of "conscience clauses" in the Book of Church Order (see p. 398), for report to the 1998 General Synod.

Two-Thirds Approval by 1997 General Synod for Formula of Agreement

3. The Classis of British Columbia overtures General Synod to require a two-thirds majority vote of the 1997 General Synod to adopt the Formula of Agreement.

Reasons:

1. The Book of Church Order requires a two-thirds majority of classes to approve proposed amendments to the RCA Constitution (BCO, Rules and Amendments of the Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures, Section 2, p. 73). There is no BCO requirement, other than a simple majority, for General Synod to adopt the Formula of Agreement.
2. At the 1996 General Synod an overture requesting that the General Synod require, upon approval of the *Formula of Agreement* by the 1997 General Synod, two-thirds approval by classes was ruled out of order as per the *BCO*, Chapter I, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4, which states the "General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy." The *BCO*, however, nowhere forbids the highest assembly of the RCA, the General Synod, to make a judgment to consult classes before making a final decision. Likewise, it is well within the power of the 1997 General Synod delegates to rule that it is judicious to require a two-thirds majority vote on a specific matter before Synod.

3. The *Formula of Agreement* is about a rather specific and detailed form of "full communion" with three other denominations. The formula's potential for affecting the faith and order of the RCA is far beyond that of the average amendment to the RCA *Constitution*.

4. The Advisory Committee on Christian Unity at the 1994 General Synod prepared the following recommendation adopted by the 1994 General Synod:

   To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to produce and distribute to all RCA clergy and clerks of consistories a brief compendium of *A Common Calling* ... highlighting the main points of the Reformed-Lutheran dialogue, along with its implications for clergy and congregations (*MGS 1994*, R-1, p. 172).

   The advisory committee prepared the following reason for the above R-1:

   R-1 encourages a positive General Synod vote in 1997. The advisory committee noted that a fragmented body of Christ undercuts the ultimate effectiveness of all Christian endeavor, and that disunity in the church blunts the basic message of the gospel of reconciliation (*MGS 1994*, p. 173).

   This reason also needs to be applied to the RCA. A decision by the 1997 General Synod that is not seen as widely supported by its delegates and by the RCA at large will tend to fragment the RCA and blunt its witness as a denomination. Prudence suggests the 1997 General Synod not allow the *Formula of Agreement* to be adopted by a narrow simple majority.

5. At least one of the four denominations involved in the *Formula of Agreement*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is requiring a two-thirds affirmative vote by its delegates at its 1997 Synod meeting.

   The Advisory Committee on Church Order did not prepare a recommendation for Overture 3.

   Upon recommendation of the parliamentarian, the president ruled Overture 3 OUT OF ORDER.

   Reasons:


   2. The *Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod* may be amended at any stated meeting of the Synod by vote of a majority of all the members present, provided that due notice of the proposed amendment has been submitted in writing at a previous
stated session and has received the approval of a majority at that session. An amendment to the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order shall go into effect upon announcement by the president of the Synod of favorable action under this provision (Book of Church Order, Special Rules of Order of the General Synod, Chapter 3, Part 1, Article 10).

3. As per the above reasons, a single session of the General Synod cannot amend the Book of Church Order.

4. The basic requirement for approval of an action by a deliberative assembly, except where a rule provides otherwise, is a majority vote as per Robert's Rules of Order, Section 43.

A point of order from the floor challenged the ruling of the president. Synod

VOTED: To sustain the ruling of the president.

Two-Thirds Approval by Classes for RCA to Enter into a New Ecumenical Relationship

4. The Classis of Northern Michigan overtures General Synod to adopt the following addition to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 5. The General Synod shall maintain a friendly correspondence and cooperative relationship with the highest judicatories or assemblies of other Christian denominations and with interdenominational agencies in all matters pertaining to the extension of the Kingdom of God. A majority vote of the General Synod and a two-thirds majority vote of all classes shall be required to approve the Reformed Church in America entering into a new ecumenical relationship.

Reasons:

1. The Book of Church Order assigns responsibilities for ecumenical relations in Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5. However, the BCO does not describe the procedure for how the RCA will enter into ecumenical relationships. This amendment spells out the procedure.

2. The significance of entering into formal ecumenical relationships (like the “full communion” relationship) requires widespread support throughout the Reformed Church in America.

3. Entering into “full communion” relationships are much more analogous to amendments of the RCA Constitution, which require two-thirds classes approval, than they are to the raising of assessments, which require a majority vote at one General Synod meeting.

4. This reforming of the RCA in its BCO is consistent with the presbyterian form of church government.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-18.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)
Reasons:

1. The RCA Constitution gives responsibility for ecumenical relationships to the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4 and Section 5).

2. Overture 4 violates the representative principle as established in the preamble to the Book of Church Order.

3. Overture 4 greatly limits many other important ecumenical relationships.

Procedure for Ruling Overtures Out of Order

5. The Classis of Canadian Prairies overtures General Synod to adopt in first reading the following amendment the Special Rules of Order of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part II, Article 2, Section 7, for recommendation to the 1998 General Synod for approval (addition is underlined):

   Sec. 7. Submission of Overtures

   The General Synod may receive overtures from a classis or a regional synod. It shall not receive overtures which deal with matters under adjudication or which make either direct or implied charges against persons. Overtures from classes shall be submitted to the General Synod office or postmarked not later than March 31. Overtures from regional synods shall be submitted to the General Synod office or postmarked within ten days of the close of the annual session of the regional synod.

   Properly presented overtures shall not be ruled out of order once presented to the General Synod. When such an overture appears to be not in order upon original receipt, the General Synod Council shall inform the classis or regional synod within three weeks of original receipt of the overture of the nature of the problem. The classis or regional synod shall then be given a period of three weeks to withdraw the overture or to make the necessary revisions of the overture.

Reasons:

1. It was a grievous interference with the democratic process to have a properly submitted overture ruled out of order by the general secretary at the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, p. 281).

2. Although a point of order from the floor challenged the ruling of the general secretary and the 1996 General Synod sustained the ruling of the general secretary on this 1996 General Synod overture (MGS 1996, p. 281), this is not a fair process. The advisory committee and General Synod delegates are not in a position to fully study the overture and to fully determine the appropriateness of the ruling.

3. It is proper and just for the General Synod Council to convey to the classis or regional synod that a submitted overture is out of order.

4. Since there is a clear deadline for receipt of overtures, there is adequate time to allow the General Synod Council to respond to an “out-of-order” overture and to give a period of time to the classis or regional synod to determine whether to withdraw the overture or to resubmit the overture with revisions.
The advisory committee recommended:

R-19.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. Regional synods and classes may already receive help from the Office of the General Synod when preparing overtures. The burden, however, is still on regional synods and classes to seek this help.

2. Only the president of General Synod has the authority and duty “to decide all questions of order, subject to appeal” by the body (Roberts Rules of Order, Section 24 and Section 46).

3. Overture 5 hinders communication for regional synods and classes to the General Synod.

4. Overture 5 is not practical regarding time limits, etc.

Clarify Role of Specialized Interim Ministers

6. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare revisions to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13 that would clarify the role of specialized interim ministers.

Reasons:

1. Although the RCA makes wide use of specialized interim ministers, the Book of Church Order is very limited in its commentary and interpretation concerning the work of specialized interim ministers.

2. The relationship between a specialized interim minister and a classis in which the interim ministry is conducted is not clear.

3. The current specialized interim ministry system does not have enough flexibility.

4. Some RCA congregations require a specialized interim minister for a longer period of time than is currently allotted.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-20.
To refer the substance of Overture 6 to Ministry and Personnel Services for review and study. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. There may be a need for clarification and flexibility.

2. Ministry and Personnel Services is responsible to review, oversee, and establish guidelines for specialized interim ministers.
Clarify Role of Retired Ministers and Continuing in Part-Time Ministry

7. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures General Synod to adopt the following revision to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 9, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined; deletion is stricken out):

Sec. 9. When a minister of a church has attained the age of seventy years, the ministerial relationship to that church shall be terminated. The classis shall terminate the relationship at a special meeting, or not later than the next regular meeting. The classis shall then appoint a supervisor over the church, unless other contractual relations approved by the classis are in effect. Those who reach the age of seventy years may continue to be employed on a renewable contract basis, the length of time of the contract being no more than one year at a time, with each renewal approved by consistory and classis. When a minister of a church has attained the age of seventy years or has retired from active ministry and wishes to continue in some part-time ministry in his or her former church—such as performing weddings, conducting funerals, preaching, making hospital calls, or providing pastoral care—he or she shall do so only on a renewable contract basis approved by the board of elders, the senior minister of the church, and the classis or its supervision committee. If such a contract is approved by all these parties, this minister shall be subject to the direct supervision of the senior minister and the classis or its supervision committee. The length of time of the contract shall be no more than one year at a time, with each renewal approved by the board of elders, the senior minister, and the classis or its supervision committee.

Reasons:

1. Sometimes ministers who have retired from active ministry remain as members of the congregations they last served. Unfortunately, on some occasions some of these ministers have challenged the leadership of the new minister and have provided support for members of the congregation who were in conflict with the new minister or objected to the leadership of the new minister. This involvement by some ministers who have retired from active ministry has made it almost impossible for the new minister to give effective leadership and to provide beneficial pastoral care to the congregation.

2. In some cases, when ministers who have retired from active ministry remain as members of the congregations they last served, it is unclear as to whether these ministers are still continuing to conduct ministerial functions in the congregation, either on a paid or volunteer basis.

➢The advisory committee recommended:

R-21.
To refer the substance of Overture 7 to Ministry and Personnel Services for review and study. (ADOPTED)
Reasons:

1. Classes are already working on creative approaches to the sensitive issue of retired ministers and their former pastorates.

2. Ministry and Personnel Services could possibly develop guidelines for classes.

Regional Synod Committee on Judicial Business Membership Composition and Terms

8. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures General Synod to adopt the following revisions to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part III, Article 6, Section 4, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 4. The regional synod shall constitute, by election or otherwise, a permanent committee on judicial business. The clerk of the synod shall refer to this committee all appeals and complaints, with all papers and documents pertaining thereto, before these matters are presented to the synod. The permanent committee on judicial business shall consist of at least five members, three ministers and two elders laypersons, who need not be delegates to the synod. The term of one member of the committee shall expire annually and a successor shall be chosen at the regular meeting of the synod for a term of five years. A vacancy occurring from death, resignation, or other cause shall be filled in the same manner for the unexpired term. The terms of office shall be established by the regional synod. In order to avoid an entire membership change of the committee at one time, a part of the whole committee shall be elected annually. The committee shall elect its own moderator.

Reasons:

1. The current wording of the BCO Chapter 1, Part III, Article 6, Section 4 is overly restrictive in the detail of the committee’s membership composition (three ministers and two elders; term of one member expires annually; only one term expires of five years).

2. Membership for the General Synod Commission on Judicial Business is comprised of “laypersons” and “ministers.” Membership is not restricted to elders (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 6). Membership on other General Synod agencies and commissions is open to all confessing members of the RCA (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 2). Membership on classis committees, commissions, or boards is open to all confessing members of the churches in the classis (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 6, Section 4). The 1997 General Synod will consider for adoption and recommendation to the classes for approval an amendment proposed by the Commission on Church Order to allow (except as otherwise provided in the BCO) confessing members of churches in the regional synod to serve as members of regional synod committees, commissions, or boards (see the Report of the Commission on Church Order in this Church Order section). The proposed amendment makes the membership composition of the regional synod’s committee on judicial business consistent with membership composition on General Synod agencies and committees and classis committees, commissions, and boards and therefore allows for additional well-qualified members of RCA churches to be considered for membership.
3. Also, as for membership composition, the proposed amendment is definitive without being restrictive. By stating the membership composition as "ministers and laypersons," the proposed amendment defines that the committee shall have both ministers and laypersons serving. Both terms ("ministers" and "laypersons") are plural. This use of plural terms indicates the committee is to be composed of more than just one minister or one layperson. However, the regional synod is still given discretion in determining the best number of ministers and laypersons to serve on this committee.

4. For terms of office, the proposed amendment is also definitive without being restrictive. By stating "a part of the whole committee shall be elected annually," this indicates different term years will be required. However, the regional synod is still allowed to define the term years as best suits the needs of the synod. The regional synod is also not restricted to one five-year term for each member of the committee.

5. The proposed amendment does not require any regional synod to change its current pattern or formation of its committee on judicial business, but the amendment does permit a regional synod to develop a committee based on the needs and structure of the regional synod without violating the Book of Church Order.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-22.
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to incorporate the substance of Overture 8 in its proposed revisions to the Book of Church Order, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The Commission on Church Order is responsible for thorough review and appropriate wording for revisions to the Book of Church Order.

From the Report of the General Secretary

P-3 (p. 50) was referred to the Advisory Committee on Theology and the Advisory Committee on Church Order.

➢ In response to P-3 (p. 50), the Advisory Committee on Church Order consulted with the Advisory Committee on Theology to prepare R-6 on p. 406. The Advisory Committee on Theology presented R-6 to this General Synod for adoption (see p. 406).

P-4 (p. 52) and P-5 (pp. 52-53) were referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Order.

➢ In response to P-4 (p. 52), the advisory committee recommended:

R-23.
To instruct the General Synod Council Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee, the racial/ethnic councils, and the general secretary to collaboratively develop a plan that will include the racial/ethnic councils in the process of focusing the
denominational vision on the tasks of new church development, church revitalization, evangelism, urban ministry, global ministry, and other priorities; and further,

to integrate the work of the racial/ethnic councils as ministries within the framework and mutual accountability of the General Synod Council; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee to report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The scope of the racial/ethnic councils is broader than specified.

2. The racial/ethnic councils need to continue to be prophetic voices calling the church to reform.

3. Each racial/ethnic council has a particular history beyond the scope and understanding of the General Synod Council.

In response to P-5 (pp. 52-53), the advisory committee recommended:

R-24.
To postpone any decision on the establishment of a Commission on Multicultural Life. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The collaboration in R-23 above needs to occur without presupposing related recommendations.

2. P-5 requires development first of a plan for these issues.

3. A commission may not be the best vehicle to address these issues.

4. Budgetary implications for establishing a commission have not been explored.
REPORTS ON CHURCH VOCATIONS

Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary

“Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD” (Ps. 118:19).

Jesus said, “I am the gate; whoever enters by me will be saved” (John 10:9).

GATEWAYS

Gateways are symbolic. The metaphor of a gate is often used to mark important transitions in human lives. Plato challenged his students in Athens by placing over the door of his academy, “Let No One Ignorant of Geometry Enter.” Dante began his and Virgil’s descent into Hell by having them enter a portal inscribed “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here.” Samuel Shoemaker, the evangelical writer and theologian, cast his life in the metaphor of a gate with his best-known poem, “So I Stand by the Door: An Apology for My Life.”

New Brunswick Theological Seminary is a gateway to professional ministry for Christians from a wide variety of denominations. For many denominations with a strong tradition of an educated ministry, such as the RCA, it is a required gateway. An M.Div degree is required for ordination. For many others, from denominations that have emphasized call and the practice of ministry more than education, seminary is a gateway to leadership—as all areas of human endeavor, ministry included, now expect a broader grounding and reach from their leaders than in years past.

New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) in both its locations, at New Brunswick, New Jersey, and on the campus of St. John’s University in Jamaica, Queens, New York, is also a gateway to deeper faith and broader, stronger, connections to reality for all who spend time at the school. As all who have been through seminary know, one acquires more than a collection of facts through a seminary education. The interactions with students, faculty, and the people from the larger church who frequent the seminary create relationships and change perceptions in ways that make all the future different. Each of these experiences is a gate to the kingdom that God is creating among us.

There are five gates at New Brunswick Theological Seminary through which all pass—students, faculty, administration, and those who do specialized and continuing education. These gateways are not just for the seminary. The church passes through them on the way to the kingdom that God is preparing. These five gateways are principles that shape and define all that is done at NBTS in the faith that passing through these gates will bring people to the one who said, “I am the gate.”

Gateway #1—Access

New Brunswick Theological Seminary used to be a very small family affair. It was a small school serving a small part of a small denomination. In recent years, God has been using the seminary in the larger Christian family, educating all as to what God’s family is really about. In the not too distant past, NBTS served an average student body of forty. Those students were uniformly male, white, and unencumbered with the rich expressions of Christian faith that did not conform to Calvinism with a Dutch accent. The seminary read the whole book of Acts but really identified with James, the brother of Jesus. He was the conservative one who did not risk missionary activity but stayed in Jerusalem and kept people attentive to the traditions.
Peter, Cornelius, and Paul have now arrived in the seminary campus consciousness. And the signs of God’s whole family are abundant. There are more students—180 to 200 students usually. But it is not just numbers. There are students from at least twenty and often as many as thirty denominations. There are students, faculty, and staff members from a rainbow of races and ethnic backgrounds—so much so that there is no single racial or ethnic group that is a majority on campus.

Why are they coming? Because NBTS is committed to access! Many, and perhaps even most, who receive a call to ministry find it difficult to afford the three years of time and the money a traditional seminary education requires. NBTS makes it possible for the people God has called to make the transition. Classes are offered mostly in the evening, allowing people to continue the employment necessary for financial support. Students come to NBTS part-time, taking a few courses at a time. This is more work for the faculty, as each faculty person must deal with more people for a longer stretch of time than in the traditional three-year program. However, it is a price gladly paid to provide access to a seminary education.

So, NBTS, while it firmly remains a seminary of the Reformed Church in America, is now fully a seminary of and for the whole church, providing access to theological education for all God’s people. And that rainbow of people and traditions means that the yeast leavening the bread at NBTS will nourish the rich smorgasbord the church is becoming in the twenty-first century.

Gateway #2—Inclusion

How do you decide who gets to become a minister? What does a minister look like and what does a minister do? How do you make a minister? In other professions, the job looks more clear-cut. Dentists need to know the difference between a decayed tooth and a healthy one. Dentists need manual dexterity to fix teeth while creating a minimum of pain in the patient. But what does a minister need to know? How to save souls? How to talk about sin while creating a minimum of pain in the patient? What does a minister do in the real world? What hands-on skills do ministers have?

The making of a minister is the enabling of a person to catch the very subtle drift of the action of the Holy Spirit among us. As with Elijah, so with us. The Holy Spirit is not a loud MTV type. When God called Elijah to stand on the mountain (1 Kings 19:11-12), God spoke not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still small voice. The “still small voice,” as the King James Version describes it, is an icon for the work of the Spirit. The New International Version translates it as “a gentle whisper.” The New Revised Standard Version has it as “the sound of sheer silence.” Those three very different translations illustrate a reality that is very fragile and hard to grasp. God’s working in human life is mostly subtle and hard to grasp. The occasional “big splash” is the exception, not the rule.

In the old days, a seminary made ministers by cloistering students in an ivory tower so they would not be distracted and would then be able to catch the subtlety of the Spirit. Frequently they caught the Spirit, but they also frequently lost touch with the world of everyday people. Today, the NBTS faculty is trying to educate with more precision, nurturing people who have heard God’s call while helping them stay in touch with life. It is a delicate balancing act, requiring intensity, vision, and a passion like Elijah’s. Today, like Elijah, the whole picture of what God has been doing is not seen until long after the immediate moment on the mountain or in the classroom.

NBTS provides the environment in which the fine, painstaking, subtle, and delicate work of making a minister can happen. In the immediate moment, NBTS is books, teachers, and such. But the real effect in the work of the kingdom may be years away. Because no one reads the mind of God to know whom God has called, NBTS is open to all who claim the call. The kingdom of God will include all sorts of folks one would not have thought of, and the
seminary must do so as well. It is above all else the Reformed doctrine of election at work. God chooses people to be the church. The seminary's task is not the choosing but the living and working with all whom God has chosen.

Gateway #3—Urban Focus

New Brunswick Theological Seminary follows Michelangelo who, when asked how he sculpted an elephant, replied, “The elephant is inside the block and I cut away all the marble that does not look like elephant.” So NBTS works at helping its students become ministers. Some of that work is adding and some of it is subtracting, but all of it is engaging those who are part of the seminary community in the work of being the church.

It is a multifaceted work in this day because this day is the day of the City. Once upon a time, it seemed like everyone knew what a minister was, what he—always he—was supposed to look like, how he would behave, and where he could be found. But now it is clear that the Lord of the church has called ministry into full bloom in both genders, from all the peoples of the world, and to work in all manner of places. There are ministers of the gospel, graduates of NBTS, who are women responsible for city-wide programs of education and shelter for homeless persons. There are ministers of the gospel, graduates of NBTS, who are men coordinating nursing programs that serve thousands of people. There are ministers of the gospel, graduates of NBTS, whose title is pastor and whose work is package delivery, housecleaning, grief counseling, theological education, evangelical persuasion, and a host of other possibilities and options that often seem to multiply and change on a daily basis.

The new ministerial identity is perhaps not as new as one might think. Peter and Andrew were not, after all, just unemployed Galilean beach bums with the freedom to wander around the countryside with Jesus. They were fisherfolk whose lives God reformed into fishers for people, while they remained fishers of fish. Paul sewed tents everywhere he went. In these cases, as it has been since, Jesus molds the life into a useful tool for kingdom work, and in that molding he is pleased to use the ministry of theological education. At NBTS the seminary focuses that education on the urban world that so badly needs to experience the gospel.

Gateway #4—The Ecumenical Church

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America made a gift this year to twenty-one Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, African Methodist Episcopal, Korean Presbyterian, and Reformed Church in America parishes. These churches are the particular ones that will benefit because they are receiving one of this year’s graduates of NBTS. For all the people that will be touched in ministry by these graduates, the contribution of General Synod now has a very special name and face.

It is particularity that makes ministry. Some of these graduates have been six years in the making. They spent six years wrestling with particular points of doctrine, particular Hebrew verbs, and particular classmates from other Christian traditions. They worked through particular and monumental traffic jams to get from their daily work to the campus in New Brunswick, New Jersey, or the campus at St. John’s University in Jamaica, Queens, New York. They shared and led particular chapel services and learned how much easier it is to critique worship than to be responsible for it. They engaged particular people during their supervised ministry, and they began to discover the joy and the stress of sharing the things of God.

Ministry always takes form in a particular setting. The Acts of the Apostles shows this most clearly. There is not a single story of a “corporation ministry” with a marketing plan to save thousands. There are no stories of the founding of universities or seminaries to research the
principles behind what God is doing in the world. There are stories of people meeting God, sometimes in surprising ways, as when Peter discovers Jesus in the house of Cornelius. At other times God is met in unexpected ways, as in the Jerusalem Council where God’s plan is made clear through a church fight. It is the particular stories that matter and are the heart of Christ’s presence among us.

For New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the parish is the real world. NBTS prepares people to mediate God’s Word to particular folk in particular places at a particular time. In that work, the gift of the RCA has been a special blessing. Just ask the soul who finds God in one of those twenty-one parishes, who might not have had a pastor were it not for the gift provided by the Reformed Church in America.

Gateway #5—A Single Conversation

What does NBTS teach apprentice ministers about life, over and above what they learn just from living? A recent guest at NBTS (let’s call him Bill) found out by sharing in a class session. Bill comes from a rural area of the country. His town has a population of three thousand and has one industry—agriculture. The people who live in this town are all descendants of the original northern European settlers. While Bill is well-informed and a full participant in modern life, he had not had an opportunity for personal sustained relationships with folks who live differently and have different approaches to life. During the four hours of class sessions and chapel, Bill was in dialogue with a class in which he was one of three with a northern European heritage, and the only one who lived and worked in an agricultural community. At the end of the evening he said, “I feel like I have been on a world tour.”

Bill was asked what he meant by that comment. He replied that he had difficulty understanding the speech of some of the other students. He was surprised to find a vigorous difference of views among people who lived and worked in the same area. Most of all, Bill was impressed by how well these folk from the big city knew the Bible. “Better,” he said, “than the elders of my church back home.” His parting comment was that he had been given a whole new idea of what ministry and ministers might be.

The giving and receiving that Bill experienced happens for each and every person who studies at NBTS. Each student receives, in unimagined ways, a gift from God of another Christian person who lives with God. From that gift, gifts flow to hundreds, perhaps thousands, who will be met in the student’s future ministry. It is an old story, modeled on the gift of God to all people in the child born to Mary at Bethlehem. God does not give gifts at one season only, but in abundance at all times and all places. By providing NBTS to the whole church, the General Synod has become part and parcel of the constant giving of God to all.

A NEW MISSION STATEMENT

Learning to be clear and intentional about these five gateways at New Brunswick Theological Seminary has produced a variety of changes in the ways NBTS thinks about and lives out its mission. Among those changes is a new mission statement.

Through the fall of 1996 and the winter of 1997, NBTS developed a new mission statement in concert with congregations of the RCA and other churches who are part of the NBTS circle. First, the Board of Trustees of NBTS determined that a new mission statement must be brief, clear, and comprehensive. Letters were sent inviting suggestions. Approximately three hundred responses were received, and they included many very helpful suggestions. NBTS then conducted a series of ten gatherings for further conversations and refinements.
of the mission statement. While these gatherings were mostly held in the states around New Brunswick, a gathering was held in Pella, Iowa, as well. Following all these conversations, the Board of Trustees, at its February 1997 meeting, recommended to submit to the 1997 General Synod for approval the following new mission statement for New Brunswick Theological Seminary:

R-1.
To adopt the following amendment to the Constitution and Bylaws for New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Article II, Section 1 (addition is underlined; deletion is stricken out):

Article II

Purpose

Sec. 1 New Brunswick Theological Seminary serves the sovereign God who in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, is redeeming the Creation, reuniting a divided humanity, and establishing righteousness on earth. God calls the church of Jesus Christ to discipleship: to proclaim the gospel, to provide ministries of compassion, and to pursue justice and peace. The Seminary's mission is to prepare men and women for educated and faithful leadership in the church, particularly in congregations, and also in specialized ministries serving church and society.

As an institution of the Reformed Church in America, the Seminary is rooted in the Reformed tradition and committed to providing leadership for that denomination. New Brunswick is also an ecumenical seminary where the catholicity of the church is affirmed and leaders are prepared for ministry in many Christian communions.

The Seminary seeks to serve men and women of all ages and racial/ethnic backgrounds with academic programs suited to their needs: residential and commuter, full-time and part-time, day and evening. The Seminary draws upon the resources of its university context for graduate instruction in a variety of academic disciplines. Located in a socially diverse, religiously plural and racially mixed metropolitan culture, the Seminary seeks the integration of a classical theological education with the effective practice of ministry in urban, suburban, and village churches and institutions.

New Brunswick Theological Seminary is a teaching institution of the Reformed Church in America, called by God to be a servant of the whole church of Jesus Christ.

The seminary's mission is to continue the ministry of Jesus in our time and place by enabling persons to translate their calling and gifts into faithful Christian ministry. (ADOPTED)

This mission statement will now be the "measuring rod" for the work to which God has called New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
DETAILS

Inside the gateways of New Brunswick Theological Seminary there are many details that attract attention. There are five details that particularly stand out this year, and three of these are submitted to the 1997 General Synod for adoption.

Major Gifts

NBTS was especially blessed this year in the area of grants and gifts. The Feakes family has been generous to NBTS, endowing the L. Russel Feakes Chair of Church History. This year Clifford and Barbara Feakes further undergirded NBTS by increasing their planned gift to $1 million. Shortly after the news of this planned gift, an anonymous donor made a gift of $50,000 to fund the development of a comprehensive campus plan. When the campus plan is developed, this donor intends to make a gift of $1 million to implement the first phase of the campus plan.

Not too long after the comprehensive campus plan grant was received, New Brunswick Theological Seminary was selected by the Lilly Foundation to receive from their Program on Technology in Theological Education a grant of $210,000. This grant encourages cooperation among librarians, faculty members, computer technicians, media specialists, and administrators to develop new and creative ways to enhance theological education.

Finally, two previous bequests to the seminary completed their payments this past year. NBTS received $436,384 from the estate of J. Arthur Mauch and $80,000 from the estate of Mary Becker. The seminary is grateful to God for all of these generous shares in the mission of theological education.

Doctor of Ministry Program

NBTS plans to offer a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree in the Urban Ministry program in the late fall of 1997. Full accreditation of the program from the Association of Theological Schools and the New Jersey State Department of Education will be completed by October 1997.

Accreditation

NBTS is pleased to report that the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has accredited the seminary for a ten-year term, the longest term possible. The association did so with no notations of deficiencies. NBTS also had its accreditation renewed by the New Jersey State Department of Education. As these two agencies do not work with the same format, numerous voluminous reports were necessary for each agency. NBTS is grateful for the approvals of accreditation and perhaps even more grateful that the process is past.

Petition to Substitute Period of Ministry for the Twenty-Seven Month Requirement

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 3, of the Book of Church Order states:

Immediately following the enrollment of a candidate for the ministry, the classis shall petition . . . on behalf of the candidate for a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. Such a petition must be received a minimum of twenty-seven months prior to the time it is to be given final disposition by the General Synod through its agent. However, in instances where completion of theological training takes place prior to the required period of twenty-seven months, the classis may petition . . . to substitute a period of ministry supervised by the General Synod through its agent for all or part of its twenty-seven month requirement.
The Classis of New York petitioned General Synod through its agent to substitute a period of ministry for part of the twenty-seven month requirement for Young Na. Na received the M.Div. degree from New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1989, but will not fulfill the twenty-seven month requirement until September 1, 1998.

Before coming under the care of the Classis of New York in June 1996, Na served as a nonordained pastoral assistant in the Shin Kwan Church in Bayside, New York. She is currently working as a nonordained pastoral assistant at the Choong Syn Reformed Church in Flushing, New York.

R-2.
To approve fifteen months of ministry at the Choong Syn Reformed Church in Flushing, New York, as a substitute period of ministry for Young Na; and further,

to approve the petition from the Classis of New York to substitute a fifteen-month period of ministry for Young Na for part of the twenty-seven-month requirement under Chapter I, Part II, Article 8, Section 3 of the Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

The Rev. Dr. John Coakley

The Rev. Dr. John Coakley is the L. Russel Feakes Memorial Professor of Church History at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In January 1997 he was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This grant enables Coakley to extend his sabbatical to a full year and thereby enables him to complete his book on female mystics and their male collaborators. Grants from the NEH are extremely competitive. It is an honor for Coakley to be awarded this grant.

R-3.
To commend the Rev. Dr. John Coakley, General Synod Professor of Theology and L. Russel Feakes Memorial Professor of Church History, for his being awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; and further,

to extend to the Rev. Dr. John Coakley the very best wishes of the 1997 General Synod for a fulfilling sabbatical year. (ADOPTED)

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops, General Synod professor of theology and professor of ethics and community, has been on disability leave for several years. In 1997 Koops reaches the age of sixty-five.

R-4.
To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops has given his entire adult life and his whole self to the ministry of the Reformed Church in America for nearly three decades through his service to Western Theological Seminary and to New Brunswick Theological Seminary; and
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops has faithfully taught and formed women and men to be ministers of Word and sacrament of the Reformed Church in America and of the broader church of Jesus Christ; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops, through his preaching, teaching, writing, and daily witness has been a teacher of the whole church and a prophet of God’s reign in the world; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops, through his service on various commissions, boards, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, has pressed the church’s theology and discipleship; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops is known by those who have served with him as a man of keen intelligence and untarnished integrity, and is known by those who have been taught by him as a man of great insight and constant compassion, and is known by those who have lived their lives with him as a disciple of Jesus Christ with profound gifts for the teaching, preaching, and living of God’s transforming Word;

BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the nineteenth day of June 1997, offers thanks to God for the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops and for his many years of competent and faithful service to theological education in the Reformed Church in America; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, on behalf of the Reformed Church in America, declares its thanks to God for the faithful life and teaching ministry of the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops and offers its prayers that he will know God’s deepest peace and comfort through all his days. (ADOPTED)

R-5.
To declare Hugh Koops professor emeritus of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

➢ The Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, led General Synod in a time of prayer for the Rev. Dr. Hugh Koops. ✹

Report of Western Theological Seminary

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul describes the church as God’s field, in which many servants work at different tasks but toward one common purpose. As those who serve Western Theological Seminary (WTS) have gone about their work this past year, it has seemed that the portion of God’s field put into the care of the seminary has been graced with fertile soil and a favorable climate. The willing hands of many knowledgeable workers have been brought together, often in new rhythms, and side by side the seminary is gaining momentum as it moves along the rows. And God has richly blessed the work of Western Theological Seminary.
Following are some of the significant milestones and concerns of the past year. They reflect the work of many, both inside and outside of Western. They highlight the growth that is already visible as well as places where more time or attention is needed before seeds carefully planted can sprout.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR WESTERN: MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Thanks to a generous and gratifying response to the Campaign for Western: Mission in the 21st Century, the seminary was able to announce the attainment of its $12 million goal in April 1997, three months before the June 1997 conclusion of the campaign. At the time of this report, the total stood at $12.8 million.

The hundreds of gifts given and commitments made will increase Western's health and strength for years to come. That increased strength will benefit the church, as better-prepared men and women emerge to minister during this era of challenge and change. And far beyond money, the participation, prayers, and support of congregations and individuals nourishes WTS as it carries out its mission.

Some results of the Campaign for Western can already be seen. Three new academic chairs were funded. In September 1996 the Rev. Dr. James V. Brownson was installed as the James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament, a position funded by a gift from Peter and Pat Cook. Funds to establish a professorship in Christian education were given by G.W. and Edna Haworth, and anonymous donors made possible a chair in Reformed theology.

Another result of the campaign is that Western has substantially increased financial aid to students. Twenty-one new endowed scholarships have been established to date in response to the Campaign for Western. These scholarships will help lighten the burden of debt for many students in years to come.

More results of the campaign will soon become apparent in the introduction of new curricula for the M.Div. and M.R.E. degree programs, in support for faculty development and the CONnECTS program, and in upgraded technical support.

ENROLLMENT

Western Theological Seminary welcomed thirty-three first-year students to the master of divinity program in the fall of 1996. That's a relatively large junior class, and the group is also younger than the national average for first-year seminary students. Of the thirty-three, fifteen are recent graduates of the three RCA colleges. Twenty-seven give the RCA as their home denomination.

This year's large entering class and the prospect of another for 1997-98 is putting a strain on seminary housing. The on-campus townhouse apartments have proven popular and valuable in building a sense of community, and the demand for them consistently outstrips the number of units available. The seminary is therefore beginning to look at options to expand residence space.

FACULTY AND STAFF

On July 1, 1996, the Rev. Dr. James V. Brownson, who also serves as the James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament, assumed the duties of academic dean. He is assisted in directing the academic program by the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr., professor of religious education and associate dean.
Professor of missiology the Rev. Dr. George R. Hunsberger coedited *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* with the Rev. Dr. Craig Van Gelder, professor of domestic missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary. Hunsberger also enjoyed a sabbatical leave this past year, during which he consulted with various denominational groups about becoming missional churches and wrote about the missional church with a team of colleagues from the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

Professor of Christian education the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. was also on sabbatical leave during the past year. His sabbatical project included researching the education programs of new RCA church starts in order to discover ways to strengthen Christian education in new churches.

Professor of historical and systematic theology the Rev. Dr. Christopher Kaiser developed a course examining the relationship between science and religion. This course was honored by the Templeton Foundation. Old Testament professor the Rev. Dr. Carol Bechtel Reynolds wrote *Sowing Tears, Reaping Joy: The Bible and Brahms Requiem*, a Bible study published by the Kerygma Program. Professor of systematic theology the Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink contributed an introductory essay to *Interpreting John Calvin: Ford Lewis Battles*, published by Baker Book House of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In February 1997 Kenneth Neevel began work as director of advancement and communications. The Rev. Vernon Hoffman retired from the director’s position but continues doing advancement work for WTS on a part-time basis.

During the next two years the seminary will be initiating searches to fill faculty positions due to the retirements of the Rev. Drs. James Cook, I. John Hesselink, and Donald Bruggink. Western asks for the prayers of the RCA on behalf of those conducting the searches, as well as for those who through these positions will help shape leaders for the church of the twenty-first century.

** NOMINATION TO THE OFFICE OF GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY **

The Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. joined the Western Theological Seminary faculty in 1988 as dean of the faculty and assistant professor of Christian education. After nine years of distinguished service to the seminary, he now serves as professor of Christian education and associate dean. As part of Brown’s most recent review, the Western Theological Seminary Board of Trustees affirmed his desire to serve as a General Synod Professor of Theology and is placing him in nomination to the fourth office, as provided for in the Book of Church Order (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 3).

