

## REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

### Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

#### INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) met twice since the last session of the General Synod: October 25-26, 1999, as guests of the Regional Synod of Mid-America in Chicago, Illinois; and February 28-29, 2000, as guests of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE). The commission met at GRACE because it afforded the opportunity to meet with the Ecumenical Council of the Christian Reformed Church at Calvin College, with the Rev. Richard L. van Houten, general secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, with the Rev. Daniel Meeter regarding the Belhar Confession, and to attend (as guests of GRACE) the ecumenical breakfast and lecture by the Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, professor of theology and ecumenical studies at Lexington Theological Seminary (Disciples of Christ).

The *Constitution* of the RCA gives responsibility for ecumenical relations to the General Synod (*Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). To be faithful to the ecumenical calling, General Synod needs a consultative body to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives as given by the church through General Synod.

Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp.201-202) and adoption in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp 101-02) by action of the General Synod, CCU has served General Synod by coordinating the whole range of ecumenical involvements at all levels throughout the RCA. CCU advises 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 confessions and practice.

"An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197) guides the work of CCU. By means of its ongoing ecumenical commitments both at home and abroad CCU keeps before the RCA the essential questions regarding the nature of Christian unity and suggests ways of giving visible expression to the unity all believers have in Jesus Christ. Conversely, through referrals, General Synod presents Christian unity matters to CCU for study and implementation and possible recommendations to General Synod.

To help summarize the scope of the ecumenical practice of the RCA, there are three groupings that give visible expression to the RCA ecumenism. These are general groupings, and they by no means exhaust the scope of the ecumenical life of the RCA.

#### **Programmatic Ecumenism**

Programmatic ecumenism refers to cooperative endeavors with other communions to create programs of ministry and mission. It may happen formally on the denominational level or more informally at the grassroots. It is usually prompted by a mutual desire to accomplish a specific ministry or mission goal. Examples (to cite just a few) of this visible expression of ecumenical activity are: cooperative curricula development, disaster relief response, vacation church schools, food distribution programs, youth events, and joint services of worship. On the denominational level, the RCA is currently involved in more than cooperative world mission partnerships and more than "ecumenical involvements."

### **Conciliar Ecumenism**

The various councils of churches (world, national, regional, state, and local) are expressions of this form of ecumenism. As communities of communions, the councils facilitate the collaboration of denominations in various programs of service and witness, recognizing and accepting the distinctive contributions of each corporate expression of the church catholic.

The RCA holds memberships in the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC), the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC). In addition, one regional synod and several congregations hold membership in the National Association of Evangelicals (NEA).

Through conciliar fellowships, Christian traditions meet and work together with the purpose of representing the unity of the body of Christ as primary. In and through the practice of ecumenism, unity is demonstrated to a fragmented society while a greater understanding is gained for each other's unique contribution to the whole body of Christ. Lively and passionate discussions demonstrate the depth of conviction that the various communion members bring to the table while remaining committed to unity and the principle of acting together with others in all matters except those in which differences of conviction compel communion members to act separately.

### **Conversational/Dialogue Ecumenism**

Conversations and dialogue are expressions of ecumenical practice that take place between churches at the denominational level. These may be either "bilateral" (one to one), such as is taking place between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church, or "multilateral" (more than two) such as took place between the *Formula of Agreement* partners. Through WARC the RCA is represented in bilateral dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church. Dialogues seek to give faithful expression to what churches believe, identifying areas where there is commonality as well as areas that need further exploration because of historic differences of theology and practice. The goal is always to recognize and not to homogenize. The desired outcome is to discover whether or not a level of consensus can be reached that recognized sufficient agreement as a basis for substantial fellowship while admitting that continuing differences exist as a basis for ongoing mutual theological work.

### **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. CCU 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**

In 1993 CCU initiated an effort to establish an RCA network of ecumenism throughout the

denomination. The purpose for the network was to help CCU disseminate information to the classes and to receive information concerning ecumenism at the local level from the classes and congregations. The network is comprised of one individual from each classis who serves as an “ecumenical liaison” between CCU and the classis. Each classis ecumenical liaison is contacted by a member of CCU following each meeting of CCU and each mailing from the office of the associate for ecumenical relations. CCU has asked each classis to provide regular agenda time at stated meetings for a report from the liaison concerning updates on ecumenical matters and to receive the feedback from the member churches of the classes for referral to CCU.

### **RCA ECUMENICAL APPOINTEES**

In 1989 CCU established a means of reporting and accountability for all ecumenical appointees representing the RCA in the ecumenical arena. A reporting form was developed which is still in use which affords a unified reporting system to CCU. The reports are reviewed by CCU at each of its meetings, which allows CCU to keep abreast of events in ecumenism and changes in programs, activities, and personnel. This year every effort is being made to have CCU members be the ecumenical appointees to other denomination’s synods, conferences, and ecumenical relations boards.

### **GENERAL SYNOD OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF KOREA**

Upon invitation from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK), the RCA sent a delegation of four persons to the September 14-22, 1999, General Synod meeting of the PCK.

Members of the delegation were:

- The Rev. Bruce Menning, director of Mission Services.
- Ella Campbell, secretary for the Council of Pacific and Asian Ministries.
- The Rev. John Jong-Pyo Lee, coordinator for mission stewardship and supervisor of RCA mission programs in East Asia and the Pacific.
- The Rev. Richard Welscott, director of Evangelism and Church Development Services.

Reflections by the Delegation:

Seoul, Korea, a place of millions—modern and crowded—seems like any large metropolis in the world. At times, driving through it, it feels like Los Angeles Koreatown. But there is a difference—it is an Asian society where being an Asian one does not stand out from the rest of the crowd. Here the tall Caucasians seem to stand out. But during the week we found that people did not gawk at the Caucasian members of the delegation.

We were clearly sightseers bent on connecting with the Christian Church in Seoul. We were taken to the mission houses, which most people would not ordinarily see. Also we went to the memorials of the martyrs and to houses of worship. We saw a different side of Korea, and in that way we were not typical tourists.

As we drove in at night from the airport to downtown Seoul, we could see countless red crosses in the skyscape. We were told that all the churches had red crosses that were illuminated at night. Korea is like the U.S. in the 1950s; people seem to be flocking to the churches, and growth happens with seemingly little effort. The truly large churches with membership in the thousands are the ones that are actively working at growing.

The visit to the memorial of the martyrs was poignant. After reading about the massacres,

one realizes that the fervor of the Korean Christians seems to be nurtured in the blood of the martyrs. Those who lived that part of Korean history will carry the story with them and will be strengthened in times of adversity. One wonders how the church will fare when the younger generation takes over. By a quick scanning of the street scene down College Boulevard, one would think the setting was Flushing, Queens, New York. MTV dictates the dress code for the teenagers. How different their life seems from that of their parents and grandparents!

Koreans are trying to recover and maintain their identity as Koreans. After too many years of oppression from the Chinese and Japanese, they want to be Korean. The folk village and the museum are a good way to keep the heritage before the young people. There were school children on class excursion trips at both places.

There appears to be an openness on the part of the PCK to explore ways in which the RCA can be joined in partnership. They seem particularly interested in learning about mission partnerships. Presently local congregations have been engaged in missions. The denomination has not had much control or involvement, and accountability was a concern for the denominational staff. It is an area where we have had a long history, and we can share our learnings with them.

In the area of evangelism, there has been amazing growth in Korean churches. I now see that part of the growth is due to the times (like the '50s were for U.S. churches) but also because of some principles valued in ministry. Relational evangelism has enabled the churches to make contacts to people who are hungry for the good news.

Being in another country is always a good experience. This was no exception. As the weeks past, we continued to reflect and gain more insights from the Korean experience. It was a very valuable trip and will help as we continue to work with Koreans here in the U.S. Learning about the character and emotions of the Korean people, we can see how they are different from the Chinese and Japanese. Asians are not all alike. This experience opened the window of awareness a little wider.

## THE WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) maintains a number of dialogues with other historic communions and world confessional bodies. Currently the RCA is involved through WARC in two bilateral dialogues with the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

### Background

In 1997 The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*:

The present Joint Declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations. The word "church" is used in this declaration to reflect the self-understandings of the participating churches, without intending to resolve all the ecclesiological issues related to this term (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of*

*Justification*, Preamble, #5).

The *Official Common Statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church* states:

1. On the basis of the agreements reached in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JD) the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church declare together: “The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutheran and Catholics” (JD 40). On the basis of this consensus the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church declare together, “The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confession do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration”(JD 41).