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. has demonstrated excellence in teaching in the area of Christian education, modeling in his own life and ministry those forms of excellence in Christian education that he seeks to instill in his students; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. has shown himself to be a diligent and faithful administrator and an advocate, mentor, and friend to many theological students; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. serves Jesus Christ, the Reformed Church in America, and the whole church of Jesus Christ through his teaching, scholarship, and service;
THEREFORE, it is fitting and proper that the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary nominates the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. to the Office of General Synod Professor of Theology in the Reformed Church in America.

R-6.
To elect the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr., professor of Christian education and associate dean, to the Office of General Synod Professor of Theology in the Reformed Church in America, as provided for in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8. (ADOPTED)

➢ The president introduced the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. to the Synod. The president read the “Appointment of a General Synod Professor of Theology” from the Book of Church Order and then conducted a service of installation into the Office of General Synod Professor of Theology for the Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. The Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. read the “Declaration for General Synod Professors of Theology” from the Book of Church Order during the service of installation. <

➢ The Rev. Dr. George Brown, Jr. addressed the Synod. <

CURRICULUM REVISION

Under the leadership of Dean Brownson, the faculty is developing new curricula for the M.Div. and M.R.E. programs, to be instituted in the fall of 1998. The new curricula are designed to help students learn in a framework of mission and in partnership with teaching churches. A movement in the academic schedule from a quarter system to a semester system is also anticipated.

CHIAPAS

In January 1997 a group of students and others traveled to Chiapas, Mexico, to meet the indigenous people among whom RCA missionaries work and to study the current political situation in Chiapas. Some sort of intercultural learning, such as this study seminar, is required as part of the M.Div. program. This year’s group was led by President Voskuil; Western’s librarian, the Rev. Paul Smith; and the Rev. Roger DeYoung, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Mexico.

STUDENT LIFE

The annual all-seminary retreat was held at Geneva Camp & Retreat Center in Holland, Michigan, August 30, 1996. Old Testament professor the Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Boogaart, recently returned from a year’s study in Israel, led the day’s reflections.

The student council, led by its president, Andrew DeBraber, provided social activities for the seminary community. Among the year’s events were “parents’ nights out,” designed for students with young children; “movie nights”; an international potluck; and the annual all-seminary spring banquet.

CONnECTS

The Continuing Education for Christian Training and Service (CONnECTS) in 1996-97 included lectures and workshops on topics ranging from spirituality in the practice of medicine to the seeker-friendly movement, from building authenticity in youth ministry to developing spiritual leadership in the consistory. Among the guest lecturers and workshop
leaders Western welcomed to campus were the Rev. Dr. Jan Mili Lochman, the Rev. Dr. Donald K. McKim, the Rev. Dr. Charles Olsen, the Rev. Dr. Cornelius Plantinga, Dr. Diane Komp, and the Rev. Dr. Gerald Sittser.

The 1996 summer months brought opportunities for longer workshops and seminars. They included Children and Worship training with Christian education professor Dr. Sonja M. Stewart, a pastoral refreshment and leadership conference with preaching professor the Rev. Timothy Brown and business leader Max DePree, and a travel seminar in Greece with professor of historical theology the Rev. Dr. Donald A. Bruggink. Professors Dennis Voskuil, George Brown, and Donald Bruggink also led intensive summer courses for TEA students on Western’s campus.

Heavy demands on faculty and difficulties in organizing off-campus events slowed the progress of that portion of the CONnECTS program in the past year. However, Western remains committed to offering its resources in service to the wider church, especially to the lay leadership. The staff and the CONnECTS advisory board are exploring more efficient and effective ways to take Western “on the road.”

TECHNOLOGY

Western Theological Seminary officially entered cyberspace in 1997, establishing a home page on the World Wide Web at http://www.westernsem.org, with a direct link to the RCA home page (http://www.rca.org). The seminary also continued to upgrade its computer system and installed a more efficient and adequate telephone system.

FINANCES

Western Theological Seminary was pleased to meet its budget for 1995-96. Two aspects of the financial year are worthy of particular note. First, increased giving to Western on the part of RCA congregations was especially exciting, reflecting the congregations’ awareness that the future of the RCA depends in large part on the strength of its seminaries. Second, the Campaign for Western generated substantial revenue, especially an increase in the endowment fund.

WTS continues to work diligently at being a good steward of the resources God has so graciously provided. The faithful support shown by many RCA congregations and members is truly gratifying.

DISPENSATION

The Western Theological Seminary Board of Trustees presents a request for a dispensation from the degree of Master of Divinity requirement on behalf of Jesús García under the provision of the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 2. The following factors are cited for this request:

1. Jesús García was promised by the Classis of California (albeit without consultation with the General Synod or any of its agents) that ordination with a dispensation would be sought for him after completing a specially designed educational track. García successfully completed this track in good faith, based on the advice of the classis. A request for dispensation under the provision of the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 1 was brought on his behalf by the Classis of California and forwarded to the 1996 General Synod by the TEA Board of Trustees (MGS 1996, pp. 298-300). At the 1996 General Synod the dispensation request was ruled out of order, since it should have been submitted under Section 2 of Article 10, rather than under Section 1 (MGS 1996, p. 300).
2. In accordance with the *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 2a, an inquiry into the circumstances that might qualify the candidate for consideration under Section 2 revealed the following considerations that qualify García:

a. García has cooperated in good faith with the Reformed Church in America, even though communication problems within the denominational structures resulted in delays and changing expectations being placed on him in the process of preparing for ordination. These miscommunications call for special consideration in this case.

b. García’s lack of facility with English makes for great stress and great demands on his time in pursuing course work at Fuller Theological Seminary, since much of this course work must be done in English.

c. García has proven himself to be competent in ministry, as is indicated by his five years of service at Iglesia De La Redencion.

d. García is forty-one years of age and has a family to care for while receiving less than the Classis of California minimum salary for his ministry at Iglesia De La Redencion. A full seminary training would impose great financial hardship on the family.

3. The Western Theological Seminary faculty examined Jesús García in accordance with the provision of the *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 2b. In its examination, the faculty discerned the presence of significant compensating gifts for ministry that, when considered along with his age, economic constraints, language difficulties, and good faith efforts to work with the Classis of California, qualify him for a dispensation under Section 2. García is in the process of completing some course work required by the faculty to compensate for areas of weakness in academic preparation that were detected in the examination. With the completion of this course work, the faculty believes that García has sufficient competence in those areas of knowledge the Reformed Church in America has designated as indispensable for the proper exercise of the Office of minister of Word and Sacrament.

R-7.
To grant Jesús García a dispensation from the degree of Master of Divinity requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.
(ADOPTED)

CONCLUSION

The board of trustees, staff, faculty, and students of Western Theological Seminary give thanks to God for the privilege of serving, teaching, and leading during the year 1996-1997. The seminary also thanks God for the many prayers offered during the past year on its behalf. To God be the glory!

Report of the Theological Education Agency (TEA)

The Theological Education Agency (TEA) was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America in 1984 and began its service to the RCA in 1985. This year represents twelve years of TEA ministry, the initial six years under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Van Wyk and the past six years under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Cornelis G. Kors. Kors continues to serve TEA with the help of an administrative assistant, Kelly Talsma. TEA has two offices: 1) a main office at the Classis of California office in Cerritos, California, and 2) a faculty office at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.
The TEA Board of Trustees continues to govern TEA with an eye on the future needs for leadership in the RCA. It does this by means of advocacy on behalf of candidates who require flexibility as they respond to God’s call in their life, and by providing ministerial formation programs and preparation that fit the unique situations of individuals. This year three board members are completing their second three-year term of faithful service: 1) TEA moderator Sybrand VanderDussen of Chino, California; 2) Timothy Gambles of Los Angeles, California; and 3) the Rev. John Opmeer of Vancouver, British Columbia. Special thanks and well wishes are expressed to these individuals as they complete six years of service on the TEA Board of Trustees.

The TEA Board of Trustees, upon the recommendation of the TEA Certification Committee, awarded Certificates of Fitness for Ministry this past year to the following individuals:

- James Anderson  
  Classis of Mid-Hudson
- Edward N. Baker  
  Classis of South Grand Rapids
- Dwayne Decker  
  Classis of Central California
- Michael DeRuyter  
  Classis of South Grand Rapids
- Douglas Dobbie  
  Classis of South Grand Rapids
- Kathleen Edwards  
  Classis of Red River
- Robert Ford  
  Classis of Illiana
- Daniel Griswold  
  Classis of Schenectady
- Steven Peterson  
  Classis of Minnesota
- Christopher Piersma  
  Classis of Illiana
- Brian Stone  
  Classis of Wisconsin
- Eric Titus  
  Classis of Red River
- Lori Walber  
  Classis of Minnesota
- Harold Willemsyn  
  Classis of Dakota

ENROLLMENT STATISTICS

The enrollment statistics for TEA, as of March 1, 1997, are:

- Registered candidates: 70
- Inactive and special: 4
- Supervision of licensed candidates: 2
- Applicants: 4

TOTAL: 80

FINANCES

TEA was pleased to experience another surplus in its 1996 budget for the fifth year in a row. Special gratitude is expressed to those congregations and classes who came through with extra gifts when the budget did not look so good. TEA budgets over the past five years are listed below:

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The above excess income has been invested in the RCA Cash Program, and plans are to also add excess income to the TEA Endowment Fund established in 1991 with PPIM funds. The TEA Endowment Fund was established for the purpose of giving financial assistance to TEA
candidates to participate in the summer intensive courses. The fund continues to provide financial assistance for this purpose.

The TEA budget for 1997 is $215,000.

PROGRAM

Opening the Doors of Opportunity Video

As part of an effort to explain the purpose of TEA to the RCA as a denomination and to individual RCA supporting congregations, the TEA Board of Trustees requested RCA Productions to produce a ten-minute video explaining the TEA ministry and its mission to encourage leadership formation in the RCA. The video was created by John Grooters, producer, and Kathy Smarella, associate for communications media. Distribution of the video has begun. Opening the Doors of Opportunity is also available, upon request, from the RCA Distribution Center. The TEA board hopes this video is helpful in explaining the purpose of TEA and will subsequently develop more support for the TEA ministry and its candidates.

Summer Intensives

During the past year three summer intensives were offered. In June 1996 Summer Intensive I (RCA Standards and RCA Polity) was taught by the Rev. Dr. I. John Hesselink from Western Theological Seminary (WTS) and the Rev. Dr. Robert Hoeksema from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS). Summer Intensive I was held at the site of the 1996 General Synod meeting on the campus of Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. Summer Intensive II (RCA History and Mission Programs) was taught by the Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil of WTS. Summer Intensive III (RCA Worship) was co-taught by the Rev. Dr. George Brown and the Rev. Dr. Donald Bruggink, both from WTS. Summer Intensive II and Summer Intensive III were taught at Western Theological Seminary.

In 1997 Summer Intensive I (RCA Standards and RCA Polity) will be taught by the Rev. Dr. Paul Fries from NBTS and the Rev. Wesley Kiel from WTS. It will be offered the week after the 1997 General Synod meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin. Summer Intensive II (RCA History and Missions) and Summer Intensive III (RCA Worship) will both be taught by the Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter, adjunct professor from NBTS and pastor at Community Church in Hoboken, New Jersey. Summer Intensive II and Summer Intensive III will be held at Southern California Christian College in Costa Mesa, California. The Southern California location was selected in order to enable more convenient participation for Fuller Theological Seminary students and the many racial/ethnic pastors in the Southern California area.

Candidate Care Committee

The TEA Board of Trustees strongly supports the concept of each classis creating a Candidate Care Committee. (This is a committee proposed by the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America. See the task force’s report in the Church Vocations section.) These committees are crucial in improving communication between the RCA seminaries, TEA, and the classis as well as giving the type of oversight that candidates for ministry need and deserve. The TEA board believes that potential conflicts between the candidate and the church in which he or she is working, the seminary where studies are taking place, or the classis of care, will be avoided with the creation of a Candidate Care Committee.
The Candidate Care Committee is a means to provide strong support for the candidate's ministerial formation during his or her years of preparation for the ministry. Other reasons for establishing a Candidate Care Committee are:

1. There is a void in the existing system of careful and intimate supervision of candidates.

2. Communication between the classis, the RCA seminary or TEA, the teaching church, and the candidate will be greatly facilitated and improved.

3. With many classes changing the membership of their committees responsible for student care and supervision, the Candidate Care Committee is a possible unifying force for bringing stability and consistency to the “care” process.

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-8:

R-8.
To request urge each classis of the Reformed Church in America that is caring for candidates preparing for ordination as RCA ministers of Word and sacrament to immediately establish a separate Candidate Care Committee (CCC) for each candidate as set forth in the Report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: The amendments urge immediate implementation of the process.

DISPENSATIONS

The TEA Certification Committee and the TEA Board of Trustees present a request for a dispensation from the Hebrew language requirement on behalf of Robert Drier. Initially, the Classis of Minnesota requested the dispensation under the provision of the Book of Church Order, Part II, Article 10, Section 1.

Several factors were cited for the request; namely, Drier's age (fifty-eight), his past experience attempting to learn the biblical languages in which he encountered great difficulty and emotional stress, and his poor health with a history of acute angina.

R-9.
To grant Robert Drier a dispensation from the Hebrew language requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. (ADOPTED)

The TEA Certification Committee and the TEA Board of Trustees present a request for a dispensation from the biblical languages on behalf of Janice Conklin Hesselink. Initially, the Classis of Albany requested this dispensation under the provision of the Book of Church Order, Part II, Article 10, Section 1.

Several factors were cited for the request; namely, Hesselink’s age (sixty-three), difficulty in learning languages and memorizing, poor health with previous bouts of breast cancer and ongoing ulcerative colitis, limited financial resources as a widow, and the fact that her seminary (St. Bernards of Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Albany, New York) does not offer the biblical languages.

*Additions are in light-face type, deletion is stricken out.
R-10.
To grant Janice Conklin Hesselink a dispensation from the biblical language requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.
(ADOPTED)

From the Report of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

RECRUITMENT OF HISPANICS FOR SEMINARY TRAINING

The Council for Hispanic Ministries prays for the day that Hispanic churches can call ministers educated in RCA seminaries. As ministry becomes more complex, the importance of calling well-trained, seminary-educated pastors increases. Currently, Hispanics must search for pastors from other denominations or without a seminary education. There are two prongs in the task for Hispanic congregations: 1) to train new pastors in RCA polity and Reformed theology, and 2) to build the membership of the congregations. The process is long and requires patience. The inevitable slow growth is frustrating RCA assemblies and consistories. Help is needed from the RCA seminaries to train Hispanics for ministry.

Past painful experiences that have closed doors do not have to be repeated if the RCA plans correctly for new Hispanic ministries. The Council for Hispanic Ministries is the expert group within the RCA to address Hispanic ministry issues.

Forty-four Hispanic ministers are currently working in the RCA as pastors and specialized ministers. This number includes twenty Hispanic pastors with seminary degrees. Some even have a Ph.D. degree. Approximately ten to fifteen pastors are prospective seminarians. These pastors are older adults—parents with families. They are not young persons fresh out of college. Most of these pastors are ordained and have excellent practical experience in ministry. They are deeply immersed in full-time ministry, and many of them even hold another full-time job. This commitment of time to their ministries makes attending seminary seem like an unattainable goal. Although a seminary education enhances knowledge, potential Hispanic seminary students need to be convinced that the time, energy, and effort devoted to completing a seminary education leads to knowledge that is useful for urban mission and personal growth—edifying the person and connecting to the roots of congregational mission and ministry. Contrary to popular belief, Hispanics will attend seminary if they are convinced of the value of attending. Relevant urban ministry courses are overdue in many seminary curriculums.

Financial assistance for Hispanic seminary students is needed. In the Reformed Church in America, classes have the responsibility of caring for ministers and students. The current practice is to help students with stipends from classes and congregations. Although some seminary scholarships are available, the current cost of a seminary education remains high and is beyond the means of most Hispanic persons already in ministry. There needs to be a commitment to increasing the dollar amounts of stipends, assistance, and scholarships that are available. The alternate track recommended in the "Report of the Task Force on the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America" (see this report in this Church Vocations section) should not be the "primary track" for those with financial limitations.
To urge the RCA seminaries, in consultation with the Council for Hispanic Ministries, to find ways to increase recruitment of Hispanics and to provide increased financial assistance for Hispanics and other racial/ethnic people desiring to obtain a seminary education. (ADOPTED)

Report of the Board of Pensions

The Board of Pensions of the Reformed Church in America currently serves 937 persons who are receiving benefits in the form of ongoing retirement income, disability payments, regular or special assistance grants, and/or survivor benefits. In addition, it serves 2,130 persons not yet retired or otherwise receiving benefits but who are making preparation for the future by building annuity fund accounts. In addition, the board administers health care insurance programs for both retirees and those in active service, provides life insurance coverage to those under age sixty-five, and long-term disability insurance coverage.

For a church to have such programs in place is not unusual. Most denominations have them. The test is whether or not what is offered is adequate to meet real needs, both in emergencies and over a long term. As life expectancies increase, clergy and other church workers—already a group that tends to experience longevity—must plan for the possibility that they will live three and even four decades beyond their retirement date. It is obvious that the thirty to forty years after age sixty-five (consistently the average age at which RCA participants retire) are as long as the thirty or forty years prior. If changes in the economy during the next three decades even approximate those in the last three, planning for retirement is placed in sobering perspective.

It is gratifying to report that those who retired in the “class of 1995” (the most recent data available) after at least thirty years of service had an average annual retirement income from the Reformed Church Annuity Fund of $24,695, the highest of the forty denominations reporting to the annual Church Pensions Conference. However, even low rates of inflation will steadily erode the buying power of those dollars, making it essential that RCA retirees not only set aside 20 percent to 30 percent of their first year’s retirement income for use in the years after age eighty, but also that they be protected by Social Security and have access to adequate savings of their own.

These three “legs” to the retirement income stool—the RCA Annuity Fund, Social Security, and personal savings—are stressed in preretirement seminars held throughout the year and in various places by the board’s team of presenters. The team consists of the Rev. Norman Tellier, a certified financial planner; Barbara Diekman, the board’s pensions administrator; and Joanne Fernandez, from the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services. Four such seminars were held in 1996, and more are planned for 1997.

When it comes to personal savings, the Reformed Church Annuity Fund offers a voluntary program through which annuity fund members can have money deposited “in lieu of salary” into a tax-deferred account permitted in plans that fall under section 403(b) of the Internal Revenue code. Participants may choose either to have this account invested in the same manner as the rest of the Reformed Church Annuity Fund or have their account managed by
the Scudder Growth and Income Fund. Either way, the additional contribution option offers all who can afford to do so an excellent way to build the resources needed for a more secure retirement.

**EBPH AMOUNT AND COVERAGE**

A unique difference between the RCA’s defined contribution plan and other plans is the manner in which the minimum contribution level is defined. By utilizing the Effective Buying Power per Household (EBPH) formula to establish the minimum annuity fund dues for installed ministers, even those at lower salary levels have sufficient contributions made into their accounts during years of active service to produce adequate accumulations at the time of retirement. In 1995 the EBPH minimum was $5,140. To the surprise of most, the EBPH for 1996 showed a significant decrease to $4,476. The reason was a change by the organization that supplies the figure in the formula used to calculate it. It seemed wise to continue to use this external indicator without adjustment, since it is objective and based on reliable data. The disadvantage to participants of a temporary decrease in the minimum dues paid is offset by the easing of at least one mandatory item in the budgets of many hard-pressed RCA congregations.

While the EBPH is effective as a safeguard for many against coming to the age of retirement without adequate means to retire, the numbers who slip through this safety net increase each year. The EBPH is a mandatory provision in the Book of Church Order because the call form for an installed minister stipulates that compensation shall include the prescribed dues to the Reformed Church Annuity Fund (BCO, Appendix, The Formularies of the Reformed Church in America, Call to a Minister of Word and Sacrament). Those who are not installed according to a classis-approved call but serve under some other arrangement may not enjoy the protection of the EBPH formula.

In many instances, such as part-time ministries or those classis-approved specialized ministries where the salary comes from sources outside the RCA, an EBPH requirement cannot realistically be enforced. But this also raises the possibilities that, after spending a large part of his or her career in an arrangement that is not subject to a formal call (thus outside the EBPH provision), a minister of the RCA may face retirement with very inadequate preparation. Who then becomes responsible to ensure that adequate retirement income is provided? The answer is usually that this is the responsibility of individuals who chose such a course of their own free will, but it is also likely that the Reformed Church in America will assume some responsibility should such a person upon death leave a spouse who, in their advanced years, faces critical financial needs. The classis that approves the form of ministry for each of its enrolled ministers, whether or not such a ministry is subject to formal call requirements, does need to call attention to what may in time become a denominational problem. At the very least, the matter should be explored with the minister when approval of the choice of ministry is being sought.

 GTA The advisory committee recommended to amend R-12:

**R-12.**

To encourage urge classes to review the plans of each RCA minister of Word and sacrament for a financially secure retirement prior to installation to a form of ministry that is not under a call (cf. Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 13, Section 4a). (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: Recognizing the importance of this funding, additional impetus is given to R-12 by this amendment. ✉

*Addition is in light-face type, deletion is stricken out.
ASSISTANCE GRANTS AND GENERAL FUND

A major concern for many years has been the needs of the older retirees (retiring prior to 1972) who are the special responsibility of RCA churches they served and are the focus of much of the board’s attention. Assistance is provided as needed, and in 1996 assistance grants (both ongoing and for emergencies) totaled $602,768. What is worthy of note is that this figure compares very closely to the total for such grants in 1995 ($601,372), which is in line with projections made several years ago that the need for assistance would peak in the late 1990s. The board’s General Fund, from which assistance grants as well as administrative costs are paid, again ended the year with a balanced budget. This can be attributed to the continuing generosity of RCA congregations and the fact that the one-half of 1 percent administrative fee that is levied on the assets of the Reformed Church Annuity Fund each year exceeds what is actually spent for administration. This balanced budget is a welcome change from the substantial deficits that were distressingly common only a few years ago.

R-13.
To encourage consistories of the Reformed Church in America to continue to include the needs of older retired ministers, missionaries, and surviving spouses in their benevolence budgets; and further,

to encourage consistories and congregations of the Reformed Church in America to give generously and thankfully to the General Fund of the Board of Pensions. (ADOPTED)

SENIOR PASTORS

Any program that bases grants on needs rather than on entitlements requires accurate and up-to-date information. The key to that lies with the network of “senior pastors” who have continued to serve the RCA with faithful excellence. Calling regularly on retirees in person, and staying in touch by telephone and mail at other times, the senior pastors are truly “the eyes and ears” of the Board of Pensions. Their ministry is received with thanks and enthusiasm by those they visit as well as being deeply appreciated by the staff and board members who follow up on their recommendations. Those serving in this capacity, together with their “territory,” are: the Rev. Bruce Penn (southeast region), the Rev. Edwin Mulder (Mid-Atlantic region and New York City), the Rev. Russell Pater (New York State and New England region), the Rev. John VerHoog (Ontario), the Rev. Henry Mouw (Great Lakes region), the Rev. Cornie Keunen (central midwest region, north to south), and the Rev. Eric Schulze (far west region, British Columbia to Arizona).

The ministry of the senior pastors is, in each instance, the team ministry of both husband and wife, and they are each fully engaged in the task.

RCA MEDICAL INSURANCE PROGRAM

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the RCA’s medical insurance program. The board’s insurance committee, combined with intense staff focus on cost control measures, succeeded in stabilizing costs without sacrificing quality of care. After some years of deficits, recovery was sufficient so that in 1996 a 10 percent reduction in premiums for the preretirement plan was possible. It was possible to continue the same premium rates in 1997.

In the retiree program, premiums have been maintained at a constant level for three years.

Cost control measures for the RCA medical insurance program included the establishment of a Reformed Church in America network in seven key states, in which Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs) offer medical care at a reduced charge. This measure alone resulted
in a savings of $463,938 in 1996. In 1997 nineteen additional states were added to the network program. A national network was also implemented to provide mental health counseling, an area of RCA coverage that has been intentionally maintained at a high level and includes marital counseling, not normally part of health plans. In this area of mental health counseling, the use of a network of preferred providers also extends the savings to the users, who pay a lower than usual copayment.

Increased attention is also being given to preventative care. The RCA's wellcare benefit was increased three-fold for adults and five-fold for infants up to one year of age. A revised prescription plan was instituted that permits participants to buy prescriptions with a $5 or $10 copayment.

Above all, the RCA medical insurance program is designed to provide a quality of care that participants deserve and want. As a self-funded program operated with concern and compassion, RCA medical insurance continues to strive for excellence in a fast-changing and challenging arena.

**RETIRED CLERGY**

During 1996 thirty-two RCA clergy retired from active service. Those who retired are being recognized by a display of their photos and service records as well as by General Synod's endorsement of an appropriate certificate of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

**R-14.**

To adopt the following resolution:

These have loved Christ and fed his sheep.  
They have devoted themselves  
to spreading the Word  
and equipping the saints  
for the work of ministry.

Their contribution to a needy world  
is rich beyond measure;  
their record is on high.

The Reformed Church in America,  
with admiration,  
deep affection,  
and overflowing thanks to God  
celebrates their lifelong service.

Lee Bayer  
Hudsonville, Michigan

Hezekiah Brady  
Saint Anne, Illinois

Robert Bedingfield  
Hampstead, North Carolina

James Brinkhuis  
Little Rock, Iowa

Randall Bosch  
Bayville, New York

Donald Den Hartog  
Orange City, Iowa

William Bouwer  
Munster, Indiana

Richard Evers  
Wilton, California
Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women met October 25-27, 1996, at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and February 7-9, 1997, at Carmel Retreat Center in Mahwah, New Jersey. The October 1996 meeting concluded with commission members participating in worship at Beechwood Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, and the February 1997 meeting concluded with commission members leading worship at Ponds Reformed Church in Oakland, New Jersey.

The commission’s responsibilities include providing resources for developing awareness and raising consciousness concerning human liberation; providing information for appointments that will facilitate the partnership of women and men in professional and
decision-making leadership of the denomination; assisting the church toward ensuring inclusive attitudes, images, and language in all published materials; working for systematic change to enable the full participation of women in church and society; and collaborating with RCA agencies, commissions, and ecumenical agencies on issues affecting women.

SURVEY

In 1988 the commission conducted a survey of RCA congregations to determine the number of women who were serving as elders and deacons. A similar survey was conducted in 1984-85. In its efforts to urge the denomination to include women in all offices of the church, the commission sees the necessity of another survey.

The commission recommends:

R-15.
To instruct the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services to send a letter to all clerks of RCA consistories, requesting a report of the male/female ratio of their current consistory membership; and further,

to submit these reports to the Commission for Women; and further,

to instruct the Commission for Women to submit a report on this survey of the male/female ratio of current RCA consistory membership to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE RELATIONSHIP OF REFORMED CHURCH WOMEN'S MINISTRIES WITH THE RCA STRUCTURE

Two members of the commission served on the Task Force to Study the Relationship of Reformed Church Women's Ministries with the RCA Structure. The task force identified a number of issues that were communicated directly to the Commission for Women as background for this report to the 1997 General Synod. The commission strongly endorses the report and the recommendations of the task force presented at this 1997 General Synod meeting (see the Report of the Task Force to Study the Relationship of Reformed Church Women's Ministries with the RCA Structure in the Christian Education and Discipleship section).

Women in Ministry Sunday

The Commission for Women continues to be a strong proponent of Women in Ministry Sunday, designated as the first Sunday in November, or whenever so designated by an RCA congregation. The commission encourages RCA congregations to participate. Bulletin covers and worship resource materials, designed especially for Women in Ministry Sunday, are available through the RCA Distribution Center. Original and new resources appropriate for Women in Ministry Sunday are welcome. The commission reviews all resources submitted. Resources may be submitted to the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services.

RETREAT FOR THEOLOGICALLY EDUCATED WOMEN

In 1978 General Synod instructed the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) to:

convene a meeting of more than fifty Reformed Church women who have received their theological education in seminaries for the purpose of affirming them in their Christian ministry and offering them our encouragement, support, and counsel (MGS 1978, R-9, p. 31).
In 1995 General Synod voted:


A retreat for theologically educated women took place November 8-10, 1996, at the Warwick Center in Warwick, New York. The Rev. Margaret Guenther led the retreat and received high reviews from the thirty-six participants.

Such retreat/events are an important part of the commission's work. A subcommittee, comprised of members from the Commission for Women and other RCA clergy women, is planning the next retreat/event scheduled for November 7-9, 1997, in the Chicago, Illinois, area.

SEMINARY ACCOUNTABILITY

The 1994 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission for Women to develop questions and/or guidelines for RCA seminaries to use to evaluate the treatment of women students; and further,

to instruct the RCA seminaries, in consultation and dialogue with women students, to prepare an annual report for five years on the treatment of women on RCA seminary campuses and to indicate specific steps taken and systems established (with attached examples) to secure just and fair treatment; and further,

to send the report to the Commission for Women to review at its spring meeting (MGS 1994, R-13, p. 276).

In response to reports received from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary and after the commission met with women students at Western Theological Seminary in October 1996 (a similar meeting is planned with women students at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in October 1997), the commission offered recommendations to the faculties of Western Theological Seminary and New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

The commission continues to seek ways to advocate for women seminary students as it works in collaboration with the RCA seminaries to ensure that equal opportunities for ministry are available for women students. The conversations between the commission and the RCA seminaries continue through questionnaires, letters, reports, and dialogue.

WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

The Commission for Women of the Reformed Church in America recognizes the worldwide responsibility that comes by being a part of the body of Christ. In fulfilling this responsibility, a member of the Commission for Women will represent the RCA at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) Assembly in Hungary in August 1997. This RCA representative will also attend the Women’s Pre-Assembly scheduled immediately prior to the WARC Assembly.
For some years it has been the practice of the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services (MAPS) to wait until after the annual meeting of General Synod to set its objectives for the ensuing year. This is done so that, in addition to the ongoing efforts of this office to provide support services to those who work for and through the Reformed Church in America, the specific recommendations made at General Synod can receive ample attention and be a priority. In 1996 General Synod once more provided MAPS with several areas of concern that required attention.

Pastoral Care of Clergy and Clergy Families

One such concern had to do with the RCA's continuing effort to improve the quality of pastoral care provided to RCA clergy and their families.

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct Ministry and Personnel Services, in consultation with stated clerks of classes, to develop a model position description for Classis Chaplain; and further,

to present a progress report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-21, p. 322).

In addition, the 1996 General Synod also voted:

To direct the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services to examine the manner in which classes comply with the Book of Church Order requirement to provide for the pastoral care of each enrolled minister and the minister's immediate family (BCO, Chapter I, Part II, Article 13, Section 3); and further,

to direct the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services to report its findings to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-13, p. 315).

When the 1996 General Synod amended the operative verb in the second motion (R-13 cited above) from the original "monitor" to "examine," the reason given for the amendment was to avoid "a connotation of authority and mistrust" (MGS 1996, p. 315). No General Synod Council committee, unit, or staff person, however well intentioned, ought to presume it has authority over a classis, and certainly not by exercising it through directions or instructions given by General Synod. Is it, however, indicative of "mistrust" when General Synod or the staff of the General Synod Council call attention to classis responsibilities that are not being adequately fulfilled? Does that not rather belong to the category of mutual accountability? In any case, it is in such a spirit that the following comments are made.

The matter of seeing to the pastoral care of clergy and clergy families is not new, and the 1996 General Synod instruction to report what MAPS knows about what is done and not done serves both to affirm those classes that have taken the responsibility seriously and to remind the RCA that such care is often lacking. Responsibility for pastoral care rests clearly with the classis; some do it well and others almost not at all.

The process for the delivery of such pastoral care varies greatly as well. Some classes have adopted the "pastor to pastors" approach, using the services of retired ministers who are members of the classis. In other situations, a classis pastoral relations committee takes responsibility on behalf of classis. There are regional synods in which pastoral care of clergy is included in the position description for synod executives.
What matters most, however, is not how such care is provided, but that it exists and is recognized by those for whom it is provided. Perhaps it is best judged adequate or inadequate by asking a simple question of ministers and their families: “Who is your pastor?” If the respondent knows and can give an immediate answer that designates a specific person, there is reason to believe the RCA has come a long way toward solving a long-standing problem—the reality that pastoral care for ministers and their families has been a missing dimension in our life together as a Christian community.

An anecdote and a statistical study can serve as indicators of need for improvements. An RCA pastor who experienced a serious and protracted illness involving extensive surgery and a series of hospitalizations reflected on his experience. He indicated that he had appreciated the many visits he received from minister colleagues. In fact, he suggested that at times there were too many! Then he added, “But I couldn’t get anybody to pray with me! You know, I didn’t want to come right out and ask them to, yet I needed that and nobody did it.” Without imagining too much, it is possible to conjecture what happened. His friends had come as friends. Though he is a person whose faith is profound and genuine, his piety is not overt or obvious. His pastor friends would probably have been glad to do what he wanted, but did not want to presume a pastoral role without his invitation and express permission. He has many friends who are pastors, but no friend who is also his pastor.

In contrast, everyone understands that the pastor of a congregation is expected to fill that role in the lives of its members. This is especially clear in times of illness, life transitions, or at other times of stress. Pastors, by virtue of their role, also have an implied right and privilege to initiate pastoral contact without being asked to do so. In fact, the minister is the only person left in our society for whom the right to initiate contact is considered appropriate and to whom it is usually granted. Others to whom people turn to for help, such as psychotherapists, physicians, and attorneys, do not have the right to initiate a professional visit. But this privilege is extended to those recognized to be pastors. For many ministers and minister’s spouses in the RCA, there is no such person.

In a recent survey within the Regional Synod of Albany, where the support of clergy and their families has been a long-standing priority and where it is taken seriously, forty-one clergy spouses responded to the question “Who is your pastor?” Eighteen indicated that they had none; twenty-three replied that their spouse is their pastor. Perhaps both responses are accurate, but they reflect different understandings and definitions of “pastor.” In the Reformed Church in America’s understanding of the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, the ministry of pulpit and table has a very significant place in the role concept. Spouses of clergy are frequently the most engaged participants in the worship life of the local congregation. They are also more aware than most people of the minister’s own faith commitments, the integrity and care that RCA ministers typically give to their preaching, and they know firsthand the context out of which the sermons and prayers are developed. As a consequence, these persons are often among the minister’s most appreciative parishioners.

However, when it comes to the pastoral dimensions of that ministry, the situation is likely to be quite different. However good the marital relationship, there is an inevitable confusion of roles. This is obviously going to be an issue if the marriage is in conflict, but what about other situations when most persons want and need pastoral care? In the midst of a serious illness, whether one’s own or a child’s, a death in the family, the loss of a job, or other similar instances when pastoral attention is important, the support of a loving spouse will help a great deal. But that person, too, is affected by the situation and is scarcely able to offer the “non-anxious presence” necessary in good pastoral care. And who is on call to assist the clergy spouse if the minister becomes hospitalized, disabled, or dies? Or, as is not uncommon, when the minister is subjected to criticism, or involved in conflict that makes
the spouse feel angry—especially because there is so little he or she can do about it—who then is the pastor? And what happens when the clergy person gets a call to the church of his or her dreams, but accepting that call also means the spouse will need to give up job, friends, and all they have come to cherish, in order to go along? Can a minister really be pastor to his or her spouse at such a time?

In the varied ways classes have sought to fulfill their responsibility, learnings continue to emerge. A fundamental learning calls into question a model that often seems to work well most of the time. In the Regional Synod of the Far West, and within the Regional Synod of New York, where synod area ministers have pastoral care built into their position descriptions, administrative and pastoral responsibilities are combined in the same persons. This may mean an absence of pastoral care when it is much needed, especially when the pastor’s difficulties in a congregation or a developing conflict require the administrator to wear his or her other hat. The issue is not whether the pastor is right or wrong, but that the administrative role of the one who would also be pastor must take precedence. This problem is also inherent when pastoral care is assigned to those who have other administrative roles, such as stated clerks, synod executives, and denominational staff.

Other approaches have also been shown to have limitations. A specific pastor to pastors designated by a classis may not be the best choice for all those who need to be served. While not unlike the situation in a congregation (in which all members do not relate with equal ease to one installed minister, yet expect to be served by him or her), it would seem better if greater personal preference could be accommodated. Since “one size does not fit all,” as one regional synod executive observed, another model may hold greater promise.

This variation of the pastor to pastors model calls for establishing the office of classis chaplain. The concept of classis chaplain draws upon the proven effectiveness of the role of military chaplains. In the armed services, chaplains are maintained in order to enable those who serve within the military to have the “free exercise of religion” guaranteed to them by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The chaplain’s first responsibility is thus to make sure that service personnel are able to worship according to the dictates of conscience and in accord with their own religious convictions. Chaplains serve those whose needs they can meet directly, and they also act as facilitators so that the needs of others are met. Their job is to see that what needs to happen takes place, even though it may not be something that they, for reasons of their own faith commitment, can do. Good chaplains are concerned about quality and adequacy even when they are not able to perform the care themselves. Simply to facilitate is not enough.

So, what might the position of classis chaplain look like? What follows is a proposed position description:

**POSITION DESCRIPTION**
Reformed Church in America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Position: Classis Chaplain</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term of Service:</td>
<td>Five years, renewable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountable to:</td>
<td>Stated Clerk, Classis of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY OF POSITION:

The classis chaplain is accountable for ensuring that the *Book of Church Order* requirement which gives classis responsibility to provide “for the pastoral care of each enrolled minister and the minister’s immediate family” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 3) is adequately met. Being provided with “pastoral care” is understood to mean that each minister in classis, together with the members of his or her immediate family, is able to identify a specific clergy person with whom that family has a mutually recognized, established, and ongoing relationship, and to whom they can and do turn in times of special need. Such care shall include being a pastoral presence in times of sorrow, physical or emotional illness, spiritual depletion, family transitions, vocational changes or uncertainties, and other life transitions. “Pastoral care” also involves having a standing invitation to share in occasions of special joy, such as the birth of a child, milestone anniversaries, and those moments for giving thanks in which the presence of a trusted confidant who is with us before God will add deeper meaning to our celebration.

NATURE AND SCOPE:

The classis chaplain is charged by classis to see that each enrolled minister and the immediate members of the minister’s family have the benefits of such a relationship with a specific pastor. Specialized ministers and others who are members of, or regularly attend, a particular church shall normally have that pastoral role filled by one of the ministers of that congregation. For those who are installed pastors of local congregations, the classis chaplain may well be the specific person with whom a relationship of pastoral care is established. But if another minister, either within or outside the bounds of classis may be more suitable, the classis chaplain shall make sure the arrangement is understood by all those involved. While it is not assumed that a minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America is the only possibility, whoever is chosen must be willing to serve, understand the role, and agree to meet the expectations for “adequate pastoral care.”

In all instances in which the classis chaplain is not a minister’s primary caregiver, it is the chaplain’s responsibility to notify the person who is the caregiver whenever an occasion to initiate pastoral care comes to his or her attention.

The classis chaplain keeps current on resources in the geographical area and shall make referrals to other competent professional persons whenever necessary. The chaplain maintains strict standards of confidentiality and is not available to mediate disputes with consistories or other groups within the church. He or she declines to comment on the professional performance of ministers within the classis, whether that assessment is positive or negative, and shall not serve in any of the administrative functions within classis that relate to pastoral relations, supervision of ministers, discipline, or judicial matters.

PRINCIPAL ACCOUNTABILITIES:

1. Serve as the primary pastoral caregiver for ministers of classis and their families who do not identify and make arrangement for someone else to fulfill the role as defined above.

2. Establish a personal pastoral relationship with each person for whom direct responsibility is assumed, so as to maintain sufficient contact for an ongoing pastoral relationship that is mutually recognized and readily available.
3. Initiate pastoral care in response to observed needs and respond promptly whenever services are requested.

4. When not the designated primary pastoral caregiver for a minister or a minister’s family within classis, maintain a list of those who serve in this capacity and call upon them to initiate pastoral contact when needs come to the chaplain’s attention.

5. Provide a quarterly report to the stated clerk, indicating the number and nature of pastoral contacts, such as home visits, hospital calls, and telephone contacts.

6. Maintain an up-to-date directory of pastoral care resources to whom referrals may be made, and share these with ministers of classis upon request.

R-16.
To instruct the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services to forward the paper “Pastoral Care of Clergy and the Clergy Family” to the classes for their consideration and implementation. (ADOPTED)

Guidelines on Clergy Divorce and Remarriage

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct Ministry and Personnel Services to study the issue of RCA clergy divorce and remarriage and prepare recommendations and/or guidelines on this issue, for report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-19, p. 321).

MAPS notes that issues surrounding divorce were addressed in reports to General Synod in 1962 (MGS 1962, pp. 205-18) and in 1975 (MGS 1975, pp. 162-72). The 1996 General Synod also instructed the Commission on Theology to review the paper, “Basic Policy on Divorce and Remarriage,” presented to the 1962 General Synod (MGS 1962, pp. 205-18) and to present an updated version of this 1962 paper at the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-20, p. 322).

Therefore, MAPS, as instructed, has restricted its concern to “clergy divorce and remarriage.” In doing so, it had before it a report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Clergy Divorce and Remarriage recently adopted by the Classis of Passaic Valley. Since the classis dealt only with the process leading to divorce and did not address the matter of remarriage, what will be presented below is more extensive than the guidelines adopted by the Classis of Passaic Valley. Nevertheless, the work of this classis committee was useful and appreciated.

Suggested Guidelines on Clergy Divorce and Remarriage

1. Classes shall regard the issues surrounding clergy divorce and remarriage within the larger context of the classis responsibility for pastoral care of ministers and their immediate family (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 8). Those who are charged by classis with this specific task—whether they be classis chaplains, serve as pastor to pastors, are regional synod ministers charged by classis with the pastoral care responsibility, or are others charged with this responsibility—are encouraged to be aware of the unusual stress that the demands of ministry may place upon marriages of those they serve, to be alert to indications that suggest deterioration in the health of a marriage, and to encourage the use of resources to bring about reconciliation, including competent counselors who view marriage from a Christian perspective.
2. When a minister and spouse experience a separation that they recognize may eventuate in a divorce, the minister shall inform his or her consistory. At that time, the minister shall invite another minister of classis to be present, and that minister of the classis shall preside at the meeting of the consistory at which this information is to be shared. Notice of the meeting and the name of the minister chosen to preside shall be given to the stated clerk of classis at least three days before the meeting is to take place.

3. Prior to consulting an attorney with a view toward beginning divorce proceedings, the minister shall inform the ministerial relations committee of classis of the intent to proceed in this direction. The committee shall have representatives meet with the minister and the minister's spouse to seek to understand their situation more fully. After the parties have consulted with their legal advisors, the ministerial relations committee shall be informed of the terms of settlement that each party is seeking to obtain and shall seek to ensure that issues of justice are addressed.

4. Ministers of Word and sacrament, as leaders in the church, are expected to lead lives that are above reproach and to live according to a standard of sexual morality that reflects New Testament teachings, even when these may conflict with generally accepted social mores. When a minister's marriage is in the process of dissolution, the minister is encouraged to pay special attention to personal relationships with members of the opposite sex, making sure that these relationships are appropriate and do not bring the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament into disrepute.

5. Before a minister who is divorced enters into another marriage, the ministerial relations committee shall be informed. If the ministerial relations committee is satisfied that the minister has made use of appropriate counseling resources and that the proposed marriage is not being entered into in haste or will otherwise bring the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament into disrepute, the committee shall file a resolution of “no objection” with the stated clerk of classis, who shall immediately inform the minister of the committee’s action.

R-17.
To instruct the Office of the General Synod to forward the above (in bold) suggested “Guidelines on Clergy Divorce and Remarriage” to RCA classes to consider for adoption.

Upon recommendation of the advisory committee to refer R-17, Synod:

VOTED: To refer R-17 to Ministry and Personnel Services for further study, with particular attention to:

1. The responsibility of the elders and other leaders to the pastor and spouse.

2. Examining how “intrusive” this process might become as it involves terms of divorce settlements and permission to remarry.

Reason: Further study is required for this very complex and emotional issue.
Continuing Education

Work in continuing education for professional church workers includes a listing of opportunities printed in each issue of *Servant Leaders*. Pastors in the Regional Synod of the Heartland receive an occasional bulletin from Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa, listing workshops and courses available in the Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri areas. Information about specific continuing education opportunities is highlighted in all the regional synod newsletters at various times during the year. Pastors are encouraged by letter and telephone to use their continuing education time each year. Many opportunities are available to clergy who seek and ask. Clergy groups are encouraged to do continuing education together. Three such groups are using leadership development funds to meet twice a year with a facilitator/leader or to attend a joint workshop.

RCA staff are also encouraged to do continuing education. Limited funding is available, and RCA staff applications for specific programs are usually approved. Reports are required after participation.

The personnel functions of MAPS include filling RCA staff positions, advertising, screening, conducting personal consultations, counseling, doing conflict management, encouraging professional development, and administering the legalities of human resources administration, including forms, records, files, and personnel information for all denominational staff.

MAPS also administers and monitors the Student Loan Revolving Fund and the New Jersey Beneficiary Funds. The purpose of the Student Loan Revolving Fund is to provide financial assistance to members of the RCA who are preparing for work of highly strategic importance to the mission of the Christian church. The New Jersey Beneficiary Funds are available to students who are enrolled at Rutgers University and are engaged in preparation for ministry in the RCA.

The Student Loan Revolving Fund is completely loaned out at this time. More RCA students could be helped if more funds were available.

**R-18.**

To instruct the Office of Stewardship and Communication Services to explore ways to increase the Student Loan Revolving Fund reserves. (ADOPTED)

The Minister/Church Profile System

MAPS continues to serve pastors and congregations in the ministerial search process. Working in close cooperation with classes and regional synods, MAPS sends out, on request, profiles of ministers who may be possible candidates for a given situation. The process involves much discernment on the part of all concerned, and is at best no more than a way in which possibilities for both pastors and congregations may be expanded. During the coming year, explorations will continue as to how some of the paper-flow involved in the process may be reduced by electronic means. Critical to any success this system enjoys is an understanding by ministers that their profile needs to be up-to-date if it is to be seriously considered. MAPS intentionally leaves this responsibility with the ministers.

A resource that many churches have found helpful is the *Handbook for Pastoral Search*, which guides the search committee through the process. Copies may be requested by calling the RCA Distribution Center or the MAPS office.
Specialized Ministries

As an examination of “Supplement B” in the Directory of the General Synod indicates, fully one-third of the ministers of the Reformed Church in America are active in ministries other than serving an RCA congregation. The largest single group of these specialized ministers fall into the category of chaplains, serving hospitals, prisons, schools, and in the different branches of the armed forces. Each year, immediately prior to General Synod, there is a Chaplains’ Conference that draws these persons and many of their spouses into a mutually supportive community. These conferences gives chaplains the basis for a network that functions throughout the year. These conferences are intentionally located at the site of General Synod in order to make possible the informal contact with General Synod delegates that is especially important for those who often serve far from any RCA context.

Two areas of chaplaincy ministry are in particular need of additional personnel. One of the sad realities of this society is that prisons are a growth industry. Prison chaplaincy is therefore an area of ministry in which additional opportunities for service exist for those who have the right qualifications and a sense of call to a difficult field of service. The Rev. Donald Jiskoot, who retired after twenty years of service with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, serves the RCA as its endorsing agent for prison chaplaincy, in which capacity he also visits and maintains a pastoral relationship with RCA prison chaplains.

A second area of ministry opportunity is perhaps more surprising, given the constant attention that has been given to federal budget constraints and their effect on the armed services. The U.S. Army has put out a plea for more than one hundred new chaplains. In the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard the RCA is represented by only two active duty chaplains, and there is a critical need to add to their number. While the U.S. Air Force currently has more RCA chaplains than has usually been the case, opportunities exist there as well. Specifically, there is an urgent need for qualified women to serve as chaplains. The director of MAPS serves the RCA as endorsing agent for military chaplains and is eager to discuss possibilities with potential chaplain candidates.

Gallup Leadership Profile

An instrument specifically designed for the Reformed Church in America was developed by the Gallup Organization to assist a classis when it must decide whether or not to take a candidate for ministry under its care. Gallup has identified several “themes” that appear to be discriminators for effective ministers in the RCA and that can be identified early. A classis can make use of this means to help it determine whether or not to encourage someone who believes he or she may be called to the ministry of Word and sacrament. Indications are that there is some use being made of this tool, but such use is not yet widespread. The cost to the classis is $300, which is a small sum when compared to the total investment of time, money, and life energy spent with a prospective seminarian. Another tool developed by Gallup is useful for identifying as early as junior high age those who may have significant gifts for ministry. This is available to RCA camps and conference centers, youth groups, and congregations to use in their Sunday school and/or youth programs.

Procedural Steps to Ordination

The 1990 General Synod received overtures from the classes of Rochester, Orange, and New Brunswick to create a task force charged to design improvements in the procedural steps to ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament (*MGS 1990*, pp. 304-08). In response, the 1990 General Synod created such a task force (*MGS 1990*, R-18, pp. 308-09).
The Task Force on Classical Procedures Toward Ordination presented its final report to the 1993 General Synod (*MGS 1993*, pp. 326-36). This report contained eight recommended classical procedures for the process leading to ordination. In response, the 1993 General Synod voted:

To endorse the...classical...procedures toward ordination; and further,

to refer the...procedures...to the classes for implementation; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council Ministry and Personnel Services Committee to monitor the implementation of the...procedures and report to the 1997 General Synod (*MGS 1993*, R-18, p.336).

At the October 1996 General Synod Council meeting, the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services noted that much of the work of the Task Force on Classical Procedures Toward Ordination was incorporated into the report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the RCA (see the Task Force on Standards report in this Church Vocations section).

**RCA Clergy/Spouse Retreats**

Each January, clergy from the three eastern regional synods gather with their spouses at the Warwick Center in Warwick, New York, for a weekend called Freedom in Ministry. This event provides mutual support, spiritual enrichment through worship and hymn singing, and external stimulation through a series of presentations by a speaker chosen by a planning committee drawn from the participants. Scheduled to include a Sunday and subsidized by grants from classes, regional synods, and denominational funds, Freedom in Ministry provides the context for a ministry of mutual encouragement to clergy and their spouses.

For the past five years the MAPS office has also sponsored a retreat for clergy spouses in the three eastern regional synods. This opportunity for clergy spouses to gather with friends for a restful and renewing retreat continues to provide encouragement and support for those who attend year after year.

In 1996 RCA ministers and spouses came from every part of the church to St. Louis, Missouri, for a first-ever denomination-wide clergy gathering called Spring Sabbath. The 1996 General Synod affirmed the gathering and voted “to direct the General Synod Council to make provision for a denominational Spring Sabbath to be held again in 1998” (*MGS 1996*, R-12, p. 314).

Members of the design team are:

- Gloria McCanna (co-chair)
- Philip Doeschot
- Ken Eriks
- Douglas Estella
- Amy Jo Hawley
- Carolyn Holloway
- Peter Semeyn (co-chair)
- Rong Lu
- Scott Nichols
- Ross Rettig
- Gordon Wiersma
- Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Alvin Poppen, Ellen Mers, and Norma Violante serve as staff resource persons.

The design team met October 31, 1996, and April 24, 1997, at the Interchurch Center in New York City. The design team agreed that the 1998 Spring Sabbath event will again be held at the Adam’s Mark Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, April 17-19. Walter Wangerin, Jr. will be
the program speaker, and Karen and Jeff Barker will present the Saturday evening program. The design team also decided to stay with the following purpose statement developed and used by the design team for the 1996 Spring Sabbath event:

To invite all clergy of the Reformed Church in America to share a time of Sabbath rest and refreshment. Like the early disciples, we will gather with others who are in ministry to share joys and griefs, to renew our strength, and to experience a vision for the future.

RCA congregations are encouraged to provide the necessary financial support and pulpit coverage so that their ministers and their spouses can attend this event.

MAPS Staff

The staff of Ministry and Personnel Services has developed a strong sense of cohesion through several years of working in close harmony. Since General Synod reports often may appear faceless, it is important to notice that people are not only the focus of Ministry and Personnel Services, but also the way in which this ministry gets done. For the director of Ministry and Personnel Services, the Rev. Alvin Poppen, this is annual report number twenty-eight to General Synod. Joanne Fernandez has been a member of the RCA staff even longer. All participants at this General Synod will want to know what already do, that Joanne's husband, Robert McDermott, died on January 17, 1997, after the onset of fast-developing cancer. Ellen Mers manages the day-to-day affairs of the MAPS office.

MAPS includes within its arena of responsibility much of the responsibility of the Board of Pensions, where Barbara Diekman serves as pensions administrator, Charlotte Peet as insurance coordinator, and Russell Hiller as managing director of investments. They are provided staff support by Lisana Gabriel, Mabel Lee, Beth Lefever, and Myrna Tinoco. In addition, MAPS maintains contracts for services to specialized ministers with the Rev. Donald Jiskoot and Karin Granberg-Michaelson.

Report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America

STANDARDS FOR THE PREPARATION OF MINISTERS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

I. Rationale and Background

When the General Synod of 1994 established a task force to address the issue of standards to be met in the preparation of ministers of Word and sacrament (MGS 1994, R-14, p. 278), it was a recognition that the context of ministry has changed. The world we live in is different from the world of only a decade ago, and with the dawning of a new millennium we can assume with some certainty that the context for ministry a decade hence will be different from today’s. Such changes require definitive standards, together with a system of ministerial preparation and a path toward ordination more flexible and responsive to changing needs than is currently operative.
But some things have not changed. The RCA *Liturgy* puts this question to all candidates for ordination:

Do you believe in your heart that you are called by God's church, and therefore by God, to be a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Whatever the context of that ministry, a clear sense of God's call remains essential. When that sense of call has been ascertained, ministerial formation becomes the responsibility of the church. That formation process is at a critical juncture. At issue is the way the RCA seminaries, congregations, and classes carry out their respective roles to ensure that the leadership the church requires is prepared and available to meet the challenge of the times.¹

The task force has created a process that coordinates and empowers the four components (candidate, congregation, classis, and seminary) involved in what the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* calls "the preparation for the professional ministry" (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 6).

When the 1992 General Synod dissolved the Board of Theological Education (*MGS* 1992, R-20, p. 65) and constituted new boards of trustees (*MGS* 1992, pp. 302-13) for New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), Western Theological Seminary (WTS), and the Theological Education Agency (TEA), the Synod kept the responsibility of overseeing "the standards for the preparation for the professional ministry" (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 6). The 1992 General Synod then lodged this oversight with the General Synod Council (*The Bylaws of the General Synod*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6c). Within the General Synod Council, the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee is designated this oversight as a specific responsibility (*GSC Handbook*, V-2).

This responsibility soon confronted the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee with a turmoil of issues and problems. The first issue was constitutional, for the *BCO* contains no "standards for the preparation for the professional ministry." The classes are simply provided with a list of subject areas in which candidates must be examined. No level of competence is indicated, and the classes are provided with no guidance to assure them that they are examining and ordaining for service to the whole church rather than within their bounds alone.

These emerging and insistent issues led the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee to recommend the creation of a task force to assist both it and the Ministry and Personnel Services office in the following tasks: 1) an analysis of the church's needs, 2) the development of a process to provide the denomination with effective means to recruit and educate candidates for ministry, and 3) an equitable and realistic means for evaluating and certifying their readiness for ministry. In response, the 1994 General Synod adopted an amended R-14.²

II. The Assignment Given to the Task Force


Following its preliminary report to the 1996 General Synod (*MGS* 1996, pp. 322-46), the task force conducted more than twenty forums throughout the RCA to receive comments, suggestions, and criticisms of its work. In addition, it received some eighty written responses from individuals, consistories, judicatories, and other interested
groups from across the denomination. Grateful for this remarkable and helpful interest and response, the task force presents a revised report that combines the mind of the church with the mandate of the Synod.

The task force understood its task to be:

A. The development of standards by which the extent and quality of preparation for ministry of Word and sacrament can be measured.

1. Such standards shall pertain to candidates for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament in such matters as:
   a. Character and confirmation of calling.
   b. Gifts, experience, and education.
   c. Comprehension of the gospel and of the history, theology, and church order of the RCA.
   d. Capacity for leadership and leadership recruitment, pastoral care and counseling, Christian education, church administration, and evangelism.
   e. Commitment to the unity of the church, the ministry of all Christians, and the proclamation of gospel.

2. Such standards shall pertain to congregations, classes, and the General Synod in such matters as:
   a. Assessment and affirmation of the call of candidates.
   b. Assessment of the gifts, abilities, training, and experience of candidates.
   c. Certification of readiness for ministry.

3. Such standards shall pertain to the seminaries of the RCA in such matters as:
   a. Institutional character of an RCA seminary.
   b. Required denominational curriculum for RCA candidates.
   c. Role of General Synod professors of theology.

4. Such standards shall pertain to the Theological Education Agency (TEA) in such matters as:
   a. Seminary selection by candidates and classes.
   b. Parameters of course and degree equivalency.
   c. Denomination-specific course work and its evaluation.
   d. Measures of minimum denominational experience.
   e. Role and definition of the Certification Committee.
5. Such standards shall provide for means of preparation other than the completion of an M.Div. degree at an Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accredited seminary.

B. The development of a process by which the goals of such standards can be achieved and through which any candidate for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament shall move.

The task force understood its framework to be:

A. Basic assumptions about ministry:

1. Each member of the church of Jesus Christ has been given gifts and is called to ministry by God. The church therefore commits itself to train all members for ministry and to train specially-called persons for the ministry of Word and sacrament.

2. Each member’s gifts are intended to be used in combination with the gifts of all members. Each member’s ministry is to be carried out in coordination with the ministry of all members. The gifts God gives to one are complementary to the gifts given to others, and the ministry to which one is called is complementary to the ministries of all.

3. Within the church of Jesus Christ there is a parity of gifts and a parity of ministries. There are neither greater gifts and lesser gifts nor greater ministries and lesser ministries.

4. The government of the RCA is shaped by its Book of Church Order, which traces its basic shape and content back to the Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort in 1619. That document established four offices within the Reformed Church:

   a. The Office of Ministers of the Word (now called “ministers of Word and sacrament”).

   b. The Office of Teachers of Theology (now called “General Synod professors of theology”).

   c. The Office of Elders.

   d. The Office of Deacons.

   The RCA is unique among American Protestant traditions in preserving these four distinct offices and in affirming their basic parity.

5. The process described in this report is for the preparation for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

B. Basic definitions of ministers:

1. The Book of Church Order, Chapter I, Part I, Article 1, states:

   Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. They are
equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 1. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The office of the minister in the local parish is to serve as pastor, teacher, and enabler of the congregation, to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. As pastor and teacher, the minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments, shares responsibility with the officers and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and is careful that everything in the church is done in a proper and orderly way. As enabler the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

Sec. 5. The office of the minister in a specialized ministry is to serve as pastor, teacher, and/or enabler of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. As pastor and teacher, the minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. As enabler the minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

2. In the RCA Liturgy, “The Order for the Ordination and Installation of a Minister of Word and Sacrament” (Gerrit Vander Lugt, ed., Liturgy and Psalms, New York: The Board of Education, 1968, pp. 95-96), states:

It is evident from Scripture that the responsibility of the minister of God’s Word is threefold:

To proclaim the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; from the Word of the Lord to instruct, admonish, comfort, and reprove according to everyone’s need; and to refute with the holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies contrary to pure doctrine;

To call upon the name of the Lord in behalf of the whole congregation; to administer, according to the command of Christ to his Apostles and through them to all his ministers, the Sacraments which the Lord has instituted as seals of his grace; and to care for the flock of Christ;

To govern the Church of God in such manner as the Lord has ordained. Christ in speaking of Christian discipline said to his Apostles, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).

The office of the Christian ministry is both glorious and necessary, and the Lord will have such an office always to remain; for he said when he sent forth his Apostles, “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20).
III. Standards for Personal Qualities and Professional Competencies

A qualified candidate for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament within the RCA shall demonstrate competence in the four areas listed below. Such competence shall ensure that candidates are prepared to serve anywhere in the denomination. The level of competence shall also assure the church of a basic uniformity in the quality and character of ministerial preparation. At the same time, the fact that specific strengths and weaknesses, experience and education, gifts and calling will vary from individual to individual is to be accepted and celebrated. This assures the church that there will be educated ministers with special gifts and callings to serve the diversity of emerging ministry settings.

A. What the minister shall be:

1. Grounded in covenantal relationship to God.
2. Faithful; that is, keeps promises and has integrity in word, deed, and relationships.
3. Passionate about the gospel.
4. Intentional about cultivating the spiritual life.
5. One who loves people and enjoys life.
6. One who loves to learn.
7. One who is emotionally mature.
8. Self-confident.
10. One who trusts in God’s providence.
11. A team player.
13. Creative and willing to take risks.

B. What the minister shall know:

1. Sufficient Greek and Hebrew to understand nuances of the original biblical text of the Word of God.
2. The contents of the Old and New Testaments.
3. The major themes and tenets of Reformed theology as expressed in the Reformed Standards of Unity and how to place these within the larger framework of the history of Christian doctrine.
4. The Bible as the Word; the varying views of the Bible in Reformed theology; and where and how God’s word is alive in the church and world today.
5. The history of Christianity; the integrity of the various historic Christian traditions; and the place of Reformed history within this broader context.

6. RCA polity as set forth in the Book of Church Order.

7. How people of different age groups learn and grow in faith.

8. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament as both call and trust.

9. The context of any specific ministry sufficiently well to be relevant and appropriate.

C. What the minister shall be able to do:

1. Lead worship within a Reformed theological understanding of liturgy.

2. Preach sermons that communicate clearly a scriptural message to a congregation and that elicit both new faith and discipleship.

3. Lead people to faith in Jesus Christ.

4. Administer the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism in conformity with the liturgy of the RCA.

5. Demonstrate personal faith and spirituality.

6. Analyze the current issues confronting the church and society and address them theologically.

7. Understand the locus of decision-making and the acceptable parameters of leadership within RCA polity.

8. Engender fellowship and community within the congregation.


10. Understand and participate in a system of education within the church.

11. Teach others at appropriate levels of life and development.

12. Address conflict from a biblical perspective.

13. Function in the pastoral role within the intimacy and trust of human relationships, maintaining and negotiating appropriate boundaries.

14. Be compassionately present with persons in their need and sustain them in suffering.

D. The minister shall equip and mobilize the church to:

1. Bear witness to the gospel.

2. Demonstrate stewardship in the future-directed administration of Christian resources; to manage and motivate a congregation as a voluntary institution for purposeful ministry.
3. Promote mutual care in community.

4. Understand the changing culture and enable effective involvement in mission and evangelism.

5. Understand and demonstrate a Christlike use of power as it relates to others.

IV. Responsibilities within the Process of Ministerial Preparation

A. The Role of Congregations

1. A congregation is the best and earliest context in which a person’s gifts and calling for ministry can be recognized, encouraged, and evaluated. It is, therefore, each congregation’s responsibility to be constantly identifying and nurturing gifted persons.

2. Church members shall constantly seek to identify in their congregations those individuals with the gifts that are necessary and desirable for service in the ministry of Word and sacrament.

3. Congregations shall watch for the emergence of ministerial gifts in church youth groups, church camps and conference centers, church colleges, and other ministerial settings.

4. The church shall encourage all individuals to remain open to the call of both God and the church to all forms of ministry for which they have gifts. Congregations provide the best and earliest opportunities for persons to demonstrate leadership as an external verification of their call.

5. When a congregation is satisfied that a person possesses the call and gifts for the ministry of Word and sacrament, it may, through its consistory, recommend to its classis that this person be enrolled as a candidate under care of its classis.

B. The Role of Candidates

1. Candidates bear the primary responsibility to initiate, develop, and sustain a learning contract with feasible goals and objectives, together with a methodology to meet the standards of the RCA for theological education and ministerial formation.

2. Candidates, together with the classis, select the seminary where they will pursue the Master of Divinity degree and develop a ministerial formation program that includes an RCA teaching church. The purpose of this program is to meet the standards for personal qualities and ministerial competencies.

3. Candidates are responsible to maintain regular contact with, and to seek the advice of, their Candidate Care Committee and classis, in order to develop support for the challenges of candidacy.

C. The Role of Classes

1. It is solely the responsibility of a classis to examine, license, and ordain ministers of Word and sacrament.
2. Each classis is expected to identify, recruit, encourage, and care for those who, in the judgment of the congregations, are gifted for and called to the ministry of Word and sacrament.

3. Each classis shall take advantage of the tools available for candidate evaluation in determining whether to take a candidate under its care.

4. When a classis is satisfied concerning the calling and gifts of a candidate, it becomes responsible to serve as the candidate's supervisor, counselor, and advocate for the remainder of the formation process.

5. Immediately following the enrollment of a candidate for the ministry, the classis shall appoint a Candidate Care Committee and petition the General Synod on behalf of the candidates for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

D. The Role of Candidate Care Committees

1. The candidate, in consultation with the classis and the candidate's seminary, shall nominate a Candidate Care Committee. Its membership represents the four entities most committed to the candidate's success within the formation process: the classis, the seminary, the teaching church, and the home church or immediate support network. Each Candidate Care Committee should therefore include the following:

   a. One member of the classis.

   b. One person from the candidate's teaching church.

   c. One faculty member from the candidate's seminary.

   d. One person of the candidate's choice, preferably a minister or elder from the home church or immediate support network (not a member of the candidate's family).

   At least one member of Candidate Care Committee shall be a minister of Word and sacrament, and at least one member shall not be in the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. Ministerial members shall have served at least three years in ordained ministry. The classis shall appoint the Candidate Care Committee and designate its chair.

2. The Candidate Care Committee shall serve throughout the formation process as the pivotal connection between the candidate, the RCA seminary or TEA (or other learning environment), the teaching church, and the classis. Its principal purpose is to supervise, encourage, counsel, and care for the candidate throughout the process of theological education and ministerial formation.

3. The membership of the Candidate Care Committee may change from time to time, but it shall continue with candidates from the point at which they are taken under the care of the classis until they become ordained. When candidates are far removed from their classis of origin, the classis of origin may invite a member of the classis in which the candidate resides to serve on the Candidate Care Committee on its behalf.
F. The Role of Regional Synods

1. The staff and resources of the regional synods shall support, assist, and encourage the classis to identify and care for those called to the ministry of Word and sacrament.

2. Regional synod executives, in cooperation with classis personnel, shall be involved in the identification of teaching churches and the development of group mentoring teams.

G. The Role of General Synod

1. It is the responsibility of the General Synod to monitor the quality of ministerial preparation. The standards for theological education and ministerial preparation originate with the General Synod.

2. It is the responsibility of the General Synod to establish, support, and oversee institutions by means of which ministerial candidates can receive a theological education and a pastoral formation that meets its standards. For this purpose, the Synod has supported New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) since 1784 and Western Theological Seminary (WTS) since 1866. In 1984 the Synod created the Theological Education Agency (TEA) to oversee candidates preparing for the ministry of Word and sacrament at non-RCA seminaries. The RCA seminaries and TEA are accountable to General Synod.

3. By these means, General Synod assures the denomination that its pastors are adequately trained ministers of Word and sacrament.

4. The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry is the means by which the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency, through the agency of WTS, NBTS, and TEA, evaluates on the basis of the needs of the whole church and certifies on the basis of the candidate’s entire record within the process of preparation, the candidate’s fitness for ministry.

5. General Synod shall exercise its oversight of ministerial formation through The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency, an agency of the General Synod with the following purposes, membership, and responsibilities:

a. The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency shall have three central purposes:

1. To coordinate the roles of the congregation, the classis, and the seminaries in the overall process of ministerial formation, facilitating their respective responsibilities.

2. To provide a unified and cooperative framework for NBTS, WTS, and TEA to work together to nurture ministerial candidates under the care of the classes.

3. To review and monitor the implementation of General Synod’s standards for ministerial formation.

b. The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency shall have nine members. At least three shall be members of GSC (appointed by the GSC moderator); three shall be named by the boards of trustees of NBTS, WTS, and TEA; and
three shall be at-large members. The membership shall include at least four laypersons, three parish pastors, one specialized minister, and one active theological educator. The presidents of NBTS and WTS, the director of TEA, and the director of the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee of GSC shall serve in a staff capacity. The agency shall call upon particular gifts and expertise as needed to carry out its responsibilities.

c. The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency’s specific responsibilities shall include the following:

1. To compile and recommend assessment instruments and procedures for persons received under the care of classis and enrolled as candidates for the ministry of Word and sacrament.

2. To provide flexible guidelines for, and to monitor the implementation of, teaching churches in the process of ministerial formation.

3. To provide guidance, resources, and support to classis committees supervising candidates under their care.

4. To approve annually a standard examination as a written component of the evaluation of candidates for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. This examination shall be prepared by a team of RCA seminary faculty members selected by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency (MFCA). The examination shall include sections on biblical knowledge and exegesis, Reformed theology, church history and government, pastoral ministry practice and ethics, church and society, and such areas as MFCA may determine.

5. To offer resources and tools to classes and to facilitate the sharing of experiences between classes that may support their tasks of identifying, caring for, examining, ordaining, and mentoring those called to the ministry of Word and sacrament.

6. To provide oversight in the implementation of the alternative route for ordination.

7. To establish and monitor standards for continuing education for ministers of Word and sacrament.

8. To study and evaluate the overall process of ministerial formation and make recommendations, as necessary, to General Synod, GSC, the RCA seminaries, TEA, and classes.

d. The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency shall make an annual report to General Synod and small make regular reports to GSC. A regular liaison with the Ministerial and Personnel Services Committee of GSC shall be established, and The agency shall meet regularly at the same time and place as GSC.

II. The Role of Seminaries

1. A seminary in which RCA candidates may enroll shall be able to provide the following:
a. An education grounded in the basic fields of theological study, usually guaranteed by accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.

b. A diverse community of students, faculty, administrators, and staff who can lead, support, encourage, and correct each candidate.

c. Broad experience in parish or specialized ministry settings, supervised by trained pastoral mentors, and reflected upon within the context of the seminary's curriculum.

d. Access to a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at an accredited center, and to a program of spiritual direction.

2. The seminary in which RCA candidates enroll is expected to be a community of learning and transformation, which nurtures its members to:

   a. Be evangelical, ecumenical, inclusive, and collegial.

   b. Understand ministry as representational, diaconal, and prayerful.

   c. Proclaim a message that is biblical, historical, sacramental, and contextual.

   d. Be ministers of reconciliation and heralds of the good news.

   e. Care for the well-being of persons.

I. The Role of Teaching Churches

The teaching church program of the RCA provides candidates for the ordained ministry of Word and sacrament with a parish-based, in-ministry experience as a major component of the preparation process. The program places all candidates in local congregational settings where there is a mutual effort among the candidate, pastoral leaders, laypersons, and seminary faculty to equip and prepare the candidate.

A teaching church program may be located in any type of congregation or specialized ministry setting that provides an extensive program for ministerial training and preparation. The Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency shall set standards, and the seminaries shall train church supervisors and lay committees in order to maximize learning. The Teaching Church Program shall be flexible in nature and adaptable to the many diverse, congregation-based, in-ministry settings that are available throughout the RCA.

1. RCA teaching churches shall meet three qualifications:

   a. Make available trained supervision, an environment in which candidates are affirmed in giftedness for ministry, and the opportunity to learn ministry through personal experience.

   b. Work cooperatively with an RCA seminary or TEA to provide both the opportunity for in-ministry learning and guided theological reflection on the experience.
c. Provide trained supervision, mentorship, and measured evaluation of the ministry experience.

2. The ministry of the RCA teaching church shall include:
   a. A setting for candidates to assess their learning needs and test their ministry skills.
   b. A contract for reimbursed ministry time in accordance with the candidate’s personal and seminary schedule.
   c. A variety of ministry opportunities and exposure to the many functions of ministry.
   d. A thorough evaluation of candidates through interviews with both staff and members prior to acceptance by the church/ministry to determine potential for a suitable match.
   e. The training of RCA candidates in cooperation with the Candidate Care Committee and the classis.
   f. A significant period of ministry opportunity, preferably two continuous years.

3. The implementation of the teaching church program includes:
   a. Identification of potential teaching churches by the classis, the regional synod, and the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency, in cooperation with the RCA seminaries or TEA.
   b. Training of supervisors and lay committees by the RCA seminaries and TEA, the regional synods and classes, and overseen by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.
   c. Preparation and provision of guidelines by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency for the administration of recommended interviews of candidates prior to entering into a relationship with the teaching church.
   d. Provision of individuals from the teaching church to serve on the Candidate Care Committees.
   e. Establishment of clearly defined learning contracts with measurable goals and objectives in the teaching church setting, to be regularly communicated to the Candidate Care Committees.

J. The Role of Mentoring Following Ordination

Experience with the full range of ministerial demands and responsibilities inevitably awaits the new clergy at the first place of full-time service. Critical to the successful passage from the one preparatory experience to full-time service is an effective mentoring relationship provided by the calling classis.