In a World Council of Churches press release of February 2, 2000, it was stated:

Bishop Walter Kasper, the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, visited the WCC’s Geneva headquarters on February 1-2, 2000. Bishop Kasper said of his visit, “The ecumenical movement is one of the bright spots of the past century.” Kasper mentioned justification as (one of the) ecumenical challenge(s) for the future. This was a fundamental question not only for Lutherans, but for the Reformation churches. It would now be a case of examining how far the differentiated consensus worked out with the Lutherans could be extended to other Reformation churches and so broaden the basis of consensus.

#### **R-12**

**To instruct the general secretary to petition the Executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to give consideration to becoming cosigners on the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and that the document be made available to the church for study; and further,**

**to direct the Commission on Christian Unity to seek out ways by which bilateral or multilateral dialogue(s) could take place with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Secretary of the (the Vatican’s) Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for the purpose determining how the RCA can become a co-signatory of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.**

Reasons:

1. The RCA is currently in conversation with the Roman Catholic Church through World Alliance of Reformed Churches.
2. Since the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is one of the *Formula of Agreement* partners and is a member of the Lutheran World Federation, CCU believes that becoming one of the signatories of the declaration would strengthen the RCA’s ecumenical ties with the ELCA.
3. Doing so would support the “Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” which states (Ecumenical Mandate III, A,1):

Christian unity is central to our faith, and so these goals are put forward for review

by the General Synod.

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

kThe advisory committee recommended a substitute motion for R-12.

**R-12 (substitute)**

**To instruct the general secretary to petition the Executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to initiate a study on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification from a Reformed perspective; and further,**

**to direct the Commission on Christian Unity to seek out ways by which bilateral or multilateral dialogue(s) could take place with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Secretary of the (Vatican's) Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for the purpose of studying the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and to report the progress to General Synod 2001. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: References to cosigning the joint declaration on the *Doctrine of Justification* appear to predetermine the outcome of a lengthy process of ecumenical dialogue.l

**ORDINATION OF HOMOSEXUALS AND MEMBERSHIP IN ECUMENICAL COUNCILS**

Background

At the 1997 meeting of General Synod the Commission on Christian Unity was directed to respond to the concerns of the Regional Synod of Canada, expressed as follows in Overture 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 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 (*MGS 1997*, p. 228).

In response to this overture synod adopted 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 (*MGS 1997*, p. 228).

CCU took up this recommendation in 1998 and again in the spring of 1999 but was unable to complete the assignment prior to the synod meeting of that year. At the 1999 session of General Synod CCU was instructed to bring this report in 2000 (*MGS 1999*, R-37, p. 185). CCU presents the following for synod's information and consideration.

## ECUMENICAL COUNCILS' POLICIES

CCU sent correspondence to each of the four ecumenical bodies in which the RCA holds membership, requesting information on what their respective positions are toward member communions who sanction the ordination of homosexual persons.

### National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

The newly elected general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC), the Rev. Robert Edgar, expressed his positive regard that the RCA is studying the issue of the ordination of practicing homosexuals within the context of the moral dimensions of human sexuality. In terms of NCC's stance on this question he wrote, "The NCC is a 'communion of communions.' As such, [NCC members] respect each other's polity and internal struggles while we seek unity. The National Council of Churches does not take an independent position on this matter. We do encourage dialogue among communions with differing views and policies. The NCC struggles with the same concerns and issues facing member communions. This is part of our shared commitment to one another."

### The World Council of Churches

Similarly to the NCC, the World Council of Churches "has no position on this question." A letter from the office of the general secretary went on to say, "We are aware that some of our member churches are studying this matter closely, and some of them may decide to sanction such ordination while others will finally refuse to do so. In either case, there is nothing in the *Constitution and Rules* of the WCC on this question which would affect the membership status of these churches at this time." The WCC, from the Harare Assembly, has been mandated to undertake "a study of human sexuality in all its diversity, to be made available to the member churches."

### World Alliance of Reformed Churches

Dr. Milan Opocensky, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), on the question of sexual orientation wrote, "WARC is at the beginning of discussion on this matter. I doubt WARC would adopt a position by which we would measure and judge member churches. It is an issue which varies from one culture to another culture. It needs to be discussed in a particular national or regional context."

### Canadian Council of Churches

Following suit with the other councils, the Canadian Council of Churches has no official position on the question of ordaining practicing homosexuals. As Janet Somerville, general secretary expressed it, "the question has never officially arrived on our agenda. No member church has referred the question to the Governing Board, on which all member churches are represented. Since no church has chosen to raise the question for official discussion in the 'forum of churches' which this council is, it has not been placed on the agenda either of our Commission for Faith and Witness, nor of our Commission for Justice and Peace."

### Membership Criteria in the Ecumenical Councils

The Preamble to the NCC *Constitution* expresses its membership criteria as such:

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. is a community of communions which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess

Jesus Christ, the incarnate word of God, as Savior and Lord. The communions covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church. Relying upon the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the Council brings these communions into common mission, serving in all creation to the glory of God.

The other ecumenical councils, as referenced above, have similar statements regarding their criteria for membership. Common to them all is a confession of adherence to Jesus Christ as Lord.

#### Response of the Commission on Christian Unity

The Commission on Christian Unity agrees that a common confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is the tie that binds the Reformed Church together with other Christian communions. Because this confession—not the RCA’s distinctive beliefs—is central to ecumenical relationships, CCU receives the policy statements (expressed above) as instructive for our life and work as a denomination. Collectively these four statements, on the matter of homosexuality, mirror the commitment of CCU: to live out an ecumenical vision that aspires to maintain unity in Christ in the midst of diversity.

Furthermore, CCU is guided by the RCA’s General Synod on this matter. In 1999 General Synod said, “The Reformed Church should avoid the precedent of severing ecumenical ties with other Christian denominations over differences regarding interpretation of Scripture on social and ethical matters” (*MGS 1999*, R-38, p. 186). CCU is also guided by “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America” on this matter. Enumerating various operating guidelines for ecumenical practice, the “Ecumenical Mandate” prescribes this important principal: “Practice humility in judging and admonishing others. Respect with charity what another communion or denomination says about itself in the expectation that our relationship with others will be mutually enriching” (page 20 # 6).

CCU is aware of how painfully divisive the issue of homosexuality is within society at large, the church catholic, and within the RCA. However, CCU does not believe that breaking fellowship over this matter will yield a situation that honors Christ. Nor will it settle the matter for the RCA, which has its own internal debate (now in moratorium) on the issue.

#### HUMAN SEXUALITY

To address R-17, 1997 (and R-37, 1999) more specifically, CCU believes that a study of the “moral dimensions of human sexuality” is beyond the scope of CCU’s life and work. CCU respectfully commends such studies to either the Commission on Theology or the Commission on Christian Action. Or perhaps, the RCA could name a task force to undertake a major study on the moral dimensions of human sexuality for the benefit of the denomination and the whole church. CCU believes that such a study could best be done in partnership with other communions with similar views as the RCA, such as that now being undertaken by the World Council of Churches.

CCU continues to urge the Reformed Church in America to look at alternatives to severing ties with sister communions over differences in how Scripture is interpreted. CCU believes that working together in mission with those whom we have sharp differences is a sign of the power of the gospel in a broken world for which Christ died.

#### MEMBERSHIP IN THE WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

At the 1998 session of General Synod CCU was directed “to ask the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) to clarify what membership in WARC means beyond mere recognition of Reformed heritage and Presbyterian church order; and further to ask WARC to state under which circumstances members of WARC might lose their membership” (*MGS 1998*, R-10, p. 257).

In a letter from the Rev. Dr. Milan Opocensky, general secretary of WARC, the following was stated about membership in WARC:

A WARC member church does agree with the principles expressed in the first paragraphs of the WARC Constitution . . . the church is in the Reformed (Presbyterian or Congregationalist) tradition and accepts one or several classic confessions of faith (Belgic, Helvetic, Westminster, Heidelberg Catechism). When a church asks for membership we send a letter describing the features of church life, the benefits and responsibilities of membership. The Executive Committee establishes a Membership Committee which examines each application for membership and makes recommendations to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee then takes the final decision. The member churches in the country concerned are approached and asked whether they know the new church and whether they are ready to recommend the application for membership.

On the question concerning revocation of a church's standing within WARC, Opocensky indicated that membership in WARC is not to be taken lightly, but it is unlikely that WARC would adopt a position by which a member church would be judged according to a particular stance it has taken on an issue (such as homosexuality).

### **CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH RELATIONS**

In 1995 an overture from the Classis of North Grand Rapids, to effect full programmatic and organizational union with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the RCA by June 2000 (*MGS 1995, p. 187*), resulted in the following recommendation from the General Synod (*MGS 1995, R-5, p. 189*):

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 Christian Reformed Church in North America and its Inter-Church Relations Committee; 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.