The classes of the RCA are required in the *Book of Church Order* to appoint mentors for new clergy:
The classis shall designate a minister to serve as a mentor to guide, counsel, and model the learning and developmental processes of each newly ordained minister or, if deemed appropriate by classis, a minister received from another denomination (BCO, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, Section 5).

Experience indicates the wisdom of implementing this BCO requirement through an individual and group mentoring program. Participation in this program would be required as part of a minister's call. Classes would select mentors who possess the following characteristics:

1. Experience in ministry.
2. Demonstrated experience in discernment.
3. Broad perspective on ministry.
4. Knowledge of current personal, professional, and ecclesiastical resources.
5. Knowledge in the practice of ministry.

V. Outline of the Formation Process

A. At the heart of the formation process is an individual within the Christian community who has discerned a call to the ministry of Word and sacrament.

1. The formation process begins when that individual petitions the consistory of a congregation for recommendation to the classis as a candidate for the ministry.
2. Ideally, this person shall be well-known to the congregation, shall have had opportunity to serve in leadership within the congregation, and shall have had experience as an adult believer and decision-maker within the congregation.

B. The consistory assesses the person's gifts and calling.

1. When the call appears to be genuine, the consistory shall assess the person's gifts for ministry with the use of instruments available from the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency. Previous service within the church shall be carefully evaluated, or when the former is lacking, the consistory may arrange opportunities by which the person can demonstrate leadership and skills for ministry. The person should be given at least one year of service in which to demonstrate gifts for ministry in the local congregation or other ministry setting.
2. At the conclusion of this period an initial assessment of the person's call and gifts shall be made by the consistory, with input from members of the congregation and others who have experienced the person's ministry.
3. The consistory may then recommend the person to the classis as a candidate for the ministry.

C. The classis, prior to enrolling the person under its care, is responsible for:

1. Verification that the person has a basic awareness of the distinctive witness, history, and theology of the RCA, and has been a confessing member of an RCA congregation for at least two years.
2. Verification that the person has fulfilled the leadership experience requirement within or under the care of a congregation (see B.1 and B.2 above).

3. Assessment of the person’s gifts, leadership abilities, skills, and experience through the use of assessment tools recommended by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.

4. Assessment, by means of personal interview, of the person’s faith and values, in light of the “Standards for Personal Qualities” (see III.A above).

5. Approval of the person’s plan for theological education, rationale for seminary selection, participation in a teaching church/ministry, and strategy for financing the entire process.

D. When a person is taken under the care of a classis, the following occur:

1. The person is enrolled as a candidate under the care of the classis and comes under its supervision for all matters pertaining to candidacy for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

2. The candidate, in consultation with the classis and the candidate’s seminary, shall nominate a Candidate Care Committee to supervise, encourage, counsel, and care for the candidate.

3. The classis shall appoint the Candidate Care Committee and designate its chair.

E. The candidate’s theological education shall then proceed along one of three avenues:

1. The two seminaries of the RCA
   a. These are the primary sites for theological education to be recommended by classes to candidates.
   b. These seminaries have in place a required curriculum for RCA students, including at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and the availability of spiritual direction.
   c. These seminaries have in place a program of supervised ministry that involves students in teaching churches.
   d. The faculties of these seminaries include General Synod professors of theology, who are responsible to the General Synod to teach in such a way that the needs of the whole church are met.
   e. Each Candidate Care Committee in its interaction with the candidate shall be guided by the seminary’s curriculum and its requirements.
   f. The Candidate Care Committee shall regularly submit progress reports to the faculty of the candidate’s seminary, and the seminary member of the Candidate Care Committee shall report the candidate’s progress at the seminary to the committee. The Candidate Care Committee shall send a formal written report to the spring session of classis, with copies to the seminary and the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.
g. When the candidate has completed the course of study, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. The certificate is granted by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency upon recommendation of the General Synod professors of theology.

2. TEA

a. TEA shall oversee the theological education of candidates who receive the permission of their classis to attend a non-RCA seminary. For a seminary to meet the standards established by General Synod, the 1990 General Synod determined that such a school shall demonstrate the capacity to provide:

i. An institutional structure and course of study fully accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.

ii. Instruction that is demonstrably compatible with Reformed theology as expressed in the three RCA doctrinal standards.

iii. Location near RCA congregations whose opportunities for regular participation lead to the creation and growth of RCA identity, loyalty, and collegiality.

iv. Diverse field education assignments in RCA teaching churches under the supervision of RCA ministers (MGS 1990, R-1, p. 261).

v. A high commitment to pastoral ministry.

vi. Availability within its curriculum of at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and a program of spiritual direction.

vii. Recognition of the RCA Standards of Unity as a valid statement of Christian faith for members of the RCA and no requirement that RCA students assent to additional doctrinal standards or statements.

b. Candidates enrolled under TEA shall fulfill the same required courses and learning experiences that are part of the required curriculum in RCA seminaries. Part of these requirements are offered to candidates enrolled in TEA by summer intensives or at regional teaching church campuses with a sufficient number of candidates to warrant such offerings.

c. Each candidate shall have the required involvement with an RCA teaching church, within the seminary's supervised ministry/field education program.

d. The candidate shall enter into learning contracts, within the seminary's supervised ministry/field education program, for the learnings that are to be pursued within the teaching church.

e. Each Candidate Care Committee, in its interaction with the candidate, shall be guided by the seminary's curriculum and its requirements.

f. The role of the Candidate Care Committee is pivotal in the assessment of each candidate's progress and fitness. TEA shall provide regular progress reports to the Candidate Care Committee on the candidate's theological education.
g. The Candidate Care Committee shall report to the spring session of classis and to TEA. TEA shall communicate any concerns of the Candidate Care Committee, classis, or the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency about the candidate to the latter's seminary.

h. When the candidate has completed the course of study, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. This certificate is granted by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency upon recommendation of the General Synod professors of theology.

i. TEA processes this recommendation through its Certification Committee. The motion to grant the certificate shall be passed by two-thirds of the committee present and voting.

3. Approved alternate route

a. In certain circumstances, candidates may qualify for ordination in the RCA through an alternate process. This process begins when a congregation or classis assesses the candidate's skills and experience as related to the standards for the ministry of Word and sacrament. The congregation shall affirm the gifts, skills, and experience of the candidate. All the following criteria must be present for a candidate to apply for permission to pursue an alternate route of ministerial formation:

i. The candidate shall have at least five years of experience in pastoral ministry.

ii. The congregation shall demonstrate a compelling need for the candidate's ministry.

iii. The classis shall determine that the candidate possesses the call, the gifts, and the experience for ministry, and that it would involve extreme hardship for the candidate to complete an M.Div. degree at an accredited seminary.

b. The classis, on behalf of a candidate meeting these criteria, may apply to the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency (MFCA) for permission to pursue a special course of theological education. If MFCA rejects the candidate, it must state clearly its reasons for doing so.

c. Upon admission to the alternate route, a Candidate Care Committee shall be formed.

d. A thorough assessment of the candidate's skills and experience, as related to the "Standards for Personal Qualities" (see III.A above), shall be carried out by Candidate Care Committee with the assistance of an RCA seminary or TEA.

e. The Candidate Care Committee shall propose a program of ministerial formation (utilizing the expertise of an RCA seminary or TEA), which includes teaching church experience (or its equivalent), CPE, availability of spiritual direction, and other means of preparation to be approved by the classis. In cases where English is not a candidate's first language, significant portions of the candidate's education may occur in the candidate's first language.
f. When the candidate has completed the course of study, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry based on the standards. The examination shall be supervised by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency in conjunction with two General Synod professors of theology. The method of assessment should be culturally and linguistically appropriate. With the concurrence of both professors, the candidate may proceed to examination for licensure and ordination.

F. Examination for Licensure and Ordination

Examination for licensure and ordination by classis shall proceed when the candidate has received the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

G. Mentoring and Continuing Education

Within six months after ordination, the new minister of Word and sacrament shall initiate a plan for continuing education and formation according to the standards, and shall participate in a three-year mentoring program.

1. The newly ordained minister shall develop with classis a yearly plan for continuing education and formation with specific learning goals and objectives, identifying standards and competencies that will be addressed.

2. Classis shall appoint for each newly ordained minister under its jurisdiction a pastor with appropriate gifts to serve as a mentor for a three-year period, meeting at least every two months.

3. Classis shall arrange and oversee a mentoring group for each new minister during the three-year period, meeting at least every two months. The group shall be led by a person with experience as a pastor and as a small group leader. The group leader may also be a mentor.

4. Since a group should include at least two additional peers, classes may participate together in providing mentors and mentoring groups.

5. Mentoring groups and mentors shall assist the new minister in implementing the yearly plan for continuing education and ministerial formation.

6. Specific areas for focus in mentoring shall include:

a. Spiritual growth and well-being.

b. Personal and family concerns.

c. The discipline of reading and reflection.

d. The practice of ministry.

7. Training, consultation, and resources shall be provided to participants by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.

8. The cost of the mentoring program shall be negotiated between classis and the calling church.
Endnotes:

1. The pressures and crises faced by the RCA today are not without precedent within its own history. When the Synod of Dort, in 1618-1619, set out to organize the church for the monumental task of reforming the faith of the Netherlands, it quickly recognized that the issue of leadership was and would continue to be of critical importance, and that it was absolutely necessary to maintain a steady supply of carefully trained pastors. At Dort, the church sensed that a creative program of ministerial preparation required specific assignment as the primary responsibility within the life of the church. Therefore, when the Church Order of the Synod of Dort identified the “ministries” or offices to be recognized within the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, it listed among them the office of “professor of theology,” an office for the preparation and training of church leaders.

Article II of the Church Order reads:

The offices of the Church of Christ are fourfold, viz.,

1. Minister of the Word
2. “Doctor” or Professor of Theology
3. Elder
4. Deacon

The office of “doctor” or professor of theology is, in the Church Order, not the “fourth office,” as is the common term used in the RCA, but the second office—placed between “minister of the Word” and “elder.” From this fact it is very clear that the Synod wanted everyone to understand that the education of future pastors was a responsibility as much at the center of congregational life as good preaching, the proper administration of the sacraments, spiritual oversight, and the care of the poor. Article XIX of the Church Order makes this very concrete by stating, “Every congregation shall commit itself to provide public funds for the support of Students in Theology.”

Students in theology and other “persons heretofore not engaged in the ministry of the Word” were to be examined regarding their “doctrine and morals” by the classis prior to ordination (Church Order, Article IV).

From this brief examination of the Church Order it becomes clear that the Synod of Dort recognized three pivotal components in the process of assuring a continuing supply of educated, moral, and committed ministers of Word and sacrament—the professor of theology, the congregation, and the classis. Of a fourth and very critical component in the process, the students or candidates in theology, the Church Order took little note.

2. The 1994 General Synod voted:

To appoint a Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America comprised of eight members (two RCA laypersons, two RCA pastors, one General Synod professor of theology from New Brunswick Theological Seminary, one General Synod professor of theology from Western Theological Seminary, one Theological Education Agency representative, and one RCA specialized minister with Clinical Pastoral Education certification; and further,
to instruct this task force to propose standards for the preparation for professional ministry in the Reformed Church in America and the means to achieve these standards, for report to the 1995 General Synod (MGS 1994, R-14, p. 278).

(It must here be noted that the record in MGS 1994, p. 278, is inaccurate. That record places a period after the word “certification” in the first paragraph and omits everything after that point. R-14, as presented to the 1994 General Synod by the Ministry and Personnel Services Committee of GSC, and recommended by the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations, clearly included the second paragraph. Indeed, R-14 makes clear sense only when the second paragraph is present.)

Appointed to the task force (in order of membership definition) were:

Laypersons  
  Barbara Liggett  
  Frederick Wezeman

Pastors  
  Vernon Hoffs  
  Stanley Perea

General Synod Professors of Theology  
  James Cook  
  Norman Kansfield  
  TEA representative  
  Cornelis Kors

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Certified Specialized Minister  
  Robert Anderson

The task force had the benefit of regular participation by two members of the denominational staff (Wesley Granberg-Michaelson and Alvin Poppen) and of three resource persons (Barbara Alexander, Ella Campbell, and Dennis Voskuil). Officers of the General Synod (Harold Korver, Anthony Vis, and Charles Van Engen) attended task force meetings in turn, and four pastors (John Buteyn, John Rottenberg, Jan Luben-Hoffman, and D. Marc de Waard) and three students (Andrew De Braber [WTS], Cynthia Van Lunen [NBTS], and Lisa Vander Wal [TEA]) offered evaluative counsel.

APPENDIX

A. Persons who would serve as ministers of Word and sacrament within the RCA shall possess a firm sense of God’s call and the following qualities:

1. Because we confess that ministers in and of themselves cannot do all that is asked of them, RCA ministers shall be prayerful, relying on God’s power and grace.

2. Because we believe it is necessary for RCA ministers constantly to clarify and deepen their personal vision of God’s reign, they shall be committed to life-long learning about God’s self-revelation, God’s church, and God’s creation, while joyfully interacting with people.

3. Because we believe that God has showered a variety of gifts and callings upon all members of the church, each RCA minister shall be committed to do ministry in partnership with all members of the congregation and with other ministers,
understanding that God does not place the whole weight of ministry on any individual person, in order that all may enjoy God's sabbath of rest and restoration.

4. Because we believe God is faithful, RCA ministers shall be faithful, ethical, and dependable in relationship to all persons.

5. Because for persons in Christ the whole creation is made new, RCA ministers shall be open to the possibility of change in themselves and others.

6. Because we believe our times are in God's hands, and that God has power over all things and will give us all that is good, RCA ministers shall live and work in "the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

B. Persons who would serve as ministers of Word and sacrament within the RCA shall demonstrate gifts and competencies for the following basic tasks for ministry:

1. The proclamation of the gospel and the gathering of the church.

   a. Because we believe that Holy Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is the only rule of faith and life, RCA ministers shall be capable of competent and contextual exposition of the biblical message.

   b. Because we believe that "God our heavenly Father gathers from among the lost children of this world a church to life eternal, and that in this work of grace God is pleased to use our ministry" (Gerrit Vander Lugt, ed., Liturgy and Psalms, New York: the Board of Education, 1968, p. 103), RCA ministers shall be capable, informed, truthful, and effective proclaimers of God's grace to all people and of God's claim upon all of life.

   c. Because we believe the Holy Spirit always works within the church to shape its corporate life in accord with Holy Scripture, and because our shared understanding of Holy Scripture is, in turn, shaped by the traditions of this particular part of Christ's whole church, RCA ministers shall be competent interpreters of the church's theological tradition as set forth in its constitutional documents:

      The Standards of Unity
      The Liturgy, with its Directory
      The Book of Church Order

2. The life of the church in discipleship and worship.

   a. Because we believe that the church, the elect fellowship of God's people, is the formative center of Christian faith and life, RCA ministers shall be able to lead the church's members to discover what it means to follow Jesus.

   b. Because we believe that all people in all their diversity are created, claimed, and loved by God, RCA ministers shall be committed to and capable of welcoming all people into God's community and of seeking their shalom.

   c. Because we believe that the life of the church must be carried out "decently and in order," and because we believe the offices of elder and deacon, with the minister in consistory, are ordained by God for this ordering, RCA
ministers shall be able to give voice to God's call, leading and equipping persons for these offices, and joining them in building up the body of Christ.

d. Because we believe that the gifts and the call of God extend beyond the limits of the ordained offices, RCA ministers shall be able to help members learn about and identify their spiritual gifts, and then welcome, nurture, value, and employ all of the gifts, skills, and experiences that persons bring to the congregation.

e. Because we believe that the gospel brings people into the presence of almighty God, RCA ministers shall be able to conduct congregational worship that celebrates the worth, mystery, and transcendence of God.

f. Because we confess that, in Jesus, God has drawn very near to us in grace, forgiveness, and love, worship also celebrates an intimate trust in God. RCA ministers, therefore, exercise a priestly function in worship, standing between the transcendent God and the needs and conditions of the world. They shall be able to structure worship to be the true and glorious praise of God, offered in language and media that are culturally relevant to, and easily understood by, the congregation gathered for worship.

3. The witness of the church to God's reign in the world.

a. Because we proclaim the good news that everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life, and that all people everywhere are called to repent and believe in the good news, RCA ministers shall be able to hold before the church in a compelling way the vision of God's reign, in order to equip the church for, to elicit its wholehearted support of, and to enlist its joyful participation in, the worldwide proclamation of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

b. Because with our Lord, we pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth" (Matt. 6:10), RCA ministers shall offer leadership in the transformation of human society into the pattern of God's will and purpose. They shall, therefore, be competent to analyze the patterns, needs, and resources of the surrounding society.

C. Persons who would serve as ministers of Word and sacrament within the RCA shall accept for themselves the following core tasks of ministry:

1. Because we believe that the church is the product of God's election, RCA ministers shall welcome all persons who respond to God's grace and shall work to form them, together, into a faithful community for God's service.

2. Because we believe that God in Christ Jesus became fully flesh and blood and dwelt with us, RCA ministers are called to forms of service that actually touch the physical and spiritual lives of persons. At the same time, ministers shall resist the temptation to do for them things that they should do for themselves; and shall do nothing that would violate their integrity as persons.

3. Because we believe that our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong—body and soul, both in life and in death—not to ourselves but to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 1), RCA ministers commit themselves to a ministry of reconciliation and healing, and to building up a community of believers who shall support and care for each other.
4. Because we confess that the mystery of God's grace is at the center of the church's life and that Word and sacrament are the means God has chosen to share that grace, RCA ministers recognize that their most important work centers in those acts that make clear the good news of God's grace and the power of Christ's presence. In congregational ministry, this naturally occurs as the congregation gathers around pulpit, font, and table.

5. Because we believe the RCA to be but a part of the one church of Jesus Christ, RCA ministers shall be committed to and capable of a ministry that helps to build up the whole body of Christ and shall both view and hear all other Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ.

6. Because we know that Jesus carried out his ministry from the margins of society, RCA ministers shall endeavor to experience reality from the perspective of those at the margins and to shape the proclamation of the message of God's grace so that it can be heard as good news to all.

7. Because Christians are anointed to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives, RCA ministers shall work for justice and well-being for all.

8. Because we confess with the psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps. 24:1), RCA ministers shall be committed to the care of the earth and the responsible use of its resources.

R-19.
To approve the Standards for the Preparation of Ministers of Word and Sacrament; and further,

- to refer the Standards for the Preparation of Ministers of Word and Sacrament to the Commission on Church Order for necessary revisions of the Book of Church Order; and further,

- to instruct the Commission on Church Order to present proposed revisions of the Book of Church Order to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

R-20.
To direct the moderator of the General Synod Council to appoint a task force of six members to consult with the Commission on Church Order and to prepare appropriate steps to carry out the intent of the Report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)
Prepare Criteria for Certification of Associates in Ministry in Specific Areas

1. The Classis of Orange overtures General Synod to instruct its Advisory Committee on Church Vocations or other appropriate General Synod agency or commission to prepare criteria for Associates in Ministry to be certified in areas such as administration, visitation, church music, preaching, outreach/evangelism, or other areas of ministry that can be carried out by capable and trained laity under proper guidance and supervision; and further,

to report these criteria to the 1998 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. The *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14, states:

   The classis shall be responsible for certifying those persons who meet the criteria approved by General Synod as Associates in Ministry and shall be responsible for the supervision of Associates in Ministry.

2. Encouraging the certification of Associates in Ministry in specified areas and encouraging the wider use of the gifts of all RCA members frees ministers of Word and sacrament to make better use of their particular gifts in building up the kingdom.

3. As in Christian education, the ministries in areas of administration, visitation, church music, preaching, outreach/evangelism, etc., are currently performed by laity with appropriate gifts. There is a need to formally recognize and cultivate these gifts and to offer proper supervision and training.

4. An Associate in Ministry certification in the specified area of preaching establishes parameters, and a clear relationship to the classis.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

   R-21.
   To instruct Congregational Services to prepare criteria for Associates in Ministry to be certified in areas such as administration, visitation, church music, preaching, outreach/evangelism, or other areas of ministry that can be carried out by capable and trained laity under proper guidance and supervision; and further,

   to report these criteria to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The advisory committee was in agreement with the reasons submitted by the Classis of Orange for Overture 1. ᇞ

Revise "Pastoral Ministry" Term

2. The Classis of Orange overtures General Synod to revise the term "pastoral ministry" in the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1d, for recommendation to the classes for approval, in order to identify gifts (in addition to pastoral ministry) for all phases of ministry, such as missionary work, chaplaincy, etc.
Reasons:

1. The term “pastoral ministry” is limiting and excludes other ministries.

2. The RCA has many specialized ministries that are not “pastoral” ministries.

3. The need for missionaries (medical personnel, Bible translators, professors, and others) should not be excluded from the prayerful concerns of the church.

4. The Book of Church Order in its Preamble declares an equality of ministry among ministers of Word and sacrament and elders and deacons.

➢The advisory committee recommended:

R-22.
To refer Overture 2 to the Commission on Church Order for study and report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason: There is merit in the intent of Overture 2, but further study is needed for precise wording.

Study Concept of Designated Pastors

3. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures General Synod to instruct Ministry and Personnel Services to study the concept of “designated pastors.”

Reasons:

1. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) currently has a “designated pastor” program that is very similar to the RCA specialized interim ministry program. The differences, however, are that designated pastors are allowed to serve a congregation for a longer period of time, serve with a specifically designated purpose or purposes, and may ultimately be called by the congregation. This model might serve the RCA as well.

2. The concept of a designated pastor may be beneficial to some small churches unable to meet classis minimum salary packages.

3. The concept of a designated pastor may be beneficial to pastors “without charge” who are seeking reentry into pastoral ministry.

4. The term “designated pastor” defines more clearly the relationship between the pastor, the congregation, and the classis.

➢The advisory committee recommended:

R-23.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The desires and intents of Overture 3 are fulfilled by the current responsibilities of classes.
From the Report of the President

P-2 (p. 35), P-3 (pp. 35-36), and P-5 (p. 38) were referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations.

➢ In response to P-2 (p. 35), the advisory committee recommended:

R-24.
To instruct the general secretary and the next president of General Synod to send a joint communication to the vice-president of consistory, the chair of the board of deacons of every RCA congregation, and the stated clerks of every classis, encouraging them to provide the time and financial resources so every RCA minister can attend the 1998 Spring Sabbath event in St. Louis, Missouri.

Reason: To be more inclusive of persons in specialized ministries, the advisory committee amended P-2 to include communication with specialized ministers via stated clerks of classis. <

➢ Upon a motion from the floor to amend R-24, Synod

VOTED: To instruct the general secretary and the next president of General Synod to send a joint communication to the vice-president of consistory, the chair of the board of deacons of every RCA congregation, and the stated clerks of every classis, encouraging them to provide the time and financial resources so every RCA minister and spouse can attend the 1998 Spring Sabbath event in St. Louis, Missouri. *

➢ In response to P-3 (pp. 35-36), the advisory committee recommended:

R-25.
To instruct the general secretary to convene each year for the next three years a gathering of fifteen to thirty RCA ministers (a new group each year) in a retreat-type setting; and further;

to instruct the general secretary to convene at no increase in assessment costs these three groups from differing perspectives, from across regional boundaries, and from diverse ethnic, gender, and age groups, in order to have times of worship, prayer, reflection, dialogue, and play together, and for the purpose of experiencing one another as sisters and brothers in Christ who belong to one body of Christ, who are united by one Spirit, and who are committed to the mission of the church of our one Lord. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. To be intentionally inclusive, the advisory committee amended P-3 to include the words “ethnic” and “gender.”

2. While these events have merit, the advisory committee amended P-3 by inserting the words “at no increase in assessment costs” in order that these events be funded from available funds rather than by increased assessment costs. <

*Addition is in light-face type.
In response to P-5 (p. 38), the advisory committee recommended:

R-26.
To instruct the General Synod Council Ministry and Personnel Services Committee to prepare plans for an annual denominationally sponsored continuing education opportunity for RCA ministers in order to provide community building with other RCA ministers, to provide opportunities for theological reflection and spiritual formation, to help in understanding contemporary issues of gospel and culture, and to expose them to cutting edge thinking in the practice of ministry. (ADOPTED)<
Twin Falls Reformed Church, Twin Falls, Idaho
Downers Grove Community Church, Downers Grove, Illinois
Peace Community Church, Frankfort, Illinois
Peace Reformed Church, Mt. Prospect, Illinois
Pembroke Community Reformed Church, Saint Anne, Illinois
Faith Community Church, West Chicago, Illinois
Christ’s Community Church, Fishers, Indiana
Christ’s Community Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana
Crossroads Church, Overland Park, Kansas
Harvest Community Church, Wichita, Kansas
Boston Taiwanese Christian Church, Arlington, Massachusetts
Reformed Church of Corinth, Byron Center, Michigan
Christ Community Church of Canton, Canton, Michigan
Church of the Saviour, Coopersville, Michigan
Open Door Reformed Church, Dorr, Michigan
University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan
Resurrection Reformed Church, Flint, Michigan
Thornapple Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Glen Lake Community Reformed Church, Glen Arbor, Michigan
Trinity Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Covenant Community Church, Hudsonville, Michigan
Hager Park Reformed Church, Jenison, Michigan
Church of the Savior, Niles, Michigan
Southridge Reformed Church, Portage, Michigan
Fourth Reformed Church, Oshtemo, Michigan
Gun Lake Community Church, Wayland, Michigan
Riverside Reformed Church, Bloomington, Minnesota
Peace Reformed Church, Eagan, Minnesota
Minnesota Valley Community Church, Prior Lake, Minnesota
Christ Community Church, Blue Springs, Missouri
Classis of Illinois (for Christ Community Church, St. Peters, Missouri)
Westwood Church, Omaha, Nebraska
First Reformed Church, Lincoln Park, New Jersey
Ocean Reformed Church, Manahawkin, New Jersey
Pinelands Reformed Church, Toms River, New Jersey
Community Church of Colonie, Albany, New York
Shin Kwang Church of New York, Bayside, New York
Mott Haven Church, Bronx, New York
United Reformed Church of Williamsbridge Road, Bronx, New York
New Lots Community Church, Brooklyn, New York
The First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the Town of Princetown, Duanesburg, New York
Choongsyn Korean Reformed Church, Flushing, New York
Heiderberg Reformed Church, Guilderland Center, New York
Nakwon Reformed Church, Sunnyside, Long Island, New York
Siloam Church, Flushing, New York
Pitcher Hill Community Church, North Syracuse, New York
First Reformed Church, Rochester, New York
New Life Community Church, Sayville, New York
Grace Christian Church, Staten Island, New York
Reformed Church of Syracuse, Syracuse, New York
Clarkstown Reformed Church, West Nyack, New York
Pultneyville Reformed Church, Williamson, New York
First Reformed Church, Wynantskill, New York
First Reformed Church of Cary, Cary, North Carolina
Report of the General Synod Council's Evangelism and Church Development Services Committee

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF EVANGELISM AND CHURCH DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Revitalization

In response to a proposal presented by the general secretary in his report to the 1996 General Synod, the 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council's Evangelism and Church Development Services Committee, in cooperation with the Council of Field Secretaries and the Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee, to engage in a study of revitalized congregations; and further,

to propose, using that study as a basis, specific plans and strategies for such revitalization that can be implemented through the General Synod Council in cooperation with regional synods, classes, and consistories; and further,

to make this study a priority during 1997 and 1998, for report to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-11, p. 369).

A Revitalization Summit Team was formed for the purpose of a study on revitalization. Members of the team are:

Anthony Vis  President of General Synod and pastor of the Meredith Drive Reformed Church in Des Moines, Iowa

Charles Van Engen  Vice-president of General Synod and professor of missiology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California
Kevin Korver  
Pastor of Third Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa

Peter Semeyn  
Pastor of Palos Heights Reformed Church in Palos Heights, Illinois

Jhonny Alicea-Baez  
Pastor of Hope Community Reformed Church in Orlando, Florida

Charles Morris  
Pastor of Colt’s Neck Reformed Church in Colt’s Neck, New Jersey

Vicki Menning  
Pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Bill Lee  
Pastor of Reformed Church of Newtown in Elmhurst, New York

Arthur Hudak  
Pastor of Woodlawn Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York

Stanley Perea  
Pastor of Church of the Rockies in Denver, Colorado

Karl Overbeek  
Pastor of Church of the Chimes in San Jose, California

Barbara Alexander  
Pastor of New Brooklyn Reformed Church in Brooklyn, New York

Thomas De Vries  
Pastor of Palm Canyon Community Church in Moreno Valley, California

Bruce Laverman, director of Evangelism and Church Development Services, and Richard Welscott, coordinator for New Church Development, serve as staff resource persons for this team.

The Revitalization Summit Team met on January 27-29, 1997, at Rancho Capistrano Conference Center in San Juan Capistrano, California. Helen Monsees, a member of the General Synod Council, served as group facilitator and led the team in discovering some common themes in the redevelopment and revitalization of congregations.

The team requested the Rev. Charles Morris write a summary document. Morris wrote:

Leadership continually surfaced as a crucial factor in the revitalization process. The role and model that leaders provide informs everything that happens in healthy congregations: how things are managed; the discovery of purpose/mission; the empowerment of persons to exercise their gifts as spiritual leaders; the importance of prayer and worship; and the nurturing of community.

We also agreed that our Reformation tradition is not a narrow street, but a superhighway on which we are prompted by the Spirit to risk the reshaping of the church to be effective in the context of a postmodern world. For this to happen there must be continual emphasis on providing the kind of personal/structural systems that give birth to and resource congregations (and their leaders) for change.

The Revitalization Summit Team will meet again July 7-9, 1997, at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America headquarters near O’Hare airport in Chicago, Illinois. The focus for this meeting is to begin preparation of its report to the 1998 General Synod.
The advisory committee recommended:

R-1.
To instruct Evangelism and Church Development Services to hold a revitalization conference for small membership churches by 1999; and further,

to instruct Evangelism and Church Development Services, in developing the design for this conference, to address both rural and metropolitan issues. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. This conference will identify the critical issues of revitalization for these churches.

2. This conference will provide opportunity for pastors to network with each other.

Evangelism Connections

The RCA is involved in a cooperative alliance of mainline Protestant denominations to plan major evangelism events in the U.S. for the years 1998 and 2000. Three events are scheduled in 1998 and four are scheduled in 2000.

The “evangelism connections” (participating denominations) are: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Reformed Church in America.

Topics being considered for these evangelism events are: contextual/contemporary worship, generational issues, small membership church issues, young adult issues, older adult ministries, contextual evangelism and social ministry, racial/ethnic ministries, hospitality ministries, men’s ministries, mentoring, small groups ministries, spiritual gifts ministries, “How to Help the Church Change” workshop, congregations as family systems, organizational leadership, contemporary music, invitational strategies, and teaching faith sharing.

Custom Church Video

RCA Productions has been working on a project with Evangelism and Church Development Services to produce a video featuring introductory material about the Reformed Church in America. Also, each local congregation has the opportunity to insert its own congregation’s story into this video. It is hoped this video will be a valuable resource to all congregations in helping them interpret and make known their ministries to the communities in which they are located. There is even the possibility this type of video could be used on local community cable television access.

RIAL Invite a Friend Campaign

One of the most effective vehicles for motivating members of a congregation to invite their friends to church is the Invite a Friend campaign produced by an ecumenical alliance called Religion in American Life (RIAL). RIAL is chaired by the former general secretary of the RCA, the Rev. Edwin Mulder. The purpose of RIAL is to resource and equip congregations to invite their friends and neighbors to church. A catalog of materials with a letter of introduction from the director of Evangelism and Church Development Services is mailed each year to all RCA congregations throughout the U.S. and Canada describing the Invite a Friend campaign.
In 1996 ten thousand congregations from many denominations participated in the RIAL Invite a Friend campaign. These congregations reported increases in attendance that averaged 11 percent in the months following the campaign. RCA pastors and congregations have reported that this campaign has proved catalytic for their community outreach.

Through this campaign, over seven million people have found a church home, a place where they experience community, recover a sense of direction in their faith and lives, and receive new strength and power in their faith for living. Approximately 85 percent of all persons joining a local congregation come the first time through an invitation by a neighbor, friend, or relative. When the unchurched are asked why they do not attend church, most answer “I’ve never been asked.”

Radio and television stations, plus newspapers and magazines, have donated an estimated $29 million in public service messages in support of this campaign.

**Evangelism Packet**

A packet of evangelism information was sent in the fall of 1996 to every RCA congregation by Evangelism and Church Development Services and Congregational Services. Included in this packet were a copy of the National Council of Churches’ evangelism statement, “A Call to Dialogue and Action in Evangelism: Jesus Christ and God’s Reign”; information on how churches can create a home page on the web site; and other evangelism articles.

**Hispanic Ministries**

The director of Evangelism and Church Development Services contacted six Hispanic RCA pastors to hear about their work. The result of these contacts is the publication of a booklet entitled *Hispanic Pastors on Ministry in the RCA*. This booklet was also included in the evangelism packet sent in the fall of 1996 to all RCA congregations.

These six Hispanic RCA pastors noted that many similar issues in ministry transcend ethnicity and culture. Further exploration of a common ministry for Christ among all RCA congregations (racial/ethnic and the others) continues in Evangelism and Church Development Services.

**REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF CONGREGATIONAL EVANGELISM**

**On the Way 2**

In 1987 the Reformed Church in America began a ten-year On the Way emphasis on evangelism, designed to motivate and equip congregations to make new efforts to reach out to millions of North Americans. The first phase of that emphasis ended in 1996. More than 370 RCA congregations enrolled in On the Way.

During that ten-year period (1987-96), evangelism resources were produced and distributed (the last mailing included *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, by Marva Dawn); a half-time staff person (the associate for congregational evangelism) was hired to provide practical hands-on help for local congregations; and regional evangelism trainers were recruited and trained. As a result, many RCA congregations have begun to develop new strategies for doing evangelization effectively.

The 1996 General Synod voted to reaffirm for five years the On the Way evangelism emphasis (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 354). This new phase is called On the Way 2. R-1 also encouraged all RCA congregations to enroll or re-enroll in On the Way. The On the Way 2 evangelism emphasis requires:
1. A journey of obedience. Enrollment in On the Way 2 expresses a willingness to make evangelization a high priority in congregational life.

2. A pledge of commitment. A single enrollment gift of $75 for a five-year period (1997-2001) in On the Way 2 is a sign of commitment to evangelism as well as a contribution to the cost of future resources.


4. A promise of support. Enrollment in On the Way 2 means entering into a covenant relationship with the RCA:

   a. The congregation agrees to pray for and work toward evangelism goals the RCA has adopted, and the congregation also agrees to pray for other RCA congregations and the entire Reformed Church in America.

   b. The Reformed Church in America agrees to provide to the congregation, on an annual basis, evangelism resources that are creative, helpful, and practical.

   c. The pastor agrees to lead the congregation in doing effective evangelization and to support local outreach goals of his or her congregation.

A letter from the president and vice-president of General Synod was sent in January of 1997 to each RCA pastor and consistory, encouraging congregations to enroll in On the Way 2. The letter stated:

Forget about the fine books and materials that will come to you over the next five years. Enroll now as a way of joining other RCA member congregations in making a powerful statement that evangelism-reaching lost and hurting people for Jesus Christ—matters to us because it matters to God!

R-2.
To urge all RCA congregations to enroll in On the Way 2. (ADOPTED)

Regional Evangelism Trainers

The 1995 General Synod voted:

To encourage RCA congregations to use the services of a regional evangelism trainer or the associate for congregational evangelism to conduct an evangelism workshop (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 354).

By the end of 1996, sixteen persons had been trained and certified as regional evangelism trainers (RETs). They are:

Regional Synod of Canada

John Kapteyn
Ronald L. Sikkema

Regional Synod of the Far West

Richard Koerselman
Jeffrey and Heather Kreiser
Thomas De Vries
Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
Daryl Vetter
Sherwin Weener

Regional Synod of the Heartland
Randy Blumer
Stephen Hielkema
Stanley Vandersall
Wayne Van Regenmorter

Regional Synod of Mid-America
Robert Grysen
John Huff

Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics
Taylor Holbrook
Nancy Ryan

Regional Synod of New York
Paul Ruter

Eight others are waiting to complete their training as RETs. RETs are trained to conduct evangelism workshops, to assist the leadership of local congregations to devise strategies for more effective outreach, and to lead faithful witnessing seminars to assist Christians in becoming more effective witnesses.

RETs are not volunteers. They receive a stipend (plus necessary transportation, room, and board) from the RCA Office of Evangelism for each workshop or seminar they conduct. This is a program funded by Evangelism and Church Development Services, and congregations are not charged.