In its continuing response to R-5, CCU met with the Inter-Church Relations Committee of the CRC at it February 28-29, 2000, meeting. The committee expressed strong interest in working with CCU. There was mutual agreement regarding the advantages of joint theological study in several areas, including the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa's Belhar Confession and the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Declaration of Justification. The CCU will continue its discussion on these matters and will work toward inviting the CRC to join these studies/discussions.

There was mutual agreement and intention that the CCU and the ICRC meet as often as once a year (possibly in the fall) in concurrent sessions that would allow for continuing joint discussions and mutual projects.

### **THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Historically, CCU has been a participant in the long-term relationship the RCA has enjoyed with the members of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. The 1995 General Synod voted (*MGS 1995, R-1, p. 405*):

To request the Commission on Christian Unity to consult with the appropriate offices

of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), with the input of the African-American Council, to develop a plan for correspondence and continuing relationships between the respective assemblies and congregations of the RCA and the URCSA.

At the General Synod of 1996, CCU reported (*MGS 1996*, p. 180):

In light of R-1 and in concurrence with similar actions and recommendations adopted in Mission Services, a delegation of RCA representatives traveled to South Africa, February 26, 1996-March 6, 1996 to meet with URCSA representatives.

The *Minutes of General Synod* from 1996 state (*MGS 1996*, p.182):

If one were to ask each member of the RCA delegation to give a summary of its task, there would be concurrence on the following:

2. The relationship of the RCA and the URCSA must be in parity. There must be a posture of equality and openness to sharing and learning from each other, both in support of each other when in agreement and in support of each other through critical dialogue.

On March 7, 1998, an URCSA delegation arrived in the United States for meetings with various RCA groups, which included the faculty of New Brunswick and Western Theological Seminaries, RCA program staff, GSC directors, and the general secretary. The delegation worshiped with RCA African-American congregations and had conversations with representatives from the Christian Reformed Church.

As a result of the conversations, the following points of agreement were reached:

1. Co-drafting of a basic document establishing the principles of the joint relationship between the URCSA and the RCA.
2. The mutual sharing of information about the government and programmatic structures of the URCSA and the RCA, along with areas of staff responsibilities for each denomination.
3. Connections between the component parts of the RCA and the URCSA will be explored, especially in the following areas: urban ministries, theological exchange, stewardship, Christian education, the Children and Worship program, and youth exchange programs.
4. The RCA will continue to monitor the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) regarding the "Proposed Joint Resolution" between the WARC and the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK, the white Dutch Reformed Church), in light of the failed attempt toward church union between the URCSA and the NGK.
5. Discussion and possible cooperation focusing on the issues of religion in public life, a major initiative of URCSA.
6. Continued cooperation in the development and implementation of the partnership on diaconal work initiated by Mission Services, Christ Memorial Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, and offices within the Christian Reformed Church.

### **The Belhar Confession**

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982, later became one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the

new URCSA. CCU has placed on its agenda a study of the Belhar Confession, which has come to have significance far beyond the church in South Africa (*MGS 1998*, pp. 247-48).

At CCU's February 2000, meeting a study of the Belhar Confession was led by the Rev. Daniel Meeter.

In its continuing response to R-1 (*MGS 1995*, p. 405), to its report to the 1998 General Synod, and to R-14 (*MGS 1999*, p.115), "To encourage all members of the RCA to speak boldly, in the spirit of Christian love, against acts of intolerance, racism, and police violence; and further, to encourage commissions, synods, and classes to work with all deliberate speed in the implementation of past and present recommendations in addressing issues of prejudice and racial intolerance," CCU recommends:

### **R-13**

**To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to put the Belhar Confession before the whole denomination over the next decade as a means of deepening the RCA commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies.**

Reasons:

1. This recommendation is one of CCU's responses to R-14 (*MGS 1999*, p. 115).
2. Racism is a sin that the Belhar Confession confronts.
3. The RCA needs to take a look at racism within the RCA.
4. This recommendation honors the RCA's relationship with the URCSA and previous agreements.

The advisory committee recommended to amend R-13 as follows (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

### **R-13 (amendment)**

**To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to put commend the Belhar Confession ~~before~~ to the ~~whole denomination~~ church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the RCA commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

Reason: The amendment strengthens the original recommendation by defining a more specific method of putting the Belhar Confession before the church.