In 1995 the associate for congregational evangelism wrote a detailed training manual for RETs. In 1996 a major supplement to this manual was produced. This supplement provides directions for leading faithful witnessing seminars. The manual and supplement are available from the RCA Distribution Center.

Between September 1996 and May 1997, four RETs conducted seventeen workshops. (Of the seventeen workshops, John Huff conducted ten.)

A gathering of RETs was held in May 1997 for a time of sharing and consultation with the director of Evangelism and Church Development Services, the Rev. Bruce Laverman, and the associate for congregational evangelism, the Rev. Donald Baird.

Regional Evangelism Trainers comprise a committed, trained, and dedicated evangelism corps, ready to serve the RCA.

R-3.
To encourage RCA regional synods, classes, and congregations to use the services of a regional evangelism trainer or the associate for congregational evangelism to conduct evangelism workshops and faithful witnessing seminars. (ADOPTED)

Evangelism Workshops and Seminars

During the 1996-97 year, the associate for congregational evangelism conducted weekend workshops, witnessing seminars, and consultations for eleven congregations in Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, Ontario, and Texas. Regional evangelism trainers conducted seventeen workshops, seminars, and consultations in Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, and Wisconsin.
An evangelism workshop is designed to provide specific helps in a specific context. Held on Friday evening and Saturday morning and afternoon, a workshop follows an intensive eight-hour schedule. In each case local church leaders are urged to participate, together with persons who control change. Although time prevents a sufficient discussion of ideas that emerge during a workshop, a process is provided for follow-up. At the end of a workshop, participants list ideas they believe would work best in their congregation and community. Ideas are compiled by the associate for congregational evangelism or the RET, who returns a detailed summary to the church, adding his or her own suggestions, commentary, and assessment.

There is no charge for a workshop. The services of the associate for congregational evangelism or regional evangelism trainer are provided to RCA congregations by Evangelism and Church Development Services. Congregations are asked to make a suitable contribution to help defray travel costs.

One of the most difficult challenges facing most parishioners—and many clergy—is how to witness effectively. Seminars are designed for average Christians who find it difficult to engage others in faith conversations. Seminars begin with Bible study and use role-playing techniques to strengthen learnings. Lasting three hours, seminars are usually held for groups of from twelve to sixty on weekday evenings. They have been held for individual congregations, groups of churches, and classes. Suggestions for follow-up training are made during the process.

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF NEW CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

The New Church Development (NCD) section of Evangelism and Church Development Services is responsible for the following areas:

1. Evaluations

   Evaluating the strengths and abilities of a potential new church development pastor is useful both to the new church development candidate and to the search committee. The following two methods for evaluation of NCD candidates were developed:

   a. Assessment Clinic. This is an intensive, four-day evaluation of NCD candidates. The next assessment clinic is scheduled for August 1997.

   b. Gallup Interview. During this interview, candidates interested in new church development receive feedback on their qualifications (gifts) for this ministry. Interested persons can contact their regional synod executives or the NCD office for information.

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-4:

R-4
To encourage Reformed Church in America congregations and pastors to identify persons who have the gifts and skills to begin new RCA congregations and to assist those persons in pursuing the option of beginning a new congregation. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: This amendment adds the critical element of gifts.

*Addition is in light-face type.
2. Consultations

The coordinator for new church development is available to the regional synods as a resource person. In that capacity, each regional synod executive was contacted in the past year and assistance was given when requested. Several church evaluations were completed and various possibilities for new churches were explored.

3. Denominational Plan

An application to be placed in the denominational plan, which all new RCA congregations must complete, requests information dealing with the purpose of the ministry, supervision of the ministry, and the financial plan to support the ministry. Once completed, the application must be submitted to the classis, the regional synod, and the Council of Field Secretaries for approval before submission for final approval to the General Synod Council.

The following churches were approved for placement in the denominational plan in the past year:

- New church start, Elk Grove, California
- Good News Community Church, Spirit Lake, Iowa
- New church start, Ankeny, Iowa
- Reformed Korean Presbyterian Church, Carrollton, Texas
- New church start, West St. Louis County, Missouri

R-5.

To pause for a time of prayer to support the following five ministries that have been entered into the denominational plan from June 1996 to June 1997:

- New church start, Elk Grove, California
- Good News Community Church, Spirit Lake, Iowa
- New church start, Ankeny, Iowa
- Reformed Korean Presbyterian Church, Carrollton, Texas
- New church start, West St. Louis County, Missouri

(ADOPTED)

➢ The Rev. Richard Welscott, coordinator for new church development, led General Synod in a time of prayer. ◄

5. Reception of New Congregations

The following congregations celebrated their organization between June 1996 and June 1997:

- La Senda Reformed Church, Downsview, Ontario
- Monocacy Valley Church, Frederick, Maryland
- New Song Community Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
- Westview Church, Clive, Iowa
- Grace Community Church, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia
- Living Faith Community Church, East Modesto, California
R-6.
To adopt the following resolution:

BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred and ninety-first session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the seventeenth day of June 1997, gives recognition and heartily celebrates the organization of the following congregations:

La Senda Reformed Church, Downsview, Ontario
Monocacy Valley Church, Frederick, Maryland
New Song Community Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Westview Church, Clive, Iowa
Grace Community Church, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia
Living Faith Community Church, East Modesto, California

(ADOPTED)

The Rev. Richard Welscott, coordinator for new church development, presented plaques to representatives of the above newly organized churches recognized by the 1997 General Synod.

The Rev. Bruce Laverman, director of Evangelism and Church Development Services, led General Synod in a time of prayer.

6. $9.8 by '98

The $9.8 by '98 fund drive directly affects the health of new congregations begun under the 98 by '98 program. This fund drive provides monies for:

a. New congregations to build their first units.

b. Training of new church development and urban pastors.

c. Matching program and capital grants for small, urban, or rural congregations to meet building or program needs.

The coordinator for new church development is responsible for supervising the distribution of the $9.8 by '98 monies raised for program and capital grants. One individual from each of the RCA's regional synods serves on the $9.8 by '98 Grant Committee, which reviews all applications. This committee met in October 1996 and in April 1997 and approved several applications for distribution of $9.8 by '98 monies.

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-7:

R-7.
To encourage each congregation of the Reformed Church in America to participate in the United States $9.8 by '98 fund drive or the Canadian Gift of Love fund drive. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)*

Reason: This identifies the Canadian component of this fund drive.

*Additions are in light-face type.
7. Vision and Implementation Plan for New Congregations

The 1996 General Synod voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council’s Evangelism and Church Development Services Committee and Mission Services Committee, in cooperation with the racial/ethnic councils and the Council of Field Secretaries, to develop a vision and implementation plan for new congregations from 1998 to 2005, with special attention to urban areas; and further,

to develop a variety of models for these new congregations in different economic, cultural, and ethnic settings, for report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-10, p. 369).

The following groups met and gave their input to the above R-10:

1. The Council of Field Secretaries (COFS) met in October 1996 and evaluated the present $9.8 by '98 program.

2. Another small group met in Newark, New Jersey, for one day to define ingredients necessary for a vision in new church development.

3. A meeting was held April 6, 1997, with racial/ethnic council and Mission Services representatives to begin processing this vision and implementation plan for new congregations from 1998 to 2005.

A final report is expected to be presented to the 1998 General Synod.

From the Report of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries

RCA ORIENTATION VIDEO

With the increasing number of Asians joining the Reformed Church in America, Pacific and Asian American pastors have expressed a need for orientation materials to acquaint newcomers with the RCA. A video resource that highlights the history, doctrine, organization, worship, mission philosophy, and the evangelical and ecumenical nature of the RCA would address the questions most frequently asked.

Evangelism and Church Development Services is working with RCA audiovisual productions on a custom church video that addresses some of the needs of Pacific and Asian American congregations. The video would need to be made available in various languages in order to meet the needs of the different language groups that make up the council. If the custom church video is used as the basis for a more expansive orientation video, the latter could be used in an educational setting that would facilitate discussion between the pastor or leader and the newcomers.
R-8
To instruct Evangelism and Church Development Services, in consultation with Congregational Services and the racial/ethnic councils, to explore the creation of an orientation video about the Reformed Church in America, including its history, doctrine, organization, worship, mission philosophy, and evangelical and ecumenical nature; and further,

to consider producing this RCA orientation video in various languages. (ADOPTED)

Agency Report

REPORT OF WORDS OF HOPE

Five New Broadcast Languages Added Since October 1996

The year 1996 proved to be Words of Hope’s most prolific ever for the adding of new broadcast languages. Funded by Words of Hope’s recent World-Reach Campaign, five new World by 2000 language broadcasts were launched during the last three months of 1996. These included Romani, Dinka, Nuer, Sena, and Makonde.

Romani. In October, Words of Hope began Romani broadcasts to central Europe’s Gypsy people over Trans World Radio’s AM transmitter in Tirana, Albania. A Gypsy pastor, who produces the programs in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia, uses the Balkan dialect of Romani which is spoken by more than 1.5 million Gypsy people in Bulgaria and in the former Yugoslavia. Most Gypsies are generally despised by other ethnic groups in the countries where they live. At the present time many appear to be especially open to the gospel. For them, hearing that Jesus Christ died for their people, too, is radical, life-changing good news.

Nuer and Dinka. In Nairobi, FEBA Radio manages the production efforts for Words of Hope’s programs in these two Sudanese languages over FEBA’s shortwave transmitters in the Seychelles. Concerning the intense religious persecution that fellow Sudanese Christians are suffering at the hands of Sudan’s Muslim-controlled government, Dinka producer Stephen Mathiang Alier explains:

We are fighting two wars. The war that [Sudan’s] government is fighting with the rebels [southern Sudanese, many of whom are Christian] is one war, and the other war that we are fighting is the war against Islam. Because the Arabs consider southern Sudan as a stumbling block to Islam, a lot of people are now dying in Sudan.

It is really very difficult in some places in northern Sudan to find people going to church because of Islam. In northern Sudan many people are Muslims and there are not many churches, so when we are using radio it can break those boundaries. People will get those messages in the houses, in the offices, every place where they are, so radio is going to help us reach those whom we cannot reach.

Encouraged by Words of Hope’s partnership in the Dinka radio outreach, Mathiang says:
FEBA Radio cannot do this without you, and we cannot do it without FEBA Radio. So you are actually fulfilling what is written in the Bible when Jesus Christ was telling his disciples that you have to start preaching in Jerusalem, in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the world. This is what you are now fulfilling at Words of Hope.

Makonde and Sena. Words of Hope and FEBA Radio also teamed up to produce first-ever broadcasts in Mozambique’s Sena and Makonde languages. Sena is spoken by more than one million central Mozambicans, in Safala province around Beira, while the Makonde people live in a frontier area on both sides of the country’s northern border with Tanzania. The production team works side by side with a Wycliffe Bible translation team in Mueda in Cabo Del Gado province. A Wycliffe missionary couple supervises the production work inside a region which is completely unserved by electricity or running water. The broadcasts are already generating a grateful response.

Words of Hope’s Other International Broadcasts Bear Fruit

Arab World. Words of Hope’s Arabic broadcasts are now on the air seven times every week. These involve four very powerful radio stations—two AM transmitters of Radio Monte Carlo (one from Cyprus to the Middle East and the other from France to North Africa) as well as two shortwave transmitters. (One is directed from the Seychelles to the Arabian Peninsula and North East Africa and the other is directed from South Africa to North and West Africa.) It is encouraging to receive mail response from countries as far away as Senegal, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The mail response reflects a steadily growing interest in the gospel among young Muslim men and women. Most listeners who respond to the broadcasts are literate, with at least a high school level of education. There are, however, many, whose ability to read and write seems to be very minimal. This confirms the importance of radio as an effective means of providing people in these mostly closed Muslim countries with the opportunity to hear the gospel.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit is germinating the heard seed of the Word into saving faith in the lives of some of those who listen. A semiliterate young Saudi illustrates that in simple words: “Life is very good under the Lord Christ.” A Syrian university graduate, on the other hand, writes: “I have discovered true meaning and direction for my life and thinking... What God gives me in Jesus is true and good as well as deep and peaceful.”

Other Muslim Peoples. In addition to Arabic, Words of Hope also broadcasts to predominantly Muslim audiences in Azeri (Azerbaijan and northern Iran), Albanian, Kashmiri (to Kashmir), as well as in the Indonesian languages of Makassar, Buginese, and Indonesian. A November 1996 visit to Indonesia by Words of Hope’s vice president Lee DeYoung confirmed the growing impact of these strategic outreach efforts.

Indian Subcontinent. Words of Hope broadcasts over thirty-five programs every week to this spiritually needy region in the languages of Hindi, Telugu, Dogri, Bhojpuri, Garhwali, Nepali, Dzongkha, Kashmiri, and Banjara. Listener response to the newest of these—Banjara—has been particularly encouraging. The Banjaras are a Gypsy tribal group who tend to live in isolation, shunning contact with other peoples. Almost as soon as Words of Hope began broadcasting Banjara programs in 1995, listeners began responding in large numbers. Hundreds of Banjara listeners write every month to testify about the life-changing impact of these gospel broadcasts, which air from Trans World Radio’s powerful AM transmitter in Sri Lanka.

China. Words of Hope broadcasts to the world’s most populous nation in six languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Amoy, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Zhuang. In 1996 listeners frequently requested prayer to help them cope with the Chinese government’s intensified persecution as part of its nationwide “Strike Hard” campaign. Among the most notable targets have been
thousands of unregistered house churches, many of which have recently been forced to close. Despite more than four decades of often-deadly antireligious persecution, China's Christian population appears to have grown from approximately seven hundred thousand in the late 1940s to an estimated eighty million today! Because of China's severe shortage of trained pastors, gospel broadcasts are crucially important—especially to China's minorities, who are rarely reachable in any other ongoing way.

**Words of Hope's English Broadcasts Are Heard Worldwide**

Words of Hope's weekly English programs with David Bast are currently broadcast on over one hundred stations in North America, as well as several major international medium and shortwave stations. The English program is broadcast via the ASTRA satellite in Europe, directly receivable by millions of European satellite dish owners. Words of Hope's English programs are also being broadcast via satellite to South Africa. Each week's English program can also be heard worldwide via the Internet from Words of Hope's worldwide web site: http://woh.org.

**Global Partnerships**

**World by 2000.** Words of Hope is an active participant on the steering committee of the cooperative World by 2000 initiative to extend the reach of missionary radio to every people group of at least one million persons. Words of Hope has been directly involved in launching one-third of the eighty-five megalanguages that have been added for broadcast since the World by 2000 project was launched in 1985. The other World by 2000 partners also invited Words of Hope to produce a new video update documenting the project's progress: *Multiplying the Harvest*. English, Spanish, and Portuguese versions of this 11-minute video are now available.

**AD2000 & Beyond Movement.** World evangelization requires coordinated efforts among many different types of ministries. That is why Words of Hope and its World by 2000 partners are working closely with the more general and broadly based AD2000 & Beyond Movement. The movement's purpose is to encourage, motivate, and network church leaders by inspiring them with the vision of reaching the unreached by the year 2000 through consultations, prayer, and communications.

**Literature**

**Four New Books by the Rev. David Bast.** Words of Hope recently published four new books by president and broadcast minister David Bast. In *Objections to Christianity*, Bast responds biblically and reasonably to common reasons for rejecting the Christian faith. *Easter Hope* seeks to answer the central question asked of the Christian faith: "Did Jesus actually rise from the dead?" *What Love Is Like* consists of ten studies of one of the Bible's most familiar and popular chapters: 1 Cor. 13. *A Gospel for the World* is a series of studies in Paul's foundational letter to the Romans.

**Online.** Exponential growth continues to characterize Words of Hope's site on the Internet's World Wide Web. Launched in April 1995, the web site is part of the Muskegon, Michigan-based Gospel Communications Network. The number of file downloads for Words of Hope's site grew from 533 in April 1995 to thirty-five thousand during February 1996 and one hundred fifty thousand per month by February 1997. Users access the service from more than one hundred countries, including Singapore, Germany, Sweden, and Australia. Words of Hope plans to continue adding more ministry resources throughout 1997. The web address is http://woh.org.
Grateful Thanks

Words of Hope is very grateful to RCA regional synods, classes, congregations, and members who have faithfully supported the ministry through their prayers and gifts. During 1996 RCA congregations contributed a total of $880,892, including $735,859 in regular giving and $145,033 in specially designated gifts.

The Rev. David Bast, president and broadcast minister of Words of Hope, addressed Synod. Synod reviewed a video presentation about the Words of Hope ministry.

From the Report of the President

P-1 (p. 33) was referred to the Advisory Committee on Evangelization and Church Growth and the Advisory Committee on World Mission.

In response to P-1 (p. 33), the Advisory Committee on Evangelization and Church Growth consulted with the Advisory Committee on World Mission to prepare R-4 on p. 422. The Advisory Committee on World Mission presented R-4 to this General Synod for adoption (see 422).
REPORTS ON FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Report of the General Synod Council’s Finance Services Committee

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

Overview

As with any organization, the Reformed Church in America depends heavily on the services provided by its financial and accounting offices to keep operations running efficiently and on track. The Office of Finance is committed to providing quality accounting and financial services to support the operations of the General Synod Council, Reformed Church Women’s Ministries, the Board of Pensions, the RCA Building and Extension Fund, and the RCA Foundation. Selected financial and advisory services are also offered to other denominational agencies and institutions, including regional synods, classes, RCA seminaries, and RCA congregations.

Dedicated personnel carry out the daily tasks that are so essential in assisting the Reformed Church in America to further the work of mission and ministry. The RCA treasurer is charged with the primary responsibility for the oversight of all activities related to the Office of Finance.

Within the Office of Finance, staff members handle a wide range of tasks, including: 1) proper recording of contributions and other income; 2) payment of all bills, including the program expenditures that make up the RCA’s total mission worldwide; 3) exercising of necessary budget and cash controls; 4) preparation of payroll for RCA staff and missionaries; and 5) other activities essential to the day-to-day functioning of the RCA. Finance staff are also responsible for interfacing with legal counsel, independent auditors, state regulators, the Internal Revenue Service, and corporate insurance providers.

Two years ago numerous changes in the corporate structure of the RCA correlated well with the installation in the Office of Finance of a new software accounting package (American Fundware). This change in software continues to produce improvements in how the office functions and in how financial information is communicated. Timeliness of reports, immediate access to finance numbers, and next-day check processing are three of the more tangible advancements.

New software development continued in 1996 as the Office of Finance switched to a PC-based system (LSSI) that processes mortgage loan payments. Installing and implementing LSSI was a joint project done by the Office of Finance, in coordination with the RCA Building and Extension Fund office in Orange City, Iowa. During 1996 the Office of Finance also completed a two-year installation of a customized investment accounting software package for the Board of Pensions. This package is also PC-based and runs from an Access database application.

Structural changes continued to occur during 1996. For example, the RCA’s Office of Audiovisual Production and TRA/VARCA were both given new accounting structures to more adequately measure the cost and effectiveness of these offices. Procedural changes also occurred during 1996 as the Office of Finance switched to a new external payroll provider (PAYCHEX) and made major modifications in the manner of collecting and reporting contribution revenue in Canada.
The Office of Finance was able to reach only a few of its long-term goals and objectives during 1996. Time constraints and staffing limitations restricted what was accomplished in 1996. Projects still requiring attention focus on the need to improve the existing system of controls. These improvements include, but are not be limited to: 1) producing an accounting manual, 2) strengthening budget controls, 3) purchasing a new contribution receipt software system, and 4) making improvements to the investment monitoring and reporting systems.

The Office of Finance gives God the glory for the opportunity to be a servant of the RCA. The report that follows is a concentrated overview of the areas of responsibility for Finance Services.

### Financial Summary, 1996

To provide some idea of the annual activity by the various agencies serviced by the Office of Finance, here is a summary of the total revenue and expenses for the calendar year 1996.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1996 Revenue</th>
<th>1996 Expenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Synod Council</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Fund</td>
<td>$12,999,578</td>
<td>$13,036,444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCWS Disaster Relief Fund</td>
<td>179,142</td>
<td>395,366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCA “If-raisers” Fund</td>
<td>179,712</td>
<td>97,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCA Distribution Center Fund</td>
<td>1,423,301</td>
<td>1,489,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Development Fund</td>
<td>6,256</td>
<td>42,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audiovisual Fund</td>
<td>243,885</td>
<td>262,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9.8 by ’98 Fund Drive</td>
<td>1,498,532</td>
<td>1,084,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$16,530,406</strong></td>
<td><strong>$16,408,045</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reformed Church Women’s Ministries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Fund</td>
<td>$200,928</td>
<td>$175,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly Funds</td>
<td>4,258</td>
<td>11,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Marcus Scholarship Fund</td>
<td>4,037</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$209,223</strong></td>
<td><strong>$190,501</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Board of Pensions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Fund</td>
<td>$1,685,799</td>
<td>$1,676,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annuity Fund</td>
<td>21,208,377</td>
<td>19,408,427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance Fund</td>
<td>8,627,989</td>
<td>7,840,882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$31,522,165</strong></td>
<td><strong>$28,925,337</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RCA Foundation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Fund</td>
<td>$526,710</td>
<td>$409,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endowment and Trust Fund</td>
<td>952,826</td>
<td>908,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey Fund</td>
<td>78,741</td>
<td>10,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropic Fund</td>
<td>121,031</td>
<td>112,087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift Annuity Fund</td>
<td>63,024</td>
<td>98,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revocable Gift Fund</td>
<td>13,832</td>
<td>13,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$1,756,164</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,553,343</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustees of the General Program Council designed the RCA Cash Program in 1979, primarily as a means for providing capital for the RCA Extension Foundation. In addition to raising new capital for the building of churches, the program makes it possible for congregations, classes, agencies, and regional synods to receive a relatively high yield for the short-term investment of surplus funds.

Up to 40 percent of the monies received into the RCA Cash Program may be deposited with the Extension Foundation Fund (EFF). The actual percentage will vary, based on the immediate cash needs of EFF. Because EFF finances most of its capital needs through the sale of its investment notes, the percentage of Cash Program funds deposited with EFF was only 5 percent at year's end.

The balance of monies on deposit with the Cash Program (95 percent) is invested in outside markets. These investments are restricted to debt securities, money market funds, certificates of deposit, U.S. government obligations, prime commercial paper/bonds of high quality, and options and futures.

The fund is similar to a money market fund in the way it operates, with actual earnings being distributed to individual participants on a quarterly basis. In recent years the amount available to invest was relatively constant. Because of this, several long-term investment instruments were purchased to enhance overall yield. This lengthening of the portfolio's average maturity caused considerable swings in the market value of the assets. During 1996 a task force was formed to study the issues that surround asset value fluctuation, particularly as asset values relate to FASB 124 and the reporting of unrealized gains and losses. A result of this study was a vote by the General Synod Council to guarantee the principal dollar balance of all depositors in the RCA Cash Program.

The amount of outside deposits in the fund declined slightly in 1996, from $19 million to $17 million. The net return for outside investors during 1996 was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>Return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Quarter</td>
<td>6.21 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Quarter</td>
<td>6.06 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Quarter</td>
<td>5.96 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Quarter</td>
<td>6.06 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the hiring of a managing director of investments in 1992, all investments in the RCA Cash Program (totaling $30 million) are under direct management of the RCA's managing director of investments. During the past year a conservative approach was taken in establishing a $600,000 reserve to allow for asset value fluctuation. Although this reserve does not encompass the entire difference created by a market-to-cost comparison at December 31, 1996, it is believed by both the managing director of investments and the independent auditors that the assets were not permanently impaired.
Overall, the RCA Cash Program continues to provide the cash needs of the Extension Foundation while at the same time providing an attractive rate of return for its participants.

Reformed Church Investment Program

In 1994 the Reformed Church in America integrated the management of its permanent investment funds (endowment funds) into the newly formed RCA Foundation. Participation in the Reformed Church Investment Program is limited to organizations or groups affiliated with the RCA. Investments in, or withdrawals from, the program can be made at the end of each calendar quarter. Each participating organization must agree to the principles and practices of the program.

Three investment advisors are currently serving the Reformed Church Investment Program. They are Old Kent Bank and Trust Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Scudder, Stevens, and Clark, in New York City; and Fleet Bank in Jersey City, New Jersey. The portfolio managed by Old Kent Bank is largely comprised of fixed-income securities. Scudder, Stevens, and Clark, on the other hand, manage a balanced portfolio consisting of both equity and debt securities. Fleet Bank holds a small portfolio for endowments that are legally restricted to remain in a New Jersey banking institution. Total market value of assets at December 31, 1996, are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investment Advisor</th>
<th>Market Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Kent Bank and Trust Co.</td>
<td>$ 2,849,522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scudder, Stevens, and Clark</td>
<td>7,807,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleet Bank</td>
<td>607,451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchurch Center Bonds</td>
<td>675,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgages</td>
<td>107,866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security National Bank</td>
<td>34,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCA Cash Program</td>
<td>105,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$ 12,187,638</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During 1996 additional subscriptions to the Reformed Church Investment Program totaled $81,180. The market value of the portfolio increased slightly during 1996 from $11,930,686 to $12,187,638. This increase was attributed to increased subscriptions and the 10.13 percent rate of return in 1996.

The General Synod Council annually establishes a rate of payout to be used for the following year. For 1996 the established rate of payout was 8 percent (of market value), which was paid in four equal quarterly installments.

The Security National Bank in Sioux City, Iowa, provides accounting and custodial services for the securities held in the Reformed Church's various endowment accounts. Appointed investment advisors execute trades through Security National Bank, which also was the recipient of all dividends and interest earnings from endowment fund portfolios.

Board of Pensions—Investments

At December 31, 1996, the Board of Pensions asset base totaled over $240 million. These assets represent four separate funds within the Board of Pensions. The first and largest of the four funds is the Contributory Annuity Fund (CAF). About 20 percent of the assets of CAF are invested in Guaranteed Investment Contracts (GICs) with eight insurance companies. GICs are backed by the assets of the issuing carriers and provide both for a guaranteed rate of return while the contract is in effect and for the repayment of the full principal plus accumulated earnings at maturity. Many of the Board of Pensions contracts were negotiated in the late 1980s and have been providing very attractive rates of return, between 9 and 10 percent.
To supplement GICs, CAF has a broad range of fixed-income holdings, such as U.S. treasuries, government-backed obligations, and corporate bonds. Since hiring a managing director of investments in 1992, the RCA now manages its funds in-house. When outside investments reach maturity, they are turned over to the RCA managing director of investments, who in turn invests the funds in instruments offered by the marketplace.

The Canadian portion of CAF operated until December of 1996 under a group annuity contract with Imperial Life Insurance Company in Toronto, Ontario. In January of 1997 however, the funds were withdrawn from Imperial Life and given over to the Regional Synod of Canada for management. The Regional Synod of Canada has obtained the services of an outside manager to invest the funds.

The second fund within the Board of Pensions is the Annuity Bond Fund (ABF). This fund was established in 1981 (BOP 81-16) and was designed to provide a member of the CAF with an alternative to purchasing an annuity with the accumulation in his or her account at the time of retirement. In the 1980s the relatively high interest rates available made it possible for a retiree, during the period between retirement and the time when he or she reached the age of seventy, to invest his or her funds in a fixed-return security, such as a treasury note, at a much higher yield than could be realized from an annuity purchased from an insurance company. At age seventy, when the security matured, the principal was then to be used to purchase an annuity, which because of the individual's shorter life expectancy, would provide a greater monthly income than one purchased at age sixty-five.

Recent changes in federal regulations and interest rates have led to a decrease in the number of those investing in ABF. The more popular choice is to remain in the CAF until mandatory requirements force participants reaching the age of seventy and one-half to purchase an instrument of annuitized value.

An additional adaptation came into effect when in 1986 the Board of Pensions and the General Synod approved the inauguration of the Support/Investment Plan (MGS 1986, p. 182). This approval created both the third and fourth funds within the Board of Pensions. Under the terms of the plan, the retiree, upon reaching the age of seventy and one-half, has the option of leaving his or her money in an RCA managed fund rather than automatically using the account balance to purchase an annuity contract with an outside firm.

The Pension Support Fund (PSF) is one component of the Support/Investment Plan. Amounts in this fund accumulate earnings, and payments to participants are paid in equal installments for a period determined by his or her actuarially determined life expectancy, utilizing an average interest rate of 8 percent. Both the interest and principal are amortized over the actuarial life span of the participant so as to achieve equal quarterly payments. In other words, this instrument is similar to the purchase of an annuity contract. The advantage to investing in the PSF, instead of purchasing an annuity in the outside market, is that upon death the residual book value of the annuity is paid to the estate, not consumed by the issuer of the annuity.

The Pension Investment Fund (PIF) is the other component of the Support/Investment Plan. Amounts in this fund also accumulate earnings, but payments to participants are based on the actual earnings in the fund. These funds are typically invested in "growth" type investments, while at the same time a conservative distribution is made to the retirees on a quarterly basis. In 1996 distribution payments were made with a 7.75 percent rate of return. Similar to the Pension Support Fund, the value of the investment (original book value in this case) is paid to the estate of the retiree at the time of death, thus leaving behind a financial legacy.
Mission Investments

In 1970 the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) established a mission investment policy that directed the General Program Council (GPC) to make "available for mission investment purposes 10 percent of the appropriated and unappropriated operating reserve" (GSEC 70-50). The main operating criteria for this policy was to assist projects owned and/or controlled by "minority" individuals, groups, or local organizations whose goal was to assist in building economic participation or growth in the community. Maximum returns on investments are not the main objective of mission investments.

At present, mission investments in fourteen banks, credit unions, and other organizations total $290,941. Receipts of mission investment monies are placed with firms such as South Shore Bank located in an African-American section of Chicago, Illinois; the Lumbee Bank of Pembroke, North Carolina, which serves a population primarily made up of members of the Lumbee Indian nation; the NCC Minority Bail Bond Fund; the Shared Interest Group, which is investing in South Africa's democratic development; and the RCA's most recent investment, the Leviticus Alternative Fund, which is investing in community-based development projects in the impoverished communities of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

Because of certain maturities in recent years, the total funds invested are far below the 10 percent allowance established in 1970. A committee of five meets regularly to analyze the portfolio and is currently seeking additional opportunities for mission investing.

Assessments

Ninety-five percent of the assessment giving for 1996 was collected by the due date of December, 1996. Of the outstanding 5 percent, less than 1 percent was received early in the calendar year 1997. The total assessment for 1996 was $25.35 per confessing member. Of this amount, $20.85 was designated for the General Synod operational budget, $1.50 was designated for the Board of Pensions General Fund, and $3.00 was designated for administration of theological education. A verbal report will be given at General Synod on classes payments of 1996 and 1997 General Synod assessments.

IRS Group Tax Exemption

As the denomination's parent organization, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America was granted a group tax exemption by the commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) on January 17, 1986. The exemption covers all participating congregations, agencies, and educational institutions within the RCA that have asked to be included.

As one of its conditions, the commissioner of the IRS requires the RCA to file an annual update listing churches and/or agencies that fall under the 501(c)(3) designation of the IRS code. A complete listing is supplied to the IRS, incorporating any additions, terminations, or revisions under the RCA group exemption umbrella. The eleventh such report, filed with the commissioner in August 1996, listed eight newly formed churches to be added, two newly formed agencies to be added, two name/address changes, two merging churches, and five churches/agencies to be removed from the roster.

During recent years the IRS has directed increased attention to its review of church activities and related filing requirements. As a result, the Office of Finance has experienced steadily growing requests, not only for advisory assistance in dealing with tax-related matters, but also for documentary evidence attesting to a church's/agency's tax exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.
Annual Audit

The 1996 financial statements of the Reformed Church in America are examined and certified by Lambrides, Lamos, Moulthrop and Co., certified public accountants, and are presented in person by the auditors at the spring meeting of the General Synod Council. Copies of the annual audit are reprinted in the Minutes of the General Synod and are also available to members of the Reformed Church in America by calling the Office of Finance in New York City at (800) 722-9977 or (212) 870-2754.

GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT FORMULA

Introduction

The 1995 General Synod voted:

To instruct the General Synod Council Finance Services Committee to develop a new formula for assessing the classes based on a proportion not directly derived only from "active-confirmed members" as reported by the classes, for a progress report to the 1996 General Synod meeting, and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council Finance Services Committee to present a final report to the 1997 General Synod (MGS 1995, pg. 350, R-7).

An ad hoc committee was established. The members of this ad hoc committee were:

| Louis Benes             | GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee |
| Shari Brink            | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Jewell Cooper          | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Harry De Bruyn (chair) | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Donald DeVries         | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Wesley Granberg-Michaelson | RCA General Secretary |
| Victor Eimicke         | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Stephen Hammel         | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Vernon Hoffs           | GSC Stewardship and Communication Services Committee |
| Andrew Lee             | RCA Treasurer and Director of Finance Services |
| Gregg Mast             | GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services Committee |
| Jack Tice              | RCA Controller |
| Gerald Verbridge       | GSC Finance Services Committee |
| Kenneth Weller         | GSC Stewardship and Communication Services Committee |

The ad hoc committee met several times in conjunction with GSC meetings and one time for a full day to review the current General Synod assessment formula and various alternative formula models developed by members of the ad hoc committee.

The ad hoc committee also decided to gather ideas from all corners of the denomination on possible revisions of the General Synod assessment formula. An article from the RCA treasurer was published in the September 1995 Church Herald and the fall 1996 Servant Leaders to solicit ideas. Both articles requested individuals to pass their ideas along to the stated clerk of their classis. Stated clerks were also informed of this action and were asked to forward the acquired data to the Office of Finance no later than January 1, 1996.
The material collected from this appeal for ideas was very sparse. A total of five classes responded, and two individuals wrote to share their ideas. This lack of response led the ad hoc committee to believe that although most people are opposed to assessments, there might not be a more equitable way to raise the required funds.

Nevertheless, at its January 1996 meeting, the ad hoc committee explored several preliminary assumptions about the current assessment formula that seemed to be underlying the issue. These assumptions were as follows:

1. The present formula is unfair.
2. Small congregations are burdened by assessments, since assessments constitute a larger percentage of their total budget.
3. Sizable assessments are charged to larger churches for whom the value of denominational services does not seem to increase in direct proportion to increased confessing membership.
4. There is a lack of ownership by congregations in the assessment process.
5. Ownership of the process would make the payment more acceptable.
6. The present formula may encourage inaccurate reporting.
7. Any formula must pass a “fairness test” on establishing the assessment amount and levying the assessment to secure that amount.
8. Trust, transparency, and accountability must be both perceived and real in dealing with assessments.
9. A fairness test must include a financial component related to the ability to pay.
10. The final formula should be uniformly used by the General Synod, regional synods, and classes.
11. Growing churches must be encouraged by the formula.
12. Total church income (not giving) should be considered in drafting a new formula.
13. Consideration should be given to including baptized members in the formula.
14. The new formula could include both income and membership, with the possibility of certain items being excluded or given “weighted” consideration.
15. The *Family Finances* brochure should be expanded to include data for the regional synods and classes.
16. Work should be done to increase perception of ownership of programs for which assessments are levied.

**Current System**

In addition to exploring the above assumptions, the ad hoc committee reviewed the current General Synod assessment formula.
The current General Synod assessment formula is based on a dollar amount charged to the classis based on the number of members on the confessing membership roll of each congregation in the classis. Although the current formula is simple to calculate, the ad hoc committee, at its June, 1996 meeting, noted several concerns or disadvantages:

1. Confessing membership should not be the only factor used for calculation as it fails to take into consideration the differences in financial strength of the various churches.

2. Undue financial burdens are placed on smaller congregations, since assessments constitute a larger percentage of their budget.

3. Sizable assessments are charged to larger churches for whom the value of denominational services does not seem to increase in direct proportion to increased confessing membership.

New Share System

To overcome some of the concerns or disadvantages of the current system, the ad hoc committee agreed that any proposed new formula had to:

1. Produce honesty and accuracy in the reporting of the data from congregations and classes.

2. Encourage congregations to grow in numbers and income.

3. Ease the financial burden for financially strapped congregations.

4. Not place an inordinate burden on financially sound churches with substantial income.

5. Not result in a dramatic shift in payment responsibility.

6. Be relatively simple to calculate and understand.

The new share system proposed by the ad hoc committee attempts to meet the above six criteria. The new share system retains the advantages of the current system while addressing some of the concerns or disadvantages noted above. The new share system is based on the financial strength and confessing membership of each congregation. Both of these factors (financial strength and confessing membership) in the proposed formula use data taken directly from the Consistorial Report Form that is submitted each year by each congregation. The calculation of the new share system’s two components are:

1. Financial Component

This calculation produces approximately 10 percent of the total assessment amount. This component recognizes that God has blessed each congregation for the purpose of being a blessing to others, including those congregations served by denominational programs of the Reformed Church in America. The financial component amount is determined by multiplying a congregation’s total income over $100,000 by .005 (1/2 of 1 percent). A maximum dollar amount is set for this financial component at $7,000 per congregation, even though the calculation may produce a higher figure. There is no financial component factor for congregations with income less than $100,000.

In order to determine the relative financial strength of a particular congregation, the ad hoc committee concluded that this financial component will use the “total income” amount
reported on the Consistorial Report Form as the factor in the equation. Total income includes endowment income, rental income, estate income, building fund income, and all other income from any source received by the congregation in any calendar year.

2. Confessing Membership Component

The remaining 90 percent of the total assessment income is provided by the confessing membership component. This calculation is based on total confessing membership but provides for special adjustments for relief to smaller congregations and encouragement to growing churches.

The calculation for this component is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of Base Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First 50 members</td>
<td>87.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 350 members</td>
<td>100.0 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>351 members and above</td>
<td>87.5 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The precise "base rate" required to meet the budget amount is to be approved each year by General Synod.

Illustration

How would the new share system work? Please refer to the appendix. The new share system is illustrated in the appendix by using the 1996 General Synod assessment amount of $25.35 per confessing member. The "base rate" of $24.00 was used in the calculations to meet the amount needed for the General Synod Operational Budget, Board of Pensions General Fund, and the administration for theological education.
### APPENDIX

**GENERAL SYNOD ASSESSMENT FORMULA - NEW SHARE SYSTEM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>Confessing Members</th>
<th>Total Income</th>
<th>Current Asmt System</th>
<th>New Share System Model</th>
<th>Total New Share System</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Financial Component</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confessing Membership Component</td>
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<td>0-50 mbrs</td>
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<td>51-350 mbrs</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First Reformed Church</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Second Reformed Church</strong></td>
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<td>$318,000</td>
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<td><strong>Third Reformed Church</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$9,450</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Confessing Membership Component**
  - $0 for 0-50 members
  - $1,050 for 51-350 members
  - $0 for 351+ members

**Note:** The base figure of $24.00 in the above confessing membership component is the mathematical figure needed to produce the necessary income to cover the 1996 General Synod assessment (General Synod operational budget, Board of Pensions General Fund, and administration for theological education). Each year the General Synod would approve this budget, which in turn would be calculated into a new base figure, similar to the way the current amount of $25.35 is calculated today.
Conclusion

The Office of Finance would annually calculate the amount of General Synod assessment for each congregation in the RCA and would furnish that calculated amount to each classis. The classis would then determine whether to use that calculation in collecting its assessment from its member congregations or use another method to collect its General Synod assessment. The Office of Finance would also calculate the percentage of the entire General Synod assessment that each congregation would pay within a classis, so that the classis could apportion the regional synod and classis assessment amount on the same prorated percentage as the new share system used for the General Synod assessment amount.

The ad hoc committee recognizes there may be other formulas developed to produce a perceived more fair assessment method. However, applying the criteria contained in this report, the ad hoc committee is convinced this new share system formula is the simplest and fairest method of assessing classes at the present time.

The advisory committee unanimously recommended not to adopt R-1:

R-1. To adopt the new share system as proposed above, effective January 1, 1998; and further,

   to use the 1996 RCA statistical reports for calculating the 1998 General Synod assessment amount. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. In the opinion of the advisory committee, R-1 did not adequately address items 1, 2, 3, and 6 in the "New Share System" section (see p. 382).
   a. Dishonesty and inaccuracy can happen under the new share system as well.
   b. The new share system does not encourage congregations to grow in membership and income.
   c. Financially strapped congregations will only be helped slightly, if at all, and then only if they are small membership congregations.
   d. The new share system is difficult to calculate and to understand.

2. What is included as income in the new share system is not clearly understood and is not universally applied.

3. The ultimate responsibility for assessments still rests with the classes who can pursue other means of addressing perceived inequities.

4. A critical issue for the advisory committee was that relief for small membership churches is still not adequately addressed.

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by inserting the words "with the exception of income from a special fund drive for the establishment of new ministries or for purchase or upgrading of property if the income of such a campaign exceeds 20 percent of the congregation’s budget for the year in which the funds are received" following the words "assessment amount." The motion LOST.)
The advisory committee recommended:

R-2.
To commend the ad hoc committee on its work and to acknowledge the completion of its task. (ADOPTED)

The advisory committee recommended:

R-3.
To encourage classes and regional synods to establish revolving funds for providing assessment relief to financially burdened churches. (ADOPTED)

From the Report of the General Synod Council’s Stewardship and Communication Services Committee and Report of the RCA Foundation

STEWARDSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Stewardship and Communication Services (SAC) is responsible for the program areas of stewardship and communication. The Rev. E. Wayne Antworth serves as the director and is responsible for the administration, coordination, and supervision of the SAC staff.

The mission of the stewardship program is:

To provide financial resources and promote personal and spiritual growth for the ministry of the RCA through fundraising, gift planning, and stewardship education programs.

The stewardship program area of SAC experienced another year of growth and revitalization. Establishing the RCA Foundation (MGS 1995, R-9, pp. 232-36) redefined the work of SAC. The RCA Foundation produced its first annual report in 1996 (MGS 1996, pp. 383-87), highlighting the services it provides to RCA congregations and individuals. The RCA Foundation board also adopted the following mission statement:

RCA FOUNDATION
MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the RCA Foundation is to serve congregations by securing financial resources for the ministries of the church through:

- Teaching biblical stewardship
- Encouraging people to give
- Acquiring resources for ministry
- Managing RCA Foundation resources
This mission is to be carried out:
With respect for individuals and families
With integrity and professionalism
Informed by Scripture
As a grateful response to God's grace

TEACHING BIBLICAL STEWARDSHIP

While all RCA Foundation staff members are engaged in teaching biblical stewardship, special emphasis is provided through stewardship education and annual giving programs.

Stewardship Education and Annual Giving

Jane Richardson is a part-time specialist in stewardship education. Her major responsibilities are the evaluation of stewardship materials and the promotion of stewardship programs within RCA congregations.

A survey was sent during 1996 to all RCA congregations to gather information about the stewardship education and annual giving programs they use. Pastors' comments in the survey indicated a direct relationship between stewardship and discipleship. They said that good stewardship is part of the normal expression of a vital and spiritually healthy congregation. When its people are committed to Christ and growing as disciples, stewardship education programs do not need to be part of a congregation's agenda.

This insight has helped the RCA Foundation assist congregations in stewardship education and annual giving programs. The task of the foundation is to encourage Christian disciples to live as good stewards because they have learned the discipline of sacrificial giving. The mission of all stewardship education or congregational giving programs is the growing of disciples.

The Consecrating Stewards and Consecration Sunday programs were often mentioned in the survey by congregations who have used them. A list of people who have been trained to help congregations implement these programs and who are willing to serve as "guest stewards" is available to congregations who order material for either program from the RCA Distribution Center.

A new print resource for stewardship education, copublished by the RCA and Christian Reformed Church in 1996 and reviewed in the winter edition of Servant Leaders, is Firstfruits Congregations, by Robert Heerspink. This resource joins the following stewardship resource material: 1) Stewardship Magazine, published twice annually, 2) The Spiritual Discipline of Tithing, a packet of print and audiovisual resources for worship, study, reflection, and action which can be used for a retreat or a six-session course, 3) The Steward's Life, which includes the RCA stewardship statement approved in 1984 and a four-session study guide, 4) My Life: A Steward's Life, a resource for children, and 5) three guides for congregational use titled Stewardship in Small-Membership Congregations, Biblical Stewardship Principles, and Faithful, Hopeful, Loving. These resources, along with more than fifteen additional audiovisual and print stewardship education resources listed in the RCA Resources for Ministry Catalog, are available through the RCA Distribution Center.

Dian Little was hired in January 1996 to work as a part-time stewardship consultant for the Regional Synod of the Far West. She presents a series of workshops on stewardship in the congregations of the regional synod and is developing a network of stewardship representatives. She also works with donors. The Regional Synod of the Far West helps underwrite the cost of this position.
On January 16, 1996, the Pilot Project, a cooperative effort of the Regional Synod of the Far West and the RCA Foundation, was initiated. Dian Little, working part-time for the Regional Synod of the Far West and also part-time for the RCA Foundation, is deployed in the Regional Synod of the Far West to teach stewardship principles to pastors and lay leaders in RCA congregations.

Major components of the Pilot Project include: 1) utilization of scriptural principles to teach stewardship education, 2) recruitment of church volunteers to represent stewardship concerns in the churches, 3) identification of potential current and planned giving donors, and 4) utilization of RCA Foundation staff and qualified professionals to provide expertise for potential donors.

The effectiveness of the Pilot Project is measured by comparing baseline statistics (before program initiation) with statistics one year later. An increase in the understanding of biblical stewardship is measured by comparing baseline numbers with statistics one, two, and three years later on membership and volunteer numbers, general and leadership contributions, and percentage given to missions—each of these being an area of teaching emphasis. Standardized evaluation forms are used to measure presentation, content, presenter performance, and the immediate effectiveness of the program.

To date, four churches have completed the first three sessions, two churches have completed two sessions, and three churches have completed one session. Three additional churches initiated the program in the spring of 1997. In the first year, 1996, curriculum for all four sessions, baseline format criteria, appropriate handouts, evaluation forms, and promotional materials were developed. Additionally, reference materials pertinent to individual churches were compiled.

ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO GIVE

All RCA Foundation staff are also engaged in encouraging people to give of their financial resources. Encouragement is part of the educational processes described above. Other types of encouragement take the form of direct solicitation of gifts and of assisting persons with estate and financial planning.

Gift Planning

The RCA Foundation Office of Gift Planning (OGP) is charged with promoting various methods of making a gift to the church.

In 1996 OGP had one full-time staff person, the coordinator of gift planning, the Rev. Norman J. Tellier, and one half-time staff person, the Rev. Walter Pickup. Presentations on estate planning and/or financial planning were offered to groups in RCA congregations. In addition, presentations on endowments were made to deacons, consistories, and other decision-making bodies. The presentation on endowments recommends that churches establish endowment funds and guidelines for the use of gifts or bequests prior to the receipt of contributed funds.

Both of the above mentioned OGP staff members are available to members and friends of the RCA to assist in estate and financial planning. Tellier is a CFP® licensee and Pickup is working toward certification. (CFP® and Certified Financial Planner® are federally registered marks of the Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards, Inc.)

OGP uses several methods to communicate the benefits of gift planning to members and friends of the RCA. OGP publishes a newsletter called Options for the Future. Each issue features a member of the RCA who has made a planned gift and explains how similar gifts
may be made. Each issue includes a tear-off response form, which is used extensively by those who receive the newsletter.

The OGP office keeps on hand a large supply of literature on the value of having a will and how gifts can be made in other ways. These materials are sent upon request and are distributed at workshops and displays.

OGP has a partnership program with several organizations who pay the foundation to represent them in gift planning. At the current time the following organizations are members of the partnership:

- New Brunswick Theological Seminary
- Regional Synod of Albany
- Regional Synod of the Far West
- Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
- Regional Synod of the Heartland
- Regional Synod of Mid-America
- Bethany Home, Ripon, California
- Elim Christian School, Palos Heights, Illinois
- Geneva Camp & Retreat Center, Holland, Michigan
- Hope Haven Inc., Rock Valley, Iowa
- Jackson County Ministries, Annville, Kentucky
- Manitouqua Ministries, Frankfort, Illinois
- Reformed Bible College, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Rest Haven Christian Services, South Holland, Illinois
- Words of Hope, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Marble Collegiate Church, New York City

OGP is an affiliate member of the Council of Reformed Charities.

The major work of OGP is to promote giving through bequests and to generate life income gifts. These gifts include gift annuities, a pooled income fund, charitable trusts, and other instruments. In 1996 the foundation worked toward registration of its gift annuity program in those states that require registration and in which it expects the foundation staff will generate annuities.

**Van Bunschooten Society**

In honor of Dominie Elias Van Bunschooten, the Van Bunschooten Society was formed in the Reformed Church in America to honor those who have included the Reformed Church in America in their wills.

OGP administers the Van Bunschooten Society. This society recognizes those who have made a planned gift. The planned gift may be in the form of a designation in a will, a life income gift, or some other means. Any part of the RCA, except RCA colleges and seminaries, may be the beneficiary of the gift. The society has over two-hundred-fifty members. In 1997 a series of luncheons are being held across the U.S. to express the RCA’s gratitude to members of the society.

The General Synod Council, at its October 1993 meeting, voted to have the following summary of the Van Bunschooten Bequest (adopted by the 1937 General Synod) read at the General Synod meeting as part of the report of the Advisory Committee on Financial Support:
At a meeting of General Synod in New York City, June 9, 1814, Dorninie Elias Van Bunschooten, one of the advisory members, walked up the aisle and laid down on the table ten bonds amounting to $13,800 and $800 in cash and asked Synod to accept the gift for the education of young men for the ministry. On January 10, 1815, in his seventy-seventh year, Dorninie Van Bunschooten went home to his reward and was buried in the churchyard of First Reformed Church of New Brunswick, New Jersey. In his last will and testament he added over $3,000 to his former donation, making a total of more than $17,000—a princely gift for those days. (Additions of income have increased the principal to $20,000.) Dorninie Van Bunschooten thus had the honor of making the first substantial contribution for assisting young students of theology. His example has been followed from time to time by others, thus realizing his desire as expressed in the bequest “that he might be an humble pattern for others to copy after.” It would be impossible to catalogue all the results that have flowed from these donations. For more than a century they have made possible the education of candidates for the ministry, for the work both at home and abroad. All honor to him and the other liberal donors who have followed his example (MGS 1937, pp. 8-9).

Direct Mail

The RCA Foundation continues to strengthen its funding sources through the solicitation of gifts from individuals. This work is carried out in part through the development of special mailings to RCA members.

A contract was signed in July 1996 with Stratmark Corporation, a direct mail consulting firm in Richardson, Texas. Stratmark is working with SAC and Mission Services in developing a comprehensive direct mail marketing strategy. This strategy includes the implementation of additional appeals and a newsletter to facilitate communication with individual donors.

In 1996 the direct mail program did nine mailings. A year-end appeal was added in 1996 to help offset a potential GSC budget deficit. The following is a list of the special appeals for 1996.

**Lenten Appeal.** The 1996 Lenten appeal was mailed to approximately twenty-eight thousand RCA households and was designated for special mission services projects needing funding.

**Social Witness.** This appeal was for projects and programs carried out through the RCA Office of Social Witness.

**Advent Packet.** Each year Congregational Services produces a special Advent packet that includes a Sunday school Christmas offering.

**Children's Christmas Fund.** The Board of Pensions sends a special appeal each year at Christmas to benefit the dependent children of deceased RCA ministers.

**St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.** This special appeal was to assist in rebuilding the St. Thomas Reformed Church building destroyed by Hurricane Marilyn in September 1995.

**Special Thanksgiving Offering.** The General Fund of the Board of Pensions gives assistance grants to ministers, missionaries, and their spouses who retired before the RCA Annuity Fund could be of much financial help.
**Holiday Special Appeal.** The special appeal was mailed to thirty-eight thousand RCA households and was designated for the RCA volunteer services program.

**Special Project Appeal.** Mission Services annually asks RCA congregations to consider extra year-end benevolence contributions for RCA mission projects and programs.

**Year-end Direct Giving Appeal.** This appeal was mailed to approximately three thousand RCA households who had previously contributed to the RCA direct mail appeals. This appeal was to assist GSC in closing a potential budget deficit.

**Special Gifts**

The Office of Special Gifts is new to the RCA Foundation in 1996. The coordinator for special gifts, Larryl Humme, is responsible to identify, cultivate, and solicit RCA individuals who may be interested in making gifts to various RCA ministries. The RCA programs or projects identified as needing funding are items that either the General Synod Council or the RCA Administrative Council have approved.

The special gifts program identifies and solicits funding for special programs and projects from individual donors. The coordinator for special gifts reviews funding sources of earlier RCA appeals and then works toward transferring those funding sources to current giving programs of the RCA. Funding sources include those individuals who responded to the Putting People In Mission fund drive and the $9.8 by ’98 campaign.

The special gifts program also works on developing and maintaining a donor prospect base for the RCA. The program is developing a long-range program of direct giving solicitation with RCA members and friends.

**Capital Campaigns**

The coordination of capital campaigns is also the responsibility of SAC and the RCA Foundation. This includes providing consultation and support for RCA congregations undertaking capital campaigns. During 1996 three congregations were assisted in the development and implementation of capital campaigns by the Rev. E. Wayne Antworth, director of Stewardship and Communications Services.

RCA congregations often request assistance with capital fund drives. In order to meet this need, RCA Capital Fund Services was developed. RCA congregations pay a much lower fee for these services than would typically be paid to a commercial fundraising company. A portion of the fee is paid to the consultant; the rest is paid to the foundation. Twenty percent of the fees received by the foundation are placed in a reserve fund to assist small and new churches with their fund drives. The present consultants are the Rev. E. Wayne Antworth, Milton Nieuwsma, and Harold Ritsema.

**$9.8 by ’98**

The 1990 General Synod approved plans for the 98 by ’98 church growth plan (MGS 1990, pp. 313-20) and challenged the RCA to establish ninety-eight new congregations by 1998. This plan was an outgrowth of the On the Way program, which called for a ten-year emphasis on evangelism and growth within the RCA and was presented to the 1986 General Synod (MGS 1986, pp. 246-255).
The RCA embarked upon this renewal program because new congregations offer unique opportunities to reach people for Christ. Over 120 congregations have been organized, developed, or identified as potential sites under the 98 by '98 church growth program.

The $9.8 by '98 fundraising campaign is one of several components of the 98 by '98 church growth plan. Originally, the $9.8 by '98 campaign had one goal, which was to raise money to increase the capital of the Church Building Fund (CBF). CBF makes low-interest loans to new congregations ready to construct their first facilities. The 1990 General Synod, however, expanded the focus of the campaign (MGS 1990, p. 320) by adding the following two goals: 1) support for the recruitment and training of new church development pastors and other resource support for new church start congregations (10 percent), and 2) support for revitalizing urban, rural, and small membership churches (15 percent).

The allocations for the $9.8 by '98 campaign are:

Seventy-five percent of the campaign proceeds for RCA Church Building Fund loans to new congregations seeking to finance their first worship facilities.

Ten percent of the campaign proceeds for the training and recruitment of new church development pastors and for resources to enhance the ministry of new congregations.

Fifteen percent of the campaign proceeds for revitalizing urban, rural, and small membership churches.

As of March 1, 1997, over $7 million had been raised in pledges and gifts toward the campaign goal of $9.8 million. Disbursement of the $9.8 by '98 funds began in the spring of 1996.

The $9.8 by '98 Disbursement Committee meets twice annually. During these meetings applications for both capital (RCA Church Building Fund) loans and program (revitalization) grants are reviewed. For individual congregations, the application process begins at the classis level. Once an application is approved by the classis and regional synod, it is reviewed by the $9.8 by '98 Disbursement Committee, which decides whether the application is to be submitted to the General Synod Council’s Evangelism and Church Development Committee for final approval. For more information on the application process, contact the Rev. Richard Welscott, coordinator for new church development.

The $9.8 by '98 campaign office, located at the RCA office in Lansing, Illinois, will continue to work with individuals and congregations until the end of the fund drive in 1998. The staff, consisting of Larryl B. Humme, Joan Suda, and Diane Mrakovich, are overseeing the campaign until its conclusion.

Promotion of the $9.8 by '98 fund drive will continue for the duration of the campaign. Promotion materials include the $9.8 by '98 video, the campaign newsletter, and bulletin inserts. In addition, articles and advertisements will appear in the Church Herald and RCA Today.

The $9.8 by '98 fund drive has been blessed by the generosity of RCA members. The RCA is grateful for all the individuals and RCA congregations who placed the needs of others before their own needs. However, there is still work to be done. If individuals or RCA congregations have not yet made the decision to engage in this important effort of evangelism, it is not too late to make a pledge. Contact the $9.8 by '98 campaign office at (708) 895-4030. As a result of the 98 by '98 evangelism program and the $9.8 by '98 fund drive, new church starts across the denomination are reaching people for Jesus Christ. The continued prayers and support of Reformed Church in America members are especially requested as the $9.8 by '98 campaign moves toward its conclusion in 1998.
ACQUIRING RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

Acquiring resources for ministry is directly associated with encouraging people to give. The gifts reported below are a result of teaching biblical stewardship and encouraging people to give. These gifts are given through the OGP and the Office of Special Gifts.

The work of the two offices resulted in gifts totalling $677,440 during 1996. These gifts were received in the following forms:

### Gifts Received—1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gift Instruments</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Estate Contract</td>
<td>$180,000</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endowments</td>
<td>$135,000</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Income Fund</td>
<td>$16,147</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charitable Gift Annuity</td>
<td>$135,392</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIFTS Philanthropic Fund</td>
<td>$119,951</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Gifts</td>
<td>$88,950</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The GIFTS Philanthropic Fund allows donors to make a gift to the foundation which is distributed to charitable organizations at a later date. This is especially helpful for donors who wish to make a gift in the current year but have not yet decided how they want it distributed. In 1996 $119,951 was received in this fund and $109,286 was distributed to charities. The foundation receives one-half of the interest earned on GIFTS Philanthropic Fund accounts. In 1996 this was $2,206.

The gifts received during 1996 by the foundation in all funds were designated as follows:

### Gifts Received—1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deferred and Special Gifts</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Church</td>
<td>$63,241</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missions</td>
<td>$124,947</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classis</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and Extension Fund</td>
<td>$33,524</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>$81,950</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>$58,200</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two gifts to the Board of Pensions included: 1) a home given outright for the retired ministers homes program, and 2) a life estate contract on another home for the same purpose. The amounts on the above chart do not equal those of the previous chart, "Gifts Received - 1996," since gifts to the GIFTS Philanthropic Fund are carried over into following years.

One of the benefits to RCA congregations is that while the RCA Foundation promotes giving through wills and other means, persons often act on suggestions made by RCA Foundation staff without notifying the foundation of the gift. These gifts then come to RCA congregations at a later time.

In order to judge the effectiveness of the RCA Foundation program, RCA congregations are asked on the Consistorial Report Form the number and amount of bequests and planned gifts received by them each year. In 1995 RCA congregations reported receiving 280 bequests totaling $5,993,723 and nineteen planned gifts totaling $284,916. The planned gifts came in the form of trust distributions, matured annuities, and life insurance. Total bequests and planned gifts reported by RCA congregations amounted to $6,278,639. The distribution of these gifts by regional synods is as follows:

**1995 Bequests and Planned Gifts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synod</th>
<th>Bequests and Planned Gifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Lakes</td>
<td>18.1% $1,012,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-America</td>
<td>3.4% $212,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>13.5% $844,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartland</td>
<td>4.7% $282,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far West</td>
<td>7.3% $459,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>17.2% $1,082,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>0.2% $13,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>37.6% $2,350,520</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OGP also promotes RCA Building and Extension Fund (RCABEF) investment notes. Investments in RCABEF are used for the construction of church buildings. Promotion is done through Church Herald ads, publicity material, and personal contacts. The OGP office is also responsible for obtaining state registrations and issuing new and rollover notes. In 1996 the offering circular was completely revised to bring it into compliance with the guidelines of the North American Society of Securities Administrators.

**MANAGING RCA FOUNDATION RESOURCES**

The RCA Foundation is also responsible for managing the RCA Endowment Fund. The services of the Office of Finance and the managing director of investments are used in order to accomplish this management. It is also possible for the foundation to manage endowment funds of RCA congregations and other assemblies and organizations.

A financial advisory committee was formed to monitor the investments of the foundation. The members of the committee are Bruce Benedict, Harry De Bruyn, and Thomas Putnam. The committee is completing an investment policy for the foundation and monitors the appropriateness and performance of invested funds. Complete financial reports for 1996, as well as the foundation’s annual printed report, are available from the Office of Finance or from the Office of the RCA Foundation office.
The RCA Foundation has come a long way since its incorporation in 1994. The foundation’s first annual report, published in 1996, described the foundation and its staff, and provided financial reports. The 1997 report will be available very soon. Continued growth in the work and financial position of the RCA Foundation provides a necessary funding component for the life and work of the Reformed Church in America.

Overture

Cap on 1998 General Synod Assessments

1. The Classis of California overtures General Synod to cap the 1998 General Synod assessments amount at the same level as the 1997 General Synod assessments amount of $26.55 per confessing member; and further,

    to exclude from this cap any additions to the 1998 General Synod assessments recommended during the week of the 1997 General Synod from an advisory committee or delegate and approved by the 1997 General Synod.

Reasons:

1. General Synod assessments increased over 300 percent in the past ten years.

2. Increases in General Synod assessments in the past two years exceeded the growth of wages and inflation in the United States.

3. A cap on 1998 General Synod assessments would assist the annual and deliberate review process for the continuation, discontinuation, or revision of each part of the General Synod budget supported by assessments (see MGS 1995, pp. 348-49).

4. At the same time that the General Synod assessments formula needs revising (MGS 1995, pp. 349-50, MGS 1996, pp. 375-77, and General Synod Assessment Formula Report in this Financial Support section), a cap on 1998 General Synod assessments should also be applied.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

   R-4.
   To instruct the general secretary to prepare the 1999 budget capping the 1999 General Synod per-confessing-member assessment at the adopted 1998 General Synod per-confessing-member assessment, plus an adjustment for inflation/cost of living. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The cap will encourage the General Synod Council to continue the deliberate review process for the continuation, discontinuation, or revision of each part of the General Synod budget supported by assessments (MGS 1995, pp. 348-49).
2. The cap will give added incentive to the General Synod Council to prioritize funding for mission.

3. The cap will regulate the growth of the 1999 General Synod assessment budget.

4. The cap will encourage use of denominational stewardship programs.

5. The cap will address some of the needs of small membership and financially burdened churches.
REPORTS ON THEOLOGY

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology met twice during the past year, on September 27-28, 1996 in Holland, Michigan, and on February 7-8, 1997, in Chicago, Illinois.

BAPTISMAL LITURGY ALTERNATE WORDING FOR ADOLESCENTS AND CHILDREN

The 1996 General Synod referred to the Commission on Theology an overture from the Classis of Montgomery to revise the RCA baptismal liturgy in order to provide alternate wording for use when baptizing adolescents and children who have achieved an appropriate level of cognitive development (MGS 1996, R-3, p. 231). The commission studied this issue and presents the following brief report.

The Commission on Theology evaluated the need for a revised wording in the RCA baptismal liturgy to accommodate the emerging faith of older children presented for baptism by their parents. The commission does not believe that any change of wording in RCA baptismal forms is necessary. The commission contemplated making the suggestion that children should be encouraged to express whatever emerging faith they may have at the time they are presented for baptism. However, the commission concluded that to do so would be unwise. From a theological perspective, any profession of faith accompanying the baptism of younger children of believers is unnecessary. Until children reach the age when they are ready to accept the full commitments of faith and church membership for themselves, the theological basis for their presentation for baptism is not their own faith, but rather the promise of God that is grasped by the faith of their parents and their congregation. This is true, even if such children may already have some emerging faith. To ask children to profess their faith will inevitably raise the question of the adequacy of such a profession. Such questions are inappropriate from a Reformed perspective, since it is not the child’s faith, but God’s covenantal promise that leads the RCA to baptize children. The RCA does so in the hope that children will, by the grace of God, arrive at a mature faith of their own. Children should not be rushed into a premature public profession of their faith, and such a profession, however well intended, should not be made a precondition for the baptism of believers’ children.

Of course, it is the responsibility of the pastor and the board of elders to determine whether older children of believers have sufficient maturity and catechesis to profess their own faith at their baptism. If such maturity is present, such candidates may be baptized “as adults,” and be admitted to the privileges and responsibilities of those members who have professed their faith publicly. If such maturity is not yet present, however, the commission thinks that it is better for children to rest in the grace expressed in the promise of God and the faith of their parents, and to receive their baptism as a sacrament of promise in which they may hope.

In consultation with the Commission on Christian Worship, the Commission on Theology further notes that the entire statement from the 1994 baptismal liturgy listed below is optional:

N (use Christian names, omit surname)

It was for you that Jesus Christ came into the world;
for you he died and for you he conquered death;
yes, for you, little one, you who know nothing of it as yet.
We love because God first loved us (MGS 1994, p. 197).

Because this entire statement is optional, the pastor should be encouraged to use the phrase “Yes, for you, little one, who know nothing of it as yet” only in the baptism of infants. In the baptism of older children the phrase should be omitted.
STUDY BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER “CONSCIENCE CLAUSES”

The Commission on Theology is still in the process of fulfilling the instruction given by the 1996 General Synod to study the “conscience clauses” of the Book of Church Order (MGS 1996, R-11, p. 313). The commission has found there is confusion in the RCA surrounding the original intention of the “conscience clauses” and some inconsistency in their application. The commission has discovered that some applications of these clauses may have violated their original intent, and other attempts to appeal to these clauses may have violated other articles of the Book of Church Order. In the commission’s preliminary study, the commission has identified the following four basic areas of concern that require further exploration:

1. The commission believes there is evidence that the church needs to pay closer attention to the “may not obstruct” directives that are part of the conscience clauses. The commission is developing guidelines that clarify how the commission believes these directives should be applied in specific kinds of cases.

2. The commission believes it is important to clarify that the conscience clauses do not in any way provide a basis for any attempt to undermine, question, or limit the full authority of ordained women to carry out their offices and functions within the Reformed Church in America. The commission is exploring ways in which this issue can be further clarified for the RCA.

3. The commission believes a Reformed understanding of conscience requires that the conscience clauses be seen as a provisional and temporary phase in the RCA’s attempts to maintain unity while growing into the mind of Christ. The commission believes that at times the conscience clauses have been unwisely used to sanction a status quo rather than to enable ongoing dialogue and learning to take place. The commission is considering how to clarify the role of conscientious objection in the RCA so that an environment of growth and learning can continue to develop.

4. The commission believes further clarification is required regarding the theological implications of including conscience clauses in the Book of Church Order.

The commission hopes to complete its study and accompanying recommendations for report to the 1998 General Synod.

RCA CLERGY DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The 1996 General Synod instructed the Commission on Theology to review the 1962 paper, “Basic Policy on Divorce and Remarriage” (MGS 1962, pp. 205-18), and to prepare an updated version of this paper for report to the 1998 General Synod (MGS 1996, R-20, p. 322). The commission reviewed the 1962 paper, as well as the paper, “Biblical Perspectives on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage” (MGS 1975, pp. 162-72) produced by the Commission on Theology in 1975.

The commission did not find issues of theological substance that needed to be reconsidered, and therefore does not intend to conduct a new theological study. However, the commission believes that the 1962 and 1975 papers are seriously out of date and flawed in their social and cultural analysis, and that they warrant a complete review by the Commission on Christian Action. The Commission on Christian Action has taken under advisement this suggestion from the Commission on Theology.
SALVATION ONLY IN JESUS CHRIST

The study requested by the 1996 General Synod on "Christian Witness to the Uniqueness of Christ Among People of Other Faiths" (MGS 1996, R-3, pp. 402-03) is still in process. A report should be ready for the 1998 General Synod.

A BRIEF RCA STATEMENT OF FAITH

In response to a proposal of the president presented in his report to the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, P-2, p. 34), the 1996 General Synod instructed the Commission on Theology to produce a brief statement of faith for the RCA (MGS 1996, R-7, p. 405).

Work on this brief statement of faith is still in process. A report should be ready for the 1998 General Synod.

CONCLUSION

The commission is currently experiencing a very heavy workload. The commission has scheduled an additional meeting during the coming year in order to accommodate the additional load.

Overtures

Scripture and Authority

1. The Classis of Greater Palisades overtures General Synod to correct and restate its 1996 reaffirmation on "Scripture and authority," especially the words, "To reaffirm the Reformed Church in America's position that Scripture is the final authority for all areas of life and ministry, including ministry to and with persons of homosexual orientation; and further,..." (MGS 1996, R-6, p. 405), in order not to conflict with the RCA Constitution.

Reasons:

1. To state the RCA's position that Scripture is the final authority for all areas of life and ministry is not really the RCA's position, and thus Synod cannot "reaffirm" it. The RCA's position is that authority belongs to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Lord shares this authority with officeholders in the church, both as individuals and as they meet in councils and assemblies (Book of Church Order, Preamble).

2. The phrase, "the authority of Scripture," is widely used in the larger church. This phrase can be an important and helpful way of speaking, but the actual position of the RCA is that the "Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice" (Book of Church Order, Preamble). Scripture as "only rule" (regula sola) is different from Scripture as "final authority." This historic position (regula sola), also taught in Articles 5-7 of the Belgic Confession, is more in keeping with the Church Fathers and with the Reformation than with contemporary positions regarding Scripture. This historic position deserves to be maintained and safeguarded today.
3. The 1996 General Synod reaffirmation (*MGS 1996, R-6, p. 405*) has the (doubtless unintended) effect of unseating Christ in favor of Scripture. This contradicts the Preamble of the *Book of Church Order*, which states: “All authority exercised in the church is received from Christ, the only Head of the Church.”

4. The Preamble of the *Book of Church Order* also states that Christ delegates a share of his authority to those holding office in the church. For this reason, all older RCA ordination forms included the words “Take thou authority” at the laying-on of hands. This authority includes the right and responsibility to speak “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” not in the name of Scripture (see Gerrit T. Vander Lugt, ed., *Liturgy and Psalms*, New York: The Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1968, p. 97; see also Articles 28, 30-31 of the Belgic Confession). At the same time, this right to speak in Christ’s name must be “within the limits set by Scripture” (*Book of Church Order*, Preamble). Indeed, “the church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (*Book of Church Order*, Preamble). This shows what is meant by Scripture being the “only rule,” and how Scripture relates to authority.

5. Scripture itself shows that authority in the church was given by Christ to persons in office. Scripture was given to the apostles and elders who met at the Council of Jerusalem, and they dared to say, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Of course, the unique authority of the apostles is conveyed to us in the New Testament scriptures, but Scripture is never to be separated from the function and calling of the offices, especially the offices of pastor and elder both in their ongoing work and in their assembly as church councils.

6. This distinction of the RCA’s position of authority belonging to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and not to Scripture alone is not just a technicality. For the RCA to continue to be a doctrinally united church, the RCA needs to conform the language of its positions to its Constitution.

7. This overture addresses the issue of Scripture and authority and does not intend to address the issue of homosexuality.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

**R-1.**

To restate the Reformed Church in America’s position on Scripture and authority, affirming that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice for all areas of life and ministry, including ministry to and with persons of homosexual orientation. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The change in words (from “Scripture as the final authority” to “the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice”) to reflect the language in Articles 5-7 of the Belgic Confession more accurately conveys the Reformed understanding of the sufficiency of Christ and the authority of his Word.

2. R-1 does not address or change the content of the 1996 General Synod statement (*MGS 1996, p. 405*) regarding the RCA’s position on ministry to and with persons of homosexual orientation.

(A motion was made and supported to amend R-1 by deleting the words “including ministry to and with persons of homosexual orientation.” The motion LOST.)
Revision to the Constitutional Inquires

2. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures General Synod to adopt the following addition to the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter I, Part II, Article 7, Section 1a, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 1. The president of classis, at the same meeting at which delegates to the synods are appointed, shall address the following inquiries to the ministers and elder delegates of each church. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods.

a. Are the doctrines of the gospel preached in your church in their purity in conformity with
   i. the Word of God?
   ii. the Standards of the Reformed Church in America?
   iii. the truth that divine redemption from sin is only by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind?

Reasons:

1. The above amendment was adopted by the 1996 General Synod for recommendation to the classes for approval (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 401. However, the words “by grace” were omitted in the booklet, “1996 Proposed Amendments to the Constitution of the RCA,” distributed in September 1996 to classes. Classes should vote on the correct wording of the proposed amendment.

2. During the past year there was much discussion in classes about the proposed amendment being redundant since the “Word of God” and “the Standards of the Reformed Church in America” address the topic contained in the proposed amendment. Redundancy is a good thing. It is good in RCA worship services to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostle’s Creed, the doxology, the ten commandments, etc.

3. As RCA congregations reach out to their communities, people in these communities ask the following types of questions: “What does the RCA stand for?” “What does the RCA believe in?” “What is the RCA?” The proposed amendment, inserted after the “Word of God” and “the Standards of the Reformed Church in America” in the BCO, is a helpful summary statement for people to understand what the Reformed Church in America stands for and believes in as it preaches, teaches, and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. In light of recent deliberations in the Classis of Muskegon and the Classis of Southwest Michigan, it cannot be assumed that the proposed amendment is redundant and that all RCA ministers and elders automatically understand that the substance of the proposed amendment is contained in the “Word of God” and “the Standards” currently listed in the BCO.