## **THE BELHAR CONFESSION**

*The Belhar Confession is one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the new Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa. Belhar has significance and influence well beyond the church in South Africa. As one member of the Uniting Church expressed it: "We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone." This is a translation*

*of the original Afrikaans text of the Belhar Confession.*

1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the Church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;

that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church;

*Therefore, we reject any doctrine*

*which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;*

*which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;*

*which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is*

*sin;*

which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church.

3. We believe that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the Church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the Church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

that God by his lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God, by his lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable His people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

*Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.*

4. We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this; that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right;

that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

*Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.*

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might

forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

## **REFORMED ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Founded in 1946, the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) was first known as the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. REC is an international organization whose members are Reformed churches. It has thirty-four denominations in twenty-three countries, joining in fellowship about seven million Christians. The churches have joined together for expressing and promoting unity, for mutual support, and to share the love of Christ in the world.

Submission to biblical truths and confessional integrity are essential to the REC's calling and purpose. The council meets in an assembly every four years, to which each member church sends delegates.

The general secretary of REC, the Rev. Richard L. van Houten, met with CCU at its February 2000 meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to share with the commission the history behind the founding of REC and its work through the years as well as the agenda for REC's upcoming quadrennial Assembly.

The RCA has received an invitation from the general secretary of REC to send an observer or observers to REC's 2000 Assembly in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, July 14-28, 2000.

It was voted by CCU to ask the RCA's general secretary, the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, to accept the invitation from REC. It is the intention of CCU that the observer be a member of the commission.

## **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS**

### **Background**

The CCU held its spring 1998 meeting in conjunction with the annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in response to a new receptivity from NAE toward RCA initiatives aimed at closer cooperation between the two bodies. Because the RCA holds membership in the World and National Councils of Churches, the RCA has been unable to hold membership in the NAE because the latter's constitution prohibits dual membership.

The 1998 General Synod voted (*MGS 1998*, R-2, p. 250):

To permit the Commission on Christian Unity to explore the possibility of, and issues related to, the RCA holding membership in the National Association of Evangelicals, for report to the 1999 General Synod.

In response to this directive, CCU reported to the 1999 General Synod (*MGS 1999*, p. 184):

CCU has sent correspondence to NAE asking that its governing board "re-examine the membership policy of NAE which restricts membership to (church) bodies which do not belong to the NCC and WCC." CCU's letter also expressed "the interest of the RCA in joining the NAE as a member denomination."

CCU invited the Rev. Kevin Mannoia, president of NAE, to meet with CCU at its February 2000 meeting for the purpose of exploring further the possibility of NAE changing its constitution to allow joint membership in WCC, NCC, and NAE. Because of prior commitments, Mannoia was unable to attend the meeting. However, in his response, Mannoia stated:

Our (NAE) Executive Committee met two days ago and took action to recommend to our Board of Directors that this rule be changed to allow for full membership providing that such denominations meet the membership expectations of the NAE.

On March 6, in Washington D.C. our Board will meet and make a final determination on this proposed bylaw change.

The CCU is confident that the NAE's Board of Directors will change its bylaws and allow dual membership at its March 6, 2000 meeting.

#### **R-14**

**To instruct the general secretary, as the ecumenical officer of the RCA, to write to the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, making application for denominational membership of the RCA in the National Association of Evangelicals. (ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. This completes the conversation of the last several years between the CCU and the officers of the NAE.
2. The CCU has been encouraged to pursue this by other RCA judicatories over a number of years.
3. Membership in the NAE supports the "Ecumenical Mandate" statement that the RCA is both ecumenical and evangelical.

#### **THE MORAVIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**

The Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the RCA, was copied in a letter to the Rev. Robert Sawyer, president of the Moravian Church in America, Southern Conference, from Eugene Turner, associate stated clerk and director, Department of Ecumenical and Agency Relationships, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The letter was in reference to the possibility "of starting a church-to-church dialogue exploring the possibility of entering into full communion."

Turner further stated that "While in Atlanta, I conferred with the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson of the Reformed Church in America and the Rev. John Thomas of the United Church of Christ. As you know, the RCA, UCC, and the PCUSA are the three Reformed partners who in 1998 entered full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through *A Formula of Agreement*. Both John Thomas and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