➢ The advisory committee recommended:

R-2.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 2 was addressed in R-6 (see p. 64)
3. The Classis of Central California overtures General Synod to adopt the following addition to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1a, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 1. The president of classis, at the same meeting at which delegates to the synods are appointed, shall address the following inquiries to the ministers and elder delegates of each church. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods.

a. Are the doctrines of the gospel preached in your church in their purity in conformity with
   i. the Word of God with its supreme emphasis on the truth that divine redemption from sin is by grace through faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humankind?
   ii. the *Standards of the Reformed Church in America*?

Reasons:

1. There is evidence that alternative ways of salvation are being proclaimed in the RCA.

2. The Classis of Central California believes that this amendment clarifies the commitment of the RCA, ministers of Word and sacrament, and consistory and congregations to the witness of the heart of the Bible’s message that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

3. The amendment amplifies a bold and specific commitment to salvation in Jesus Christ alone without weakening the existing affirmation in the *Book of Church Order* for the preaching of the doctrines of the gospel being in conformity with the Word of God or the *Standards of the Reformed Church in America*.

> The advisory committee recommended:

R-3.
To deny the overture, (ADOPTED)

Reason: The substance of Overture 3 was addressed in R-6 (see p. 64).

**Traditional Biblical Language**

4. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures General Synod to remain open to traditional biblical language usage, including references to the Godhead as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and further,

   to openly receive this usage of traditional biblical language in regular public worship services of RCA congregations; and further,

   to continue to respect traditional biblical language usage in RCA seminaries and seminaries meeting the criteria (see *MGS 1990*, R-1, p. 261) for attendance by Theological Education Agency students.

Reasons:

1. To be truly inclusive requires a willingness to also continue to accept the usage of traditional biblical language rather than to discriminate against it.
a. An RCA minister of Word and sacrament, working on a D.Min. degree dissertation at Western Theological Seminary, had his work rejected because he did not use inclusive language.

b. The classis is aware of a professor at an RCA seminary who informed a student that a favorable grade would not be given unless inclusive language was used.

2. There are numerous ways evident and visible in the life of the Reformed Church in America at all levels that show the acceptance of women aside from the use of inclusive language.

3. The use of inclusive language has caused many misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and mistrust in the life of the Reformed Church in America.

4. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ spoke to God as his Father in heaven.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-4.
To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

1. The advisory committee understood that the RCA already affirms the Bible's ways of speaking about God as the only rule of faith and practice for the theological reflection and worship of the church.

2. The denial of Overture 4 in no way suggests any weakening of the RCA's affirmation of the normative status of the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with reference to the Triune God.

3. Overture 4 is unclear and ambiguous.

RCA Offices of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Elders, and Deacons and Lifestyles

5. The Classis of Northern Michigan overtures General Synod to adopt the following addition to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 3, 7, and 9, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. They are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 1. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office. Those who are called to this office are to lead a life in obedience to the Scripture and in conformity to the historic standards of the church. In this obedience and conformity is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage if a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged adulterous or homosexual
practice shall not be ordained and/or installed into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Sec. 7. Elders are confessing members of the local church who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Those who are called to this office are to lead a life in obedience to the Scripture and in conformity to the historic standards of the church. In this obedience and conformity is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage if a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged adulterous or homosexual practice shall not be inducted into the Office of Elder by ordination.

Sec. 9. Deacons are confessing members of the local church who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Those who are called to this office are to lead a life in obedience to the Scripture and in conformity to the historic standards of the church. In this obedience and conformity is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage if a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged adulterous or homosexual practice shall not be inducted into the Office of Deacon by ordination.

Reasons:

1. The RCA needs a clear judicial statement that opposes the ordination of any person to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament, Office of Elder, and Office of Deacon who is practicing a sexual lifestyle contrary to Scripture and which Scripture calls sin.

   a. The General Synod has made numerous policy statements acknowledging that homosexual practice is sin. Homosexual behavior is listed in Scripture with other sins, including adultery, fornication, pride, greed, lust, jealousy, and malice. Although homosexuality is not a greater sin than any other sin, Scripture still clearly defines the practice of homosexuality as sin.

   b. Ordination to an office is not a “right.” It is a call to a particular function within the church. It requires prayerful discernment by congregations and classes of those whose manner of life is a demonstration of the Christian gospel. Where there is sin, repentance leads to grace that demonstrates the gospel. Where sin remains unacknowledged and unrepent, there can be no ordination to an office.

2. The RCA currently does not have a judicial statement to prevent classes or consistories from ordaining self-acknowledged practicing homosexuals in church offices.

3. The RCA needs this proposed BCO amendment to ensure uniformity among all RCA classes and congregations on the issue of ordination to church offices and human sexuality.
a. While many in the RCA may believe that the best road to unity is to allow the
decision on ordination to be decided solely by classes and congregations, this is a
radical departure and a far-reaching change in the foundational principles of a
connectional church. Any form of local classis or congregation option on this issue
means the abandonment of the RCA’s historic and distinctive foundation as a
confessional and connectional church living under the authority of the Word of God.

b. The proposed BCO amendment makes the necessary distinction between homosexual
orientation and homosexual practice. Homosexual orientation is not a sin, and
therefore should not be a barrier to ordination to an office.

4. Through listening to the pain of its members, the RCA has learned to distinguish
between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice.

5. The proposed BCO amendment addresses both homosexual and heterosexual sin and
bars each lifestyle from ordination to an office.

6. The proposed BCO amendment addresses only “self-acknowledged practice.” The
proposed BCO amendment bars ordination to an office only for those persons who
“refuse to repent of sin.” In so doing, the RCA church order would reflect Jesus, who
loves persons and did not come to condemn anyone, but calls all persons to repentance,
to turn away from sin. The RCA must not be an exclusive, condemning community; it
must be a community of welcome and love. The issue before the RCA is not one of
membership, but of ordination to an office.

7. The proposed Formula of Agreement allows for the orderly transfer of ministers
between the RCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian
Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ. The RCA must be clear in its stand
to its ecumenical partners on the issue of human sexuality and ordination to church
offices.

a. The United Church of Christ ordains practicing homosexuals to all church offices.

b. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), at its 1996 General Assembly, voted to amend
its church order not to allow the ordination of practicing homosexuals to any church
office. The proposed BCO amendment for the RCA is based on the Presbyterian
model.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-5.
To instruct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the
Commission on Church Order, to prepare revisions to the Book of
Church Order (BCO) that address moral and ethical behavior,
including sexual purity as it relates to qualifications for ordained
ministry, for report to the 1998 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The language of the recommended BCO revisions in Overture 5 is vague and
ambiguous on a number of topics, i.e., the meaning of “historic standards of the
church,” the meaning of “adulterous practice,” the meaning of “self-acknowledged,”
and the implications of these BCO revisions on past General Synod votes regarding

2. The RCA does need to find ways to underscore the importance of moral, ethical
behavior in the lives of ministers, elders, and deacons.
From the Report of the General Secretary

P-3 (p. 50) was referred to the Advisory Committee on Theology and the Advisory Committee on Church Order.

In response to P-3 (p. 50), the advisory committee recommended:

R-6.
To instruct the moderator of the General Synod Council, in consultation with the general secretary, to appoint an ad hoc committee of no more than eight persons, including representatives of the Commission on Theology and the Commission on Church Order, and other ministers, elders, and deacons, to study those sections of the Book of Church Order (BCO) dealing with the election, tasks, and responsibilities of consistories in light of Reformed understanding of the role of elders and deacons and the consistory’s calling to give spiritual leadership in the ministry and mission of congregations, for report to the 1999 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The emphasis today should fall on the consistory’s responsibility to foster congregational ministry and mission, rather than on more administrative tasks.

2. The RCA needs time to respond to a study before revisions of the BCO are brought to a vote.
REPORTS ON WORLD MISSION

Report of the General Synod Council's Mission Services Committee

In a course he teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, entitled "Biblical Foundations of Mission," the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen, vice-president of General Synod, offers the following definition:

Mission is the people of God intentionally crossing barriers from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith, to proclaim by word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, through the church's participation in God's mission of reconciling people to God, to themselves, to each other, and to the world; and gathering them into the church through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit with a view to the transformation of the world as a sign of the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ.

In addition to being wonderfully comprehensive in scope, this definition is also wonderfully universal in its application. In essence, it proclaims that "Mission is One." The mission of the people of God is one and the same in Chicago ... and Chiapas ... and China ... and Chernobyl. The former distinctions between "foreign missions" and "domestic evangelism" are quickly fading as the church in every culture on every continent senses the call to "intentionally cross barriers from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith, proclaiming by word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ." And as the world has become a "global village," the Spirit calls the church to mission with neighbors and nations, proclaiming the whole gospel to the whole of the people throughout the whole world.

Mission Services, through its statement of purpose, affirms the primary role of the local congregation in missions:

The RCA Mission Services Committee/Unit is to challenge and enable the members of the Reformed Church in America to join with the Christian community around the world in making Christ known among all people through word and witness (General Synod Council Handbook, VI-1).

In order to fulfill this purpose, the first goal of Mission Services is:

To assist and affirm RCA congregations as they seek to understand and be engaged in mission locally, regionally, and globally (MGS 1996, p. 406).

As the 1997 General Synod focuses on transformation "by the renewing of your minds" through the study of the Word, it is imperative that the Mission Services report also be biblically grounded. Particularly relevant are the Acts 11:19-30 and Acts 13:1-3 accounts of the church in Antioch, which shines as a model for all congregations seeking to be faithful in mission with neighbors and nations.

"God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18).

Following the conversion of Cornelius, the "apostles and believers who were in Judea" (Acts 11:1) became reluctantly persuaded that God's love was wide enough to include the Gentile world. Still, the church in Jerusalem had little awareness of what such a declaration would mean for its life and witness. In the city of Antioch, the Spirit made it perfectly clear. Antioch was the first Christian church that was cross-cultural in its mission concerns, both locally and globally. At a crucial moment in the life of the early church, its members understood that cross-cultural mission is one, whether in their own city of Antioch or in Antioch of Pisidia.
Ever since, sometimes more ideally than in reality, the doors of the church have been open to all, and the mission of the church has been extended to all sorts and conditions of humankind. There is no face in which the countenance of Jesus is not to be found. On six continents, in cities and suburbs and villages, among the rich and the poor, with people of every race and creed, the RCA seeks to proclaim the “repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch” (Acts 11:19).

Antioch was a great urban center of five hundred thousand people, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, surpassed only by Rome and Alexandria. Located three hundred miles north of Jerusalem, it was the Mediterranean doorway to the great Eastern highways. Called the “Queen of the East,” it was embellished with everything that Roman wealth, Greek aestheticism, and Oriental luxury could produce. An urban center became the birthplace of the name “Christian,” and an urban church launched the urban missionary strategy of Paul and Barnabas.

The Spirit is calling the church to the cities again. Waldron Scott, in his paper, “The Challenge of Urban Realities to Christian World Mission in the 21st Century,” says:

During the past four millennia the overwhelming majority of the world’s peoples have lived out their lives in rural settings. Our planet is experiencing a massive urban transition unparalleled in human history. At the beginning of this century a mere one-tenth of the world’s population lived in cities. Although that tenth was itself an historic high, by 1975 the figure had tripled. Today fully half the world is urban. And by the year 2025 nearly two-thirds of the world’s total population—more than five billion people (out of a projected 7.5 billion)—will be living in cities. (Paper presented November 8-9, 1996 by Waldron Scott at the Eastern Fellowship of the American Society of Missiology in the Maryknoll Center, New York.)

In response to the challenge of the city, the 1996 General Synod affirmed the goal of Mission Services “to pay particular attention to ministry in cities as a place where the RCA discovers and models its practice of Mission is one (MGS 1996, p. 408 and MGS 1996, R-1, p. 409).

1. In Los Angeles, California, Kathy Vander Werf Gabel has become a member of InnerChange, a Christian order composed of communities of missionaries living and ministering incarnationally among the poor and striving to follow God’s injunction “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

2. In Toronto, Ontario, the Rev. Brigido Cabrera is pastor of Agape Hispanic Reformed Church, a new church started in 1991.

3. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Rev. Madeline Fuentez is the founding pastor of La Iglesia de la Trinidad Reformed Church.

4. In Denver, Colorado, the Rev. Eric Ishimaru is organizing a new church development in the area of the city between the urban core and the suburbs—an area that is often overlooked by church planters.

5. The consistory of Union Church of Highbridge in the Bronx, New York, is preparing a plan to develop as a vital center of urban witness.

6. The Rev. David and Charlene Alexander are giving pastoral leadership to the planting of a new church start in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.
7. In order to coordinate the urban focus of the Reformed Church in America, the General Synod Council approved the formation of the Metropolitan Ministries Team (MMT), to be comprised of the executive directors of the racial/ethnic councils, a representative from each of the regional synods and Evangelism and Church Development Services, and the director of Mission Services. After MMT discerns the RCA’s strategy for city ministry, a director of metropolitan ministries will be sought, probably in early 1998.

8. In addition, the director of Mission Services has been directed to give 25 percent of his time to the development of the RCA’s urban mission worldwide.

“And they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20).

In the power of the Spirit, the church in Antioch was able to throw off its self-imposed blinders to the breadth of God’s light and to break down its self-erected fences to the limits of God’s grace. They were able to see their own sinful selfishness, to understand the double blessing of God, to see mission broadly rather than narrowly, concretely rather than in theory. The old excuses were no longer acceptable. No longer could the naysayers proclaim “We’ve never done it that way before,” or “What will happen to our sense of identity?,” or “Don’t you think we should take care of our own before we try reaching out?,” or “This congregation was better when it was smaller.” Cross-cultural mission assumes that we “become all things to all people” so that we might “by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

The great challenge of the church today, as it was in its infancy, is cross-cultural missions, identified by professor Van Engen as “intentionally crossing barriers from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith, to proclaim by word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.”

1. The RCA has long been a pioneer in “foreign” cross-cultural missions. Historic and honored missions with our church partners in the Middle East, India, Asia, Africa, and Mexico continue with strength and commitment today.

2. Within the last decade, the Rev. Robert and Helen Wierenga have given leadership to the planting of a new National Presbyterian Church in Caracas, Venezuela; and the Rev. Douglas and Aleta Shepler assist the training of pastors at the Evangelical Seminary, also in Caracas.

3. In Kiev, Arlene Vander Loon works with a team of Ukrainian Christian leaders to develop children’s ministries.

4. New volunteer placements and partnerships are being explored in Russia.

A new awareness for the RCA is the emergence of the United States and Canada as a cross-cultural mission field. At the January 1997 meeting of the General Synod Council, in preliminary work on a new vision statement, the context for the RCA was identified as a “disbelieving culture in need of God’s amazing grace.” Seen as a secular, greedy and decadent culture, the two-thirds world is sending cross-cultural missionaries to U.S. and Canadian cities in rapidly increasing numbers. Thus, the church’s assumptions about its place in society, its methods of evangelism, the work of its clergy and laity, and its worship styles need to be examined.

1. In Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Bethany Reformed Church, pastored by the Rev. Allen Pruis, has begun a Saturday night worship service that is attracting unchurched people.
Bethany's outreach service was recently featured on the video, *Evangelism in a Changing World.* This video is available from TRA/VARCA and the RCA Distribution Center.

2. Third Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa, is forming small group cells for all of its members for the purpose of community, growth, and outreach.

"The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced" (Acts 11:21-23).

Grace, if it's real, can be seen. What it looked like in Antioch was the healing of old wounds, the blurring of old boundaries, the easing of old tensions, the ending of a cold war, and a soothing embrace for old enmities. Apparently, this observable grace was so revolutionary that it caused others to sit up and take notice. When Christ gathers a cross-cultural community that is "no longer Jew or Greek . . . no longer slave or free . . . no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28), i.e., a community that knows no racial, economic, or gender bias, it lives as a witness to God's amazing grace.

1. Reformed Church World Service in 1996 assisted the healing of the nations with grants for Rwandan, Liberian, Chiapan, and South Sudanese refugee relief, and the rebuilding of First Missionary Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma.

2. New partnerships are being forged with the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the development of its seminaries.

3. Three RCA pastors traveled to Cuba in January 1997 to assist the evangelical church in its evangelistic outreach.

4. In the volatile Middle East, for over 150 years the RCA has been a highly respected and active presence in dialogue and relationship with the Muslim world.

5. In eastern Canada, assisted by Debi Logtenberg and Christ Community Church in Welland, Ontario, the church is reaching out to women and children in crisis.

6. Hope Community Church in Los Angeles, California, once Anglo and currently African-American, now begins the transition of embracing the neighborhood's change to a Hispanic population.

Twice in the narrative about Antioch, Luke reports the great growth of the church. The Lord's mission, attended by the Holy Spirit and witnessed to by the words and deeds of the people of God, always produces fruit. The church of Jesus, once as small as a mustard seed, has grown into a tree in which all the nations of the world have come to rest.

"News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 11:22).

Then as now, innovation and change usually comes from the frontier rather than from "Zion." In the economy of God, Jerusalem needed to learn from Antioch about the mission of the church. Was this the first example of reverse flow mission?

1. What did First Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa, learn about mission in its own backyard when it traveled to Fordham Manor Reformed Church in the Bronx, New York? And what did Fordham Manor learn in the exchange?
2. Will worship ever be the same for those who attended the 1996 General Synod and came to love and appreciate songs, rhythms, and liturgies from around the world?

3. Will it be possible for the affluent, Western church to hear the witness of the world’s poor challenging our secular greed?

4. Will the reality of the power of Christ to command demons and heal the physically sick challenge our dismissal of evil and confront our dependence upon technology rather than the power of God?

5. Will the RCA be able to hear the critique of its racial/ethnic constituencies regarding its systemic and structural racism?

"The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief [for the severe famine predicted by Agabus] to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:29-30).

The concern of the church in Antioch was not only local and global, but also regional. The brothers and sisters in Judea were facing famine, and the Antiochan response was grace that could be seen. Each member made a pledge—and then kept it! The money was collected for the saints soon-to-be-in-need and delivered when they needed it.

Timely and appropriate response to need has always been a hallmark of RCA mission, which is marked by a wholistic approach to its work.

1. Based in Mombasa, Kenya, Delvin and Debra Braaksma assist the African Inland Church in mission with the Orma people, developing Christian education materials and animal husbandry. Roger and Susan Scheenstra work out of Daba, Kenya, providing agronomist and nursing skills to the Orma people.

2. In 1996 Reformed Church World Service provided $63,800 for domestic food pantries and over $465,000 in relief for refugees and victims of floods, famines, hurricanes, and earthquakes, as well as funds for public policy advocacy and hunger education.

3. Through the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, the RCA helps its church partners support an English language congregation and a soup kitchen that feeds hungry Russians, mostly elderly women.

"While the [church at Antioch]... was worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3).

It wasn’t Saul and Barnabas taking off by themselves on the Lord’s mission. Rather, it was the church in Antioch-with-Saul-and-Barnabas-through-the-laying-on-of-hands on the Lord’s mission. They were together in spirit. One imagines that if it had been possible, some of the brothers and sisters would have accompanied the missionary team.

Today we continue to lay on hands and send off “our own” with our prayers to places far and near. And because of the availability of technology and travel, we are also involved in hands-on projects.

1. In the last year the following new missionaries were appointed: Debra Schneider Wilson (Cambodia); Appu Varghese (Oman); Frank and Darlene Van Hoeve (Kentucky); Arlene Vander Loon (Ukraine); and Bruce and Laurie Hawley (Oman).
2. Thirty-three work groups are committed to assist the rebuilding of First Missionary Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma in 1997; and 228 adults participated in Hurricane Marilyn relief projects in St. Thomas, the U.S. Virgin Islands, through the Office of Volunteer Services.

"It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ (Acts 11:26).

It’s not a title that we can give ourselves. But when our discipleship crosses barriers and enables others to experience the grace of the Lord we proclaim, then it may be that others will honor us with the name Christian, the hand of the Lord will bless us, and great numbers will turn to the Lord.

CITY CONFERENCE

The 1995 General Synod voted:

To urge the Office of City Congregational Ministries to regularly and periodically schedule similar gatherings like the “Celebrating City Ministries” consultation held April 20-22, 1995, in Newark, New Jersey (MGS 1995, R-3, p. 310).

A consultation on urban ministry entitled “Transformation 1997—All Aboard, Mission is One,” was held April 10-12, 1997, at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. Approximately one hundred forty urban pastors and laypeople from the United States, Canada, and Venezuela gathered for worship, fellowship, educational opportunities, and affirmation of urban ministry as a denominational priority. The Rev. Spencer Perkins, president of Reconcilers Fellowship, led a Bible study that challenged the church to bring both “eternal and everyday” hope to the city, to take risks of faith that depend upon the presence and power of God, and to so love each other in Christ that the reconciling grace of God becomes a witness to the world. The Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson reaffirmed the RCA’s commitment to the mission of local and global urban ministry. Workshops resourced by urban practitioners suggested ways and means of transforming seminary education, liturgies, reconciliation, Christian action, youth conflict, congregations, neighborhoods, spirituality, and new church development. A panel led the consultation in dialogue about the future of RCA urban ministries. Worship and prayer centered the consultation on God and the world for which Christ died.

The setting for “Transformation 1997” was particularly appropriate. The Bissinger Room at Stevens Institute provided a breathtaking view of Manhattan across the Hudson River, and of urban New Jersey from the Hudson’s palisades. Hoboken, a great and diverse city, provided lively streets, great restaurants, responsive government, and historic churches to be explored and appreciated.

In 1995 an urban ministry consultation—the first since 1979—was held in Newark, New Jersey. The consultation was marked by unity and a desire for partnership in mission, and it produced an important statement of urban hopes and commitments entitled “The Newark Covenant” (MGS 1995, pp 309-10). In the same spirit, the participants and focus groups of “Transformation 1997” contributed to the “Hoboken Affirmation.” The affirmation states:

The Hoboken Affirmation

1. The primacy of prayer. God’s direction, power and blessing for the mission of the church comes through disciplined and regular prayer. Our best efforts are inadequate, and our best plans fall short if attempted without prayer.
2. **Faith without works.** Christian actions speak louder than words to a disbelieving culture numbed by the church saying yes but acting no. The church is called to be "Christ's very presence in the world so loved by God." It is not a matter of word or deed, but the necessity of word and deed.

3. **A reason to celebrate.** The city is a place to be celebrated rather than a problem to be solved. God loves the city and calls us to live there and seek its welfare.

4. **The battle is the Lord's.** Undaunted by our size or the overwhelming needs of the city, the church is full of faith, boldly risking and slaying principalities and powers in the name of the Lord. The mission is God's, and the Holy Spirit empowers and leads us.

5. **Called to community.** The Christian community witnesses to the power of Christ to gather a church that is, as Paul says in Gal. 3:38, "no longer Jew or Greek . . . no longer slave or free . . . no longer male and female" (i.e., without racial, economic, or gender bias). We are accountable to each other for mutual affirmation and mutual admonition. Systemic and structural racism is a sin that must be confessed and repented of.

6. **Unity in diversity.** The Spirit breathes a wonderful variety into the urban church in its worship, witness and models of effective ministry, which are valued and respected.

7. **Mission is One.** The concerns of our consistories about content and style of worship and Christ's salvation in a pluralistic society are missiological issues. The local church today struggles with the question that has always faced global missionaries: how can the gospel be interpreted to an unbelieving culture?

8. **The key to the future.** As the church in the United States and Canada seeks to cross boundaries in witness to the gospel, the urban church will show the way. Thus, making urban ministry a denominational priority is important to the Reformed Church in American's future.

9. **Giving and receiving.** In learning to do mission in cross-cultural settings, the church is wise to receive not only the gifts of urban ministry, but also those of the world missionary community and the RCA's mission partners.

10. **Partnership in mission.** While ministry to the needs of people can be carried out with few resources ("I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you" [Acts 3:6]), it is also true that the whole church is expected to provide for the needs of the poor and oppressed.

11. **The church in the world.** A Reformed understanding of the reign of God propels the church into the city's government, commerce, and art. God is pleased to dwell with humans in all aspects of work, community, and leisure.

12. **Leadership for mission.** The decision of the General Synod Council at its April 1997 meeting to seek a full-time denominational staff position in urban ministries is strongly affirmed. In particular, a person skilled in interpreting urban ministries to the larger church is needed.

In his remarks on behalf of Hoboken Mayor Anthony Russo, Michael Korman said:

Mayor Russo and I are very happy to see that the Reformed Church is making a new commitment to Hoboken and cities in general, with invigorated support for your churches and pastors and your ministries and members. You need to do this. Our cities need churches; what they offer to our cities is essential . . . Don't leave us. Be here, stay
here, and love us... pour yourselves into your cities... Five years from now Mayor Russo would like to hear that the Reformed Church has had great new success in the cities of America—and that it all started right here in Hoboken!

In his keynote address, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson said:

It was perhaps from the docks of Hoboken that the early RCA missionaries departed on ships for the Middle East, India, and China. May it be that from these same shores that the RCA will launch its new mission to its cities and nations.

ADDITIONAL MATTERS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST

Southern Normal School

At its October 1996 meeting, it was reported to the General Synod Council (GSC) that Southern Normal School (SNS) had only seventy-eight students and had an indebtedness of over $900,000. The projected shortfall in the cash flow for the 1996-97 academic year was over $100,000.

Over the past number of years, Mission Services has supported Southern Normal School with annual grants of $300,000. Direct contributions from individuals and congregations have totaled another $50,000 to $83,000 annually.

The GSC Mission Services Committee, at its October 1996 meeting, reviewed a recommendation to cease Reformed Church in America financial support for Southern Normal School effective at the end of the calendar year 1997, and GSC approved this recommendation.

In the late fall of 1996 the Southern Normal School Foundation Board of Trustees voted to suspend operations of SNS effective at the end of the first semester of the current school year because of severe budget problems. All students at SNS were enrolled in other schools, and all SNS teacher except one found other positions.

Late in December 1996 a proposal came from Alabama State University, an historically black college located in Montgomery, Alabama, to purchase SNS with the intention of continuing to operate a secondary school in Brewton for underserved black youth. The SNS board looked with favor on this proposal, since it desires to see a school continue on the campus. However, the board also stipulated that any offer to purchase the school had to be for an amount sufficient to cover the total indebtedness. If no such offer was forthcoming, the SNS board agreed to deed the property back to the Reformed Church in America for final disposition.

As of April 1997 the sale and disposition of the SNS property to Alabama State University was not completed. GSC, at its April 1997 meeting, instructed its Coordinating Committee to continue the process of the sale and disposition of the property by the SNS board. GSC, at its April 1997 meeting, also voted to invite a representative from the SNS board to attend the 1997 General Synod meeting in order to express appreciation for Southern Normal School, its staff, and graduates.

R-1.
To adopt the following resolution:

WHEREAS Southern Normal School impacted the lives of thousands of young people; and
WHEREAS Southern Normal School blessed the lives of many throughout the Reformed Church in America who worked in partnership with countless brothers and sisters in Christ in Brewton, Alabama;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the Milwaukee campus of the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the seventeenth day of June 1997, offers thanks to God for the ministry of Southern Normal School since its founding in 1911. (ADOPTED)

The Rev. Robert Terwilliger, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Eastern Europe and Russia and member of the Southern Normal School Foundation Board of Trustees, presented to Synod an update on the sale of Southern Normal School. As of June 9, 1997, the school was sold to Alabama State University. Enough money was received from a combination of sources, including Alabama state, donations from alumni and friends of Southern Normal School, and the Reformed Church in America to be able to pay off the entire indebtedness of the school. Two lawsuits continue against the Southern Normal School Foundation Board of Trustees. One suit will probably come to trial in December 1997. The other suit may continue for one or two more years before it reaches any conclusion. The board will therefore continue to exist, at least until these suits are settled.

The Rev. Robert Terwilliger, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Eastern Europe and Russia and member of Southern Normal School Foundation Board of Trustees, introduced Manford Byrd, graduate of Southern Normal School and Central College and former superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools from 1985 to 1990, to the Synod. Manford Byrd addressed the Synod and expressed thanksgiving to the Reformed Church in America for its many years of support for Southern Normal School.

Oliver Patterson, chair of the African-American Council, led General Synod in a prayer of thanksgiving for the many years of ministry of Southern Normal School.

Jackson County Ministries

John Smith, director of Jackson County Ministries (JCM), informed Mission Services on February 10, 1997, that the city of Annville, Kentucky, did not receive an anticipated grant from the state of Kentucky to renovate JCM Lincoln Hall. The city is disappointed but is resolved to seek alternative funding. The city planning committee has asked for patience from the RCA as it pursues other sources of funding.

Youth in Missions

The 1996 General Synod instructed Mission Services, in cooperation with Congregational Services, to plan regular mission events for youth participation in mission (MGS 1996, R-2, p. 410). In response to R-2, a design has been produced that will encourage youth to move along a continuum from general mission interest through volunteer service and foreign mission trips to actually becoming career missionaries.

The Youth Team of Congregational Services staff and Mission Services staff continue to communicate and cooperate in the development of these ideas.

Additionally, representatives of Congregational Services and Stewardship and Communications Services have begun planning for mission education for younger children. They are developing mission education units for 1997 or 1998 that will coordinate with the Mission of the Month program.
Mission Resources

This past year, Mission Services, in conjunction with Stewardship and Communication Services, developed twelve videos in the Missionary Conversations Series. Featured in these five-minute videos were: Merle and Karen Vander Sluis, the Rev. Charles and Rieneke Ausherman, Delvin and Debra Braaksma, the Rev. Wendell and Renske Karsen, the Rev. John and Lynn Hubers, the Rev. Peter and Patty Ford, Brian and Donna Renes, the Rev. Roland and Judy Van Es, the Revs. Abraham and Sayuri Kist-Okazaki, the Rev. Wayne and Miho Jansen, the Rev. Gordon and Evon Laman, and the Rev. Martin Weitz.

Mission Services also produced an eleven-minute video, *Carrying the Light to the Orma*, featuring the work of Delvin and Debra Braaksma in Kenya.

A major video, *Sayuri's Joy*, was produced in 1996. The first part features the Rev. Sayuri Kist-Okazaki telling about her growing-up years in Japan as a lonely Christian, then coming to the U.S. to further her education at Western Theological Seminary and discovering the great joy of belonging to the larger body of Christ. She and her husband Abraham are now back in Japan serving as RCA missionaries. Part two of the video features the work of the other RCA missionaries in Japan.

*Bearers of the Light: An Overview of RCA Mission*, which highlights all the areas of the world where the RCA is involved in mission work, was completed early in 1997. Other videos scheduled for release in 1997 are an American Indian video and missionary conversations with Gail Beran, Cornelia Roghair, the Rev. Thomas and Barbara Vande Berg, and the Rev. George and Joyce Magee.

As noted in the above Youth in Mission section, representatives of Congregational Services and Stewardship and Communication Services have begun planning for mission education for younger children, developing mission education units that will coordinate with the Mission of the Month program.

During 1996 more than seven hundred duplicate copies of videos were made by the video production staff for distribution to supporting congregations, TRAVARCA, and RCA staff. These resources are available from TRAVARCA and the RCA Distribution Center by calling (800) 968-7221.

Mission Services also publishes material that can be of assistance in increasing mission awareness in congregations. This material includes Reformed Church in Mission information kits, area packets, mission profiles, mission calendars, placemats, missionary letters, and displays. These items, as well as a selection of other books and pamphlets that highlight missions in various areas of the world, are available through the RCA Distribution Center by calling (800) 968-7221.

Cross-cultural Study Seminars

Two seminars were conducted in the past year. The Rev. Roger Schrock, supervisor of RCA mission programs in the Middle East, led a group of four persons on a pilgrimage to the Middle East and Israel. The Rev. Roger De Young, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Mexico, accompanied Western Theological Seminary students, laypeople, and a pastor to Chiapas, Mexico. They met with RCA missionaries and the church in Chiapas to hear the story of what the Lord is doing in Chiapas. There is no better way to experience and understand RCA mission involvement than through actual visits to mission sites.
Strategic Planning

In a world where the face of missions is rapidly changing, the need for a strategic plan to guide RCA mission decisions in the next twenty years is plainly evident. In the next year Mission Services will be engaged in a season of strategic planning that is both deep and wide. This will involve RCA pastors and laity, Mission Services staff, active and retired missionary communities, RCA missiologists, and RCA mission partners around the world.

Guidelines for Future Directions

Five principles to guide Mission Services staff in future allocations of mission funds and programs were presented to the 1996 General Synod (MGS 1996, pp. 410-13). At its October 1996 meeting, the General Synod Council said these principles should be seen as a document in progress to allow for missionary input. During the coming year, through an RCA web site bulletin board, e-mail, letters, and on-site visits, opinions will be gathered and made an important part of the impending strategic planning process.

FINANCES AGAIN HEALTHY IN 1996

Due to the generosity of the church, contributions and other income for missions in 1996 amounted to $7,652,858. Through good stewardship and a commitment to limit spending, expenses for program and administration totaled $7,559,770, providing a year-end surplus of $93,088.

In order to keep up with increased missionary salary and travel expenses for the 1997 RCA mission program, the General Synod Council, at its April 1997 meeting, recommended congregations increase their Partnership-in-Mission shares from $3,400 in 1996 to $3,600 in 1997. Mission Services staff is hopeful that RCA congregations will respond generously and make possible another positive financial balance in 1997.

Expenses for missionary salaries and travel are greatly affected by circumstances beyond the RCA’s control, such as foreign inflation rates and the strength of the U.S. dollar. In some countries mid-year adjustments to missionary salaries are needed due to runaway inflation. This dynamic is expected to affect the 1998 budget, which also includes an administrative position for urban ministries. Therefore, the GSC, at its April 1997 meeting, approved a $200 increase in mission share contributions for 1998.

Every effort has been made to keep the increase in Partnership-in-Mission shares below the actual increase in the cost of living. In 1987 a PIM share was $2,500. An average increase of 5 percent per year would have brought a PIM share to $4,277 in 1998. Thus, the approved 1998 PIM share of $3,800 is less than the actual increase of the cost of living.

Still, the General Synod Council recognizes the generosity of the RCA’s congregations and individuals, and it covets their continuing commitment to missions, which is the lifeblood of the church.

R-2.
To encourage each RCA congregation to have a Partnership-in-Mission share(s) in the RCA mission program, and to ask those who already have a Partnership-in-Mission share(s) to increase their shares accordingly in 1997-98. (ADOPTED)
CHANGES IN MISSIONARY AND STAFF PERSONNEL

Appointments

The Rev. Bruce Menning was appointed director of Mission Services. Menning served as the secretary for urban ministry for the Regional Synod of Michigan from 1983 to 1991; and copastor with his wife, Vicky, at Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1989 to 1996. Menning serves in the RCA Michigan Regional Center office in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Rev. Richard Vander Voet, who was serving as director of Mission Services, was appointed the coordinator of RCA volunteer services, Reformed Church World Service, and disaster response. Vander Voet serves in the RCA office in Orange City, Iowa.

Amy De Kruyter was appointed associate for RCA volunteer services. De Kruyter serves in the RCA Michigan Regional Center office in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Frank and Darlene Van Hoeve were appointed as world mission program associates. They serve in Livingston, Kentucky, helping to create opportunities for economic self-sufficiency.

Arlene Vander Loon was appointed as a world mission program associate. Vander Loon serves in Ukraine, training Ukrainians in children’s ministry.

Deb Schneider Wilson was appointed as a world mission program associate. She serves in Cambodia, working with community development organizations.

Appu Varghese was appointed as a world mission program associate. He directs the Theological Education by Extension Program of the Al Amana Center in Oman.

Bruce and Laurie Hawley were appointed as world mission program associates. They serve in Oman.

Resignations/Completions of Service

Cheryl Daniel was appointed a missionary in 1988. She served at the Al Raja School in Bahrain from 1988 to 1996.

The Rev. John and Lynn Hubers were appointed missionaries in 1986. They served in Bahrain from 1986 to 1996.

Donald and Brenda Schout were appointed missionaries in 1992. They served in Chiapas, Mexico, from 1992 to 1996.

Rowland and Jane Van Es, Jr., were appointed as world mission program associates in 1993. They served in Malawi, Africa, from 1993 to 1996.

Kenneth and Connie Shingledecker were appointed missionaries in 1988. They served in Nairobi, Kenya, from 1988 to 1996.

Volunteer Services Assignment

Africa: William and Carolyn Overway

Hong Kong: Brian Greller
Hungary: Marci Van Dyke

Japan: Gail Beran
Vince Boraas
Jerre Bush
Kim Courson
Melanie De Boer
Stella Fowler
Rebekah Hanousek
David Kennedy

Slovakia: Denise Meyer

U.S. Queens Village, New York
Project Hospitality, Staten Island, New York

Deaths

William Hocking died in late August, 1996. With his wife, Marion, he served Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church in Dulce, New Mexico, from 1961 to 1968, and Cook College and Theological School in Tempe, Arizona, from 1969 to 1981.


Synod recognized RCA missionaries in attendance at the 1997 General Synod.

Synod recognized former RCA missionaries in attendance at the 1997 General Synod.

Report of the American Indian Council

Change has been a major theme for the American Indian Council (AIC) this past year. A significant leadership change occurred. Kenneth Mallory resigned as secretary for AIC in order to begin new leadership challenges within his tribe. Reaves Nahwooks, a member of the Comanche-Kiowa tribe in Oklahoma, was appointed in November 1996 as interim secretary for AIC. Another leadership change occurred on the American Indian Council Executive Committee. Raymond Nauni, Jr., replaced Thurman Cook as chair of the executive committee.

AIC also recognized the need for other changes: 1) to strengthen and revitalize AIC ministries, 2) to improve communications among the six AIC congregations, 3) to move from a mission-oriented council to a program-generating ministry (e.g., training programs for elders, deacons, and Sunday school teachers; and an annual leadership conference for identifying, developing, and training leaders), 4) to restructure AIC and its relationships with GSC Mission Services and GSC Policy, Planning, and Administration Services, 5) to work more closely with the four RCA classes (Red River, Southwest, Rocky Mountains, and Central Plains) that have AIC congregations within their bounds, and 6) to change the name of the American Indian Council to the Native American Indian Ministries Council.

These changes in AIC present many challenges not only for AIC congregations, but also for the Reformed Church in America. Some of the proposed changes will require revisions of the AIC Constitution. It is anticipated that these revisions will be presented to the 1998 General Synod Council for approval. For information, AIC presents to the 1997 General Synod some of these proposed revisions:
Vision Statement: As Reformed Churches in America, our vision is to embrace and live in
the spirit of our Lord, utilizing all our gifts to one another. We seek to
work with other cultures in North America and the world, giving
testimony to God's grace and God's activity among us, and the making,
teaching, and sustaining of disciples throughout the earth.

Mission Statement: In acceptance of and in response to God’s call and teaching through
Jesus Christ, we proclaim the gospel of Christ and seek to empower for
ministry the RCA Native American Indian congregations. The Native
American Indian Council (NAIMC) seeks to strengthen the discipleship,
fellowship, leadership, and stewardship of the Native American Indian
members and congregations of the Reformed Church in America.
NAIMC will work to fulfill its vision by creating opportunities for the
RCA Native American Indian congregations to gather together; by
designing resources with other denominational groups for Christian
nurture and leadership development; by resourcing an annual leadership
conference; by encouraging faithful stewardship practices of finances,
time, and talents with a view toward self-sufficiency of member
congregations; and with prayer support for the RCA ministries which
take place among Native American Indian people.

Organizational Structure: Native American Indian Ministries Council. The name of this
organization will be Native American Indian Ministries Council
(NAIMC). The council will be composed of one delegate from each
NAIMC congregation, each congregation having one vote. The council
will also include the executive secretary and two pastors of NAIMC
congregations, each person a nonvoting member. In addition to previous
roles, NAIMC will expand its responsibility to include more program
involvement in identifying congregational needs and meeting those
needs. This function will result in an annual leadership conference
where all the elements of Native American Indian ministries in the RCA
will be involved in strategic and long-range planning, designing
workshops, identifying program resources, and leadership and ministerial
development. The development and equipping of lay leaders will be a
primary objective. NAIMC will act to strengthen, renew, and assist both
existing and new Native American Indian congregations. The council
will work cooperatively with the classes where Native American Indian
congregations and other related ministries are located or established in
the future. NAIMC will offer itself as an advisor to the classes and is
prepared to establish a coordinating advisory body with each classis that
is engaged in ministry with Native American Indians.

Classis Advisory Committee. NAIMC encourages each classis in
which a Native American Indian congregation is located to establish a
Classis Advisory Committee for Native American Indian Ministries.
This committee would be directly accountable to the classis and would
be a standing committee of the classis. This committee exists in a liaison
relationship to NAIMC. It hears the concerns of NAIMC and responds
to them in terms of policy decisions, review of funding proposals, action
on advocacy issues, and other formal ways of relating to RCA Native
American Indian ministries within classical bounds. This committee
can serve as an effective backup to an established classis pastoral care
committee by focusing on specific needs/issues of clergy serving
Native American Indian congregations.
Classes also benefit from NAIMC through this committee. NAIMC can help classes to celebrate their cultural diversity. NAIMC can serve as a resource for classes concerning specific issues which are culturally sensitive. The leadership conference can help classes meet leadership training needs in all member congregations.

The suggested makeup of this committee includes the appropriate NAIMC delegate(s), at least one pastor from an RCA Native American Indian congregation, and three at-large members of classis. It is recommended that at least two members of this committee be of Native American Indian descent. This committee would relate to NAIMC and Mission Services of the General Synod Council. The Classis Advisory Committee for Native American Indian Ministries would report to classis on a regular basis.

Pastors. The pastors, along with the congregations, have a direct relationship to the classis. The pastors also have a direct relationship with the General Synod Council’s Mission Services, but this may change as the congregations develop greater self-sufficiency or as other changes may be adopted.

Mission Services. General Synod Council’s Mission Services serves in an advisory or liaison relationship to the classes but maintains a direct relationship to the pastors by providing financial and supervisory support. Mission Services provides support and supervision for NAIMC and its executive secretary.

Executive Secretary of NAIMC. This person carries out staff responsibilities under the programmatic direction of NAIMC and under the supervision of Mission Services. The executive secretary of NAIMC will work to provide vision and leadership for Native American Indian ministries within the RCA, especially in the areas of lay and professional leadership development, and church revitalization and outreach. The executive secretary will work closely and cooperatively with pastors and consistories of Native American Indian congregations, the classes who supervise these congregations, and the Mission Services staff responsible for Native American Indian ministries. The executive secretary, along with the chairperson of NAIMC, will maintain full membership with the other three racial/ethnic councils (African-American, Hispanic, and Pacific and Asian American) and will have immediate access to the director of Mission Services.

R-3.
To affirm the above proposed changes for the American Indian Council (AIC); and further,

to direct the General Synod Council and the American Indian Council to begin, during the coming year, implementation of the above proposed reorganization and restructure of the AIC, subject to approval by the 1998 General Synod of revisions to the Constitution of the American Indian Council. (ADOPTED)
AIC is excited in exploring and discussing changes to more effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to find new ways to experience the transforming power of the Spirit of the Lord in its midst. Please remember the American Indian Council in prayer. The council prays for God's blessings on the Reformed Church in America.

From the Report of the President

P-1 (p. 33) was referred to the Advisory Committee on World Mission and the Advisory Committee on Evangelization and Church Growth.

In response to P-1 (p. 33), the advisory committee recommended:

R-4.

To declare the Reformed Church in America a "missionary denomination" for the twenty-first century; and further,

to declare Canada and the United States (including the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico) a primary mission field for the Reformed Church in America in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, not neglecting the Reformed Church in America's continuing obligation to bring the gospel to all nations and peoples; and further,

to encourage every congregation of the RCA to think of itself as a "mission station" and to think of its members as missionaries called to bear witness to the good news of God in Jesus Christ in the midst of a disbelieving culture; and further,

to encourage each of the forty-six classes to set aside a special and significant period of time over the next twelve months, preferably in a retreat setting, to work together as congregations in understanding what it means to become "mission stations," to develop ways to support one another, and to hold one another accountable in achieving this goal; and further,

to instruct all staff, units, agencies, task forces, commissions, and committees of the General Synod to vision, plan, strategize, prioritize, and act in ways consistent with these declarations. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. Mexico considers itself part of North America. R-4 clarifies the intention to specifically refer to only Canada and the United States (including the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico).

2. The RCA must not lose sight of its commitment to overseas missions.
Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations submitted for consideration and election the following names:

Note: *indicates a final term  
#indicates an official nomination from the body listed

### GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

**Class of 1999**
- Jeanette Baas ............................................................. Classis of South Grand Rapids#
- Mary Ann Bahnsen ................................................... Classis of Mid-Hudson#

**Class of 2000**
- *Louise Bass ............................................................... Classis of Northern Michigan#
- Harlan Bergman ....................................................... Classis of Central Iowa#
- *Albert Bieber ............................................................. Classis of Delaware-Raritan#
- Stephen Breen ........................................................ Classis of West Sioux#
- *Ruth Diephuis ............................................................ Classis of Southwest Michigan#
- Ronald Gray .............................................................. Classis of Rocky Mountains#
- Carol Hageman ........................................................ Classis of Albany#
- Arthur Hessinger ..................................................... Classis of Nassau-Suffolk#
- *Vernon Hoffis .......................................................... Classis of California#
- *Darrel Jongeling .................................................... Classis of Dakota#
- *Frederick Knuthof .................................................. Vice-President of General Synod
- *Louis Lotz ................................................................. At-Large
- *Gregg Mast ................................................................ At-Large
- *Stephen Norden ........................................................ Classis of Lake Erie#
- *Edward Suffern ........................................................ Classis of Passaic Valley#
- *Lula Thomas .............................................................. Classis of Queens#
- *Betty Unger .............................................................. At-Large
- Vacant ....................................................................... At-Large
- *Michael Vanden Berg ............................................... Classis of Canadian Prairies#
- *Elmer Van Drunen .................................................. Classis of Iliana#
- *Gerald Verbridge .................................................... Classis of Rochester

### BOARD OF TRUSTEES, NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**Class of 2000**
- Christopher Bateman ................................................ NBTS#
- *Susan Damon ............................................................ Regional Synod of Canada
- *Christina Eldridge .................................................... NBTS#
- Eunice Folkerts ........................................................ NBTS#
- Justo Gonzalez ......................................................... NBTS#
- *Thomas Liddle ........................................................ NBTS#
- *Charles Morris ....................................................... NBTS#
- Louis Ruprecht ....................................................... NBTS#

### BOARD OF TRUSTEES, THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AGENCY

**Class of 2000**
- Cornelis Koolhaas ................................................ Regional Synod of the Far West (Canada)
- Christina The ............................................................. Regional Synod of the Far West
- D. Curtis Strechman ............................................... TEA#
BOARD OF TRUSTEES, WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Class of 1998
Marcia Elgersma ....................................................... Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Class of 2000
Thomas Claus ........................................................... WTS#
Rong Fu Lu ............................................................ Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics
*Ronald Sikkema ........................................................ Regional Synod of Canada
Stephen Thomas ....................................................... WTS#
*Wayne Vander Byl .................................................... Regional Synod of Albany

EDITORIAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH HERALD
Class of 2000
*Mary Bauman .......................................................... At-Large
*Cynthia De Glopper .................................................. Regional Synod of the Heartland#
*William Te Winkle .................................................... Regional Synod of Mid-America#
*Thomas Torrence ...................................................... Regional Synod of Canada#

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Class of 2000
John Fitzgerald
*Mary Bechler
*Moira Poppen Gargano

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Class of 2000
*Timothy Boeve
Douglas Estella
Samuel Kwon

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Class of 2000
Judith Marvel
*Dennis Te Beest

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Class of 2000
Carol Myers
*Russell Paarlberg

COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Class of 2000
*Gerald De Jong
*Sophie Mathonnet-Vander Well

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Class of 2000
*Samuel Hamstra ..................................................... Regional Synod of Mid-America#
*James Ramsay ....................................................... Regional Synod of Canada#
*Edward Thornton ................................................... Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics#

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Class of 1998
*Anthony Vis ............................................................ Past President of General Synod
NOMINATIONS

Class of 2000
Virginia Bowman .................................................... Regional Synod of New York#
Livingstone Chen .................................................. Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries#
Beverly Clark ...................................................... African-American Council#
*Arthur Vander Meulen .............................................. Regional Synod of Canada#
Gary Van Heukelom ................................................ Regional Synod of the Heartland#

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
Class of 2000
*John Chang
Steven Bouma-Prediger
*Petronella Verwijs

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Class of 2000
Mary Bos
*Anna Melissa James
*Gloria McCanna

WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES
Class of 2000
*Paul Walther ...................................................... Commission on Christian Unity#

BUILDING AND EXTENSION FUND
Class of 2000
*Harlan Bergman .................................................. Building and Extension Fund#
**Linda McLane .................................................. Building and Extension Fund#
**Stanley Perea .................................................. Building and Extension Fund#

BOARD OF TRUSTEES, CENTRAL COLLEGE
Class of 1999
Marilyn Klimstra

Class of 2001
Carl Boat

BOARD OF TRUSTEES, HOPE COLLEGE
Class of 2001
Douglas Edema
*Louis Lotz
William Waldorf

BOARD OF DIRECTORS, SOUTHERN NORMAL SCHOOL
Class of 2000
Robert Terwilliger

Prior to the vote by Synod on R-1, Audrey Den Herder, moderator of the Commission on Nominations, noted the vacancy on the Theological Education Agency Board of Trustees, Class of 2000. Audrey Den Herder requested Synod insert the name of D. Curtis Strechman. Synod then voted on R-1. ❖

R-1.
To elect the above-mentioned nominees to the respective General Synod agencies and commissions as listed. (ADOPTED)
Following the vote by Synod on R-1, the president noted two errors in the RCA Building and Extension Fund list of nominees, Class of 2000. The president informed Synod that the correct nominees for the RCA Building and Extension Fund, Class of 2000, were Linda McLane and Stanley Perea. By consensus, Synod agreed to insert the names of these nominees in the above list, RCA Building and Extension Fund, Class of 2000.

R-2.
To elect Arthur Vander Meulen moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 1997-98 term. (ADOPTED)
EDITORIAL REPORT

In accordance with the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 3, Part II, Article 3, Section 2, all proposed amendments to the BCO which have been approved shall be referred to the corresponding delegate from the Commission on Church Order in consultation with the general secretary for final wording and report back to the Synod.

Of the BCO amendments approved at this meeting, one required additional attention by Synod.

R-1.
To approve the following editorial change to R-4, p. 242 (addition is underlined):

To adopt the following revisions of the Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13, section 4a, for recommendation to the classes for approval... (ADOPTED)

Of the Constitution and Bylaws amendment approved at this meeting for the Theological Education Agency, the following editorial change was suggested.

R-2.
To approve the following editorial change to R-8, p. 312 (addition is underlined):

To adopt the following amendment to the Constitution and Bylaws for the Theological Education Agency, Article X, Section 1:

Article X
The Certification Committee

Sec. 1 a. The certification committee shall consist of seven persons elected by the Board of Trustees. Two shall be professors or associate professors, one of whom shall hold the Fourth Office, nominated by and from within the faculty of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Two shall be professors or associate professors, one of whom shall hold the Fourth Office, nominated by and from within the faculty of Western Theological Seminary. One shall be a professor or associate professor teaching at a non-Reformed Church in America seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Two shall be persons nominated by and from the Board of Trustees of the Theological Education Agency. All nominees shall be members of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

Reason: The editorial change of certification committee membership for the Theological Education Agency will then be consistent in language and correspond with the certification committee membership of professors or associate professors from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary.
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE

REFERRAL OF GENERAL SECRETARY PROPOSALS

P-1 (p. 49), P-6 (p. 55), and P-7 (p. 55) were referred to the Committee of Reference.

➢ In response to P-1 (p. 49), the Committee of Reference recommended:

R-1.
To request each classis to prepare by the 1999 General Synod a special “state of religion” report, as required by the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1, which reflects on its context for ministry and includes a statement of vision for its ministry and mission over the next five years. (ADOPTED)

➢ In response to P-6 (p. 55), the Committee of Reference recommended:

R-2.
To request the general secretary to communicate this statement of mission and vision to each RCA pastor, congregation, classis, regional synod, agency, institution, and affiliated body of the Reformed Church in America; and further,

to urgently request the above to prayerfully reflect on the statement of mission and vision and then to act on the statement faithfully according to their discernment of the leading of God’s Spirit. (ADOPTED)

➢ In response to P-7 (p. 55) the Committee of Reference recommended:

R-3.
To instruct the General Synod Council to audit all of its present programs and commitments in light of the statement of mission and vision; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to identify, manage, and prioritize the resources necessary to implement this vision; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to evaluate how the Reformed Church in America is implementing the statement of mission and vision, for report to the 1999 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

1998 GENERAL SYNOD OPERATIONAL BUDGET

The Committee of Reference reported the cost effect of one item added to the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget by the 1997 General Synod.

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<th>Item</th>
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<td>Task Force to Encourage Youth/Children to Become Future Missionary Pastors</td>
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<td>Basic Service Cost</td>
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(The above item was included in the 1998 General Synod Operational Budget adopted by the 1997 General Synod. See pp. 65-68).

**LEAVES OF ABSENCE**

All requests for leaves of absence were reviewed and found to be acceptable.

**RESOLUTIONS**

The Committee of Reference presented the following resolutions:

**R-4.**

WHEREAS the delegates and guests of General Synod have been graciously received by the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; and

WHEREAS the beautiful setting, hospitality, and meeting space have been conducive to the work, comfort, and productivity of the delegates;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its gratitude to Scott Peak, assistant director of university housing/residence life; Jan Balistrere, conference manager; Sheila Johnston, set-up and audiovisual supervisor; and the staff and student volunteers of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, for their hospitality in hosting the delegates of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

**R-5.**

WHEREAS the members of area churches within the Classis of Wisconsin provided transportation from and to the airport and opened their houses of worship to the delegates for Sunday worship; and

WHEREAS these kind Christian brothers and sisters hosted the delegates of General Synod with extreme grace and thoughtfulness;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere appreciation to the pastors and members of the churches of the Classis of Wisconsin. (ADOPTED)

**R-6.**

WHEREAS the choir of First Reformed Church of Oostburg, Wisconsin, presented the cantata “From Sea to Shining Sea” wonderfully and musically for the enjoyment and edification of the delegates, and

WHEREAS these sisters and brothers then hosted a magnificent luncheon for the delegates;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses
its sincere thanks to First Reformed Church of Oostburg, Wisconsin, and its pastor, the Rev. Raymond Tilstra, and congratulates the congregation on its upcoming one hundred fiftieth anniversary of ministry. (ADOPTED)

R-7.
WHEREAS New Life Community Church of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, graciously hosted the General Synod for its theme program and served a delicious dinner and refreshments to the delegates;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere thanks to New Life Community Church of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and its pastor, the Rev. Dale Matthews, and congratulates the congregation on its upcoming one hundred fiftieth anniversary of ministry. (ADOPTED)

R-8.
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez presented thoughtful and provocative keynote addresses challenging the delegates to understand, acknowledge, accept, and proclaim what we read in the Bible;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere gratitude to God for sending this gifted historian and theologian to our midst. (ADOPTED)

R-9.
WHEREAS the members of the Church of the Living Christ in Fremont, Michigan, loaned their beautiful banner, created by Barbara Oosting, for the glory of God and to aid in energizing the worship and work space of the delegates;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, wishes to thank Barbara Oosting and the members of the Church of the Living Christ for their most generous act of kindness. (ADOPTED)

R-10.
WHEREAS the Rev. Phyllis Palsma and the Rev. Martin Vis provided leadership for a most joyous and creative series of worship services for a wonderful, yet “odd” delegation;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its heartfelt gratitude to God for the gifts of this Sister and Brother. (ADOPTED)

R-11.
WHEREAS the Kenwood United Methodist Church welcomed the delegates and guests of General Synod to its house of worship for daily worship services;
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its gratitude to the Rev. Dr. Lance Herrick and Kenwood United Methodist Church. (ADOPTED)

R-12.
WHEREAS the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, has cast a vision for the future of the denomination with clarity and enthusiasm;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere appreciation and thanks to its general secretary and all those who assisted him in the development of this vision. (ADOPTED)

R-13.
WHEREAS the Rev. Anthony Vis presided with strong eloquence and thoughtful discernment during his tenure as president of General Synod, focusing the church on proclaiming and living out the good news story, and revisioning and refocusing the church toward the revitalization of both the local church and our individual faith in the ever-changing mission field of tomorrow;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its heartfelt thanks to Almighty God for the dedicated and inspired service of the Rev. Anthony Vis. (ADOPTED)

R-14.
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen, vice-president of General Synod, has faithfully discharged his duties during the course of this past year;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its gratitude to the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen and pledges to him its prayers and commitment during his term as president of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

R-15.
WHEREAS the Rev. Frederick (Fritz) Kruithof has been elected vice-president of the General Synod;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere congratulations and commends the Rev. Frederick Kruithof to the care of the Sustainer. (ADOPTED)
R-16. WHEREAS the moderators and vice-moderators of the various advisory committees, staff members, and resource persons facilitated the work of the advisory committees and the General Synod with open minds and open hearts, to the end that all things were done decently and in good order;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its heartfelt thanks for their dedicated service. (ADOPTED)

R-17. WHEREAS the many elder delegates offered their tireless energies and careful consideration to the work and deliberations of the General Synod, and

WHEREAS many of them are doing so at the cost of sacrificing personal vacation time;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, enthusiastically expresses its thanksgiving to Almighty God for the commitment and love of its elder delegates for the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

R-18. WHEREAS Ken and Beth Van Prooyen have generously and graciously given of their vacation time to serve the General Synod as sound technicians for the past twenty-three years;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its heartfelt gratitude to Ken and Beth Van Prooyen. (ADOPTED)

R-19. WHEREAS the staff of the Reformed Church in America, as well as the regional synod and classis staff who were present at the 1997 General Synod, have given of themselves tirelessly with enthusiasm, dedication, and openness;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its affirmation of the work performed by these staff persons and offers its prayers for God's blessings upon each and every member of the staff and their families. (ADOPTED)

R-20. WHEREAS Lucas De Koster has served the General Synod as its parliamentarian with competence and patience;
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, thanks Lucas De Koster for his dedicated contribution to the work of the Synod. (ADOPTED)

R-21.
WHEREAS Chaplain (Lt. Cmdr.) Alan Baker offered pastoral counsel and care to the delegates by serving as the General Synod chaplain;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, wishes to express its appreciation to the Rev. Alan Baker. (ADOPTED)

R-22.
WHEREAS Bible study leaders Donald Hammond, Jayne Yonkman, and the Rev. Lisa Tice challenged us to engage the Bible in ways that were both old and new, but always rewarding and stimulating;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the twentieth day of June, 1997, thanks Donald Hammond, Jayne Yonkman, and the Rev. Lisa Tice for helping us to encounter God in the Scriptures. (ADOPTED)

R-23.
WHEREAS the Rev. Amy Van Gunst, the Rev. Timothy Mulder, and Linda Strouf, pianist, coordinated the daily worship services, and members of the choir offered their gifts and abilities in enabling us to lift our voices in praise to our God;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the twentieth day of June, 1997, wishes to thank the Rev. Amy Van Gunst, the Rev. Timothy Mulder, Linda Strouf, and members of the choir. (ADOPTED)

R-24.
WHEREAS Barbara Boss, the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell, the Rev. Stephanie Doeschot, Sue Ellis (recorder), Madeline Fuentez, Donald Hammond, the Rev. Jeffrey Japinga, Martha Lankheet, Deborah Swanson, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Van Eck, Colleen Wiessner, and Barbara Wright, members of the General Synod Theme Committee, have creatively and energetically developed a program that included Bible studies, workshops, a keynote speaker, and a video;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-first General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the twentieth day of June, 1997, expresses its sincere thanks to Barbara Boss, the Rev. Kenneth Bradsell, the Rev. Stephanie Doeschot, Sue Ellis (recorder), Madeline Fuentez, Donald Hammond, the Rev. Jeffrey Japinga, Martha Lankheet, Deborah Swanson, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Van Eck, Colleen Wiessner, and Barbara Wright for their remarkable contribution. (ADOPTED)
R-25.
To express its enthusiastic appreciation for the members of the various General Synod commissions, councils, and agencies who are completing their terms of service this year, having served the Lord and the church faithfully in their respective capacities. (ADOPTED)

The following persons have completed their service this year:

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<tr>
<th>General Synod Council</th>
<th>Commission on Nominations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Louis Benes</td>
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<td>Stephen Hammel</td>
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<td>I. John Hesselink</td>
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<td>Toni Macon</td>
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<td>John Chang</td>
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<td>Dorothy Hostetter</td>
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<td>Dale Assink</td>
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<td>Sybrand Vander Dussen</td>
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<td>Robert Zwier</td>
<td>Bette Leestma</td>
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<td>Susan Vogel-Vanderson</td>
<td>Thurman Cook</td>
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| Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries Executive Committee | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|______________|
| Amy Kuo                                                               | Antonio Lopez |
| Dean Kusakabe                                                         | Irving Rivera |
| Theodore Lee                                                          | Mirta Rivera  |
| Edward Lu                                                             |               |
| Wai Tan                                                               |               |
ELECTION OF OFFICERS

The Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen, associate professor of theology of mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, was elected president. The Rev. Frederick R. Kruijthof, pastor of the Second Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was elected vice-president.

Upon his election as president of General Synod, the Rev. Dr. Charles Van Engen addressed the Synod.

ADDRESS BY THE REV. DR. CHARLES VAN ENGEN

INTRODUCTION

Mr. President; Mr. General Secretary; delegates to the 191st General Synod; my wife, Jean; sisters and brothers in Christ:

Haartelijk dank u dat u mij hebt gekozen al voorzitter van de Synode voor de jaar negentien acht en negentig.

Les agradezco muchisimo la confianza puesta en mi en haberme elegido presidente del Sinodo General para 1998.

It is a deeply humbling thing to be elected your president for the next year. I am unworthy and undeserving of such an honor. Yet I will seek to do all in my power, as our gracious and loving Lord Jesus gives me grace, to faithfully discharge the duties you have assigned to me.

The first General Synod I ever attended was at Buckhill Falls, Pennsylvania, in the mid-1950s. My parents were RCA missionaries in Chiapas, Mexico, serving the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. They were in the U.S. for a furlough of speaking and retooling. We drove our 1948 Ford from southern Mexico to Buckhill Falls to attend General Synod.

There are two things I remember about that General Synod. I remember a very large room filled with people singing. I can almost hear the lusty, four-part harmony of the delegates singing the great hymns of the church for what seemed like a very long time. I love that singing! All I had known up until then was the very slow, slow Presbyterian hymns sung in Spanish in our little church in Mexico.

The second thing I remember was a small putting green out in front of the very large main building. My older brother and sister and I would check out the putters and golf balls and putt around on that green by the hour. Just a few days ago, for our wedding anniversary and Father’s Day, my wife gave me a new set of irons. And it brought back memories of my first introduction to golf—at a General Synod of the Reformed Church in America!

"THINK GLOBALLY—ACT LOCALLY."

Buckhill Falls illustrates for me what the RCA’s life and mission involves as we move toward the twenty-first century. One way I’m learning to say it is by using a phrase you have probably heard in other contexts: "Think Globally—Act Locally."

Briefly, let me mention four aspects about the RCA that are both global and local, flowing from those memories of Buckhill Falls.
1. First, the RCA is a global network of local relationships bridging multiple cultures. The RCA is an amazing network of shared histories, interwoven life-stories, and family and friend relationships. My great-grandfather Van Engen, a Dutch immigrant, was clerk of consistory at the time of the founding of the Pella Reformed Church in Pella, Nebraska—near Lincoln. My mother is Ruth Muyskens from Alton, Iowa. My mother’s oldest brother, John Muyskens, was an RCA missionary in India. Two of her brothers were RCA pastors. In fact, quite a few of my Muyskens cousins seem to feel it is their calling to keep an eye on me!

This matter of interwoven multicultural relationships derives from the fact that we are an immigrant church, an ethnic church that has struggled—and continues to struggle—with being (using Martin Marty’s term) “pilgrims in their own land.” This ethnic, immigrant quality means we need to reaffirm and possibly relearn traditional Dutch hospitality. Everyone is welcome to come in for ein kopje koffie. Our ethnic, immigrant history should serve as one of our greatest strengths. The entire globe is at our doorstep or down the street. As pilgrims in our own land, we should be able to encourage, empower, and be enriched by the struggle of churches and Christians of many cultures who are giving us the opportunity to walk with them in their pilgrimage in their own land in North America.

So you just elected a Mexican-American immigrant of Dutch descent! I am a kind of inside-outsider. I grew up as a double-minority in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. I was one of those hated “gringos” and despised Protestants. I made profession of faith in a small Mexican Presbyterian church. I had to recite the whole Westminster Shorter Catechism in order to be accepted for membership. So I thank you for making me feel a part of you.

As we learn to think globally and act locally, especially in the multicultural reality in which we live, I believe we will find that loving, affirming and empowering relationships are as essential now (or may be more so) as they were in the past.

2. Secondly, Buckhill Falls helped me understand that the RCA is a global fellowship of local churches. During more than three centuries, the RCA has often been at the forefront of North American Protestant involvement in ministry and mission around the world.

A few examples:

- 1798—Two hundred years ago next year, the Rev. Robert McDowell was sent by the Classis of Albany as a missionary to Canada to work among Tories who had fled the colonies during the Revolutionary War. He started fourteen churches in Ontario, organizing three in 1798 which numbered more than 400 families of Dutch, German, and English descent. This is one of the earliest recorded instances of global, international mission-sending from North America—and notice that it was a classis that made it happen. Unfortunately, because the RCA did not send more ministers to help him, McDowell joined the Presbyterian Church in 1819, taking eleven of the new churches with him. Several remain part of the Presbyterian Church in Canada today.

- 1847—One hundred fifty years ago, First Reformed Church of Milwaukee was organized.


- 1847—Mrs. Elihu Doty began the Amoy Girls School in China.
1857—Forty years ago, Jeremiah Calvin Lanphier, a merchant distinguished for his singing voice and gift of prayer, and a member of Old North Reformed Church in New York City, “began a program of visitation to area families (mostly recent immigrants) to bring them to church and to recruit children for the Sabbath school. After a period of visitation, he would return to the church to pray. He began to conduct a weekly prayer meeting during the noon hour. This type of meeting became front-page news” (Church Herald, March 1993, p. 15) and “spread all over the city, the country, and then to Europe” (Arie R. Brouwer, Reformed Church Roots, p. 31). The Fulton Street prayer meetings continued until 1960 (Church Herald, March 1993, p. 15; Brouwer, pp. 30-31). These prayer meetings sparked the great revivals in North America and Europe at the end of the 1850s.

1897—One hundred years ago, the Women’s Board of Domestic Missions was established (Church Herald, March 1993, p. 17). The Women’s Board of Domestic Missions was instrumental in much of the RCA’s early church extension and mission endeavors westward; began the ministry among Native Americans; started the ministries in Appalachia; ministered among Japanese, Italian and Hungarian immigrants in New York and New Jersey (Brouwer, pp. 158-161); and also began the work in Chiapas, sending John and Mabel Kempers there in 1925, with my parents following in 1943.

1947—Fifty years ago this year the Church of South India was formed, with strong support and involvement on the part of the RCA and RCA missionaries (Church Herald, March 1993, p. 19).

These are but a few examples of the incredibly rich heritage that is ours. Can we be as faithful to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for our generation as they were for theirs?

3. Buckhill Falls introduced me to local spirituality for global mission. My goodness, can we sing when we gather for our General Synods! As good as Buckhill Falls! And Wisconsin churches can sing! How about that musical Sunday morning in Oostburg! This past Thursday and Friday I had the joy of sitting in on the chaplain’s conference that has been held before General Synod for twenty years now. It was a delightful time—spiritually refreshing, emotionally healing, relationally wonderful. And I tell you, those chaplains can sing! We have been both traditional and innovative about our forms of worship because we are “Reformed” and semper reformanda—always reforming. I mean, look, in 1727—two hundred seventy years ago, the organ was first used in Dutch services in the U.S., amid great controversy! (Brouwer, p. 84).

We need to draw vision and strength from a firm grounding in our traditional Reformed understanding of the gospel, while also seeking new, innovative, creative, joyful ways to experience God’s grace. And that is where the putting green comes in.

Just think, I got my first golfing lesson at General Synod! I love golf not so much for the sport, but for the quietness, the peacefulness, the intimacy of the conversations during a round of golf. That putting green at Buckhill Falls speaks to me of consistory and classis retreats—times of reflection and prayer, seeking a deepening spiritual formation for mission.

I am excited about our mission/vision statement! It gives us an opportunity to find ways in which all the structures of the church can mobilize congregations and their members for ministry and mission in the world. We are a church that has sought to be sensitive to people in need, and committed to ministering to those around us.
For spiritual renewal, church revitalization, and congregational mission to happen, a transformation must take place in the lives of the members of our churches and in the midst of our congregations and classes. As Tony Vis said in his presidential report, “If the world is to recognize the gospel we proclaim as authentically of Jesus, then the world must see self-giving, forgiving, and healing love permeating all arenas of our life together in the RCA.”

4. Fourth, Buckhill Falls was a foretaste of the way our cities today are a local microcosm of global urbanization. To get to Buckhill Falls, my parents traveled through Mexico City, Dallas, Lincoln, Nebraska, Sioux City, Iowa, Chicago, and New York City. CITIES. CITIES. CITIES! Much of the RCA’s history is intertwined in the mutual interdependence of country, town, and city in Canada and the U.S. We need to foster the revitalization and growth of rural and country churches—and we need to call all of us to mission in our cities.

Our world has changed. New York/New Jersey is now one metropolex, as are greater Chicago, (and we are in some ways on the outskirts of that here in Milwaukee), Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles, Denver, Omaha, Sioux Falls, the Grand Rapids/Grand Haven/Muskegon/Holland/Kalamazoo urban complex, need I go on? As our general secretary said at the April 1997 City Ministries Conference in Hoboken, New Jersey, “God is calling us to turn our hearts and our eyes to the city, where so many are drawn and need so deeply the salt and light and love of God’s people...So we (are called to) live out that mission statement, ‘a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing. Following Christ in mission in a lost and broken world that is so loved, so loved by God.”

Eldin Villafane has said, “As we enter the twenty-first century, there is no greater need for (Christians) in the cities than to articulate in both word and deed a social spirituality. The twin phenomena of urbanization and globalization, which define the ethos of our great cities, demand no more and no less than an authentically biblical spirituality (in the city)” (Church Herald, May 1997, p. 23).

CONCLUSION

Buckhill Falls! The RCA looks to me like a global-local network of multicultural relationships; a fellowship of local churches circling the globe; a church that experiences spiritual renewal for the sake of evangelizing the world; a church that meets the globe in the cities of North America.

I welcome your prayers! To me, prayer is not some kind of pious optional spiritual activity. If Christ is the head of the church and if the Holy Spirit constitutes and mobilizes the church, then prayer is absolutely essential for the church to move forward and be led in mission. I would like to encourage us this year to THINK GLOBALLY AND ACT LOCALLY.

Pray for me that I would walk closer to Jesus Christ than ever before, together with Jean and my family. A surprising number of people are already praying for me and for the Reformed Church in America. I invite you to join us in the journey of prayer. If you are willing to join us in praying for Jean and me and our family, and for the RCA, for a minimum of a half hour per week during this coming year, please give me a slip of paper with your name and address on it. I will then add your name to my mailing list of a prayer network, and you will receive a newsletter from me every few weeks.

I look on the presidency of General Synod as a wonderful time for me to learn. I want to learn how our churches, classes, and regional synods are living out our shared faith in the world we face together. I want to learn how you see the incredibly rapid changes that are facing...
your societies and church. I want to find out how we can network together and help each other to become more fully, in the words of the "Statement of Mission and Vision," "congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world."

Let's together find out how our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit, wants us TO THINK GLOBALLY AND ACT LOCALLY. <

III. CLOSE OF GENERAL SYNOD

CLOSE AND ADJOURNMENT

President Anthony Vis presented president-elect Charles Van Engen with the traditional bell and gavel and the presidential cross.

The 1996-97 General Synod bell of the president and the 1997-98 General Synod bell of the vice president were chimed simultaneously eight times for RCA churches that closed during the past year. Following a time of prayer, Synod sang the doxology.

The 191st General Synod concluded its business and adjourned at 12:30 p.m. central time on Friday, June 20, 1997, to meet in Holland, Michigan, June 5-10, 1998.

Anthony D. Vis, President
Charles Van Engen, Vice-President
Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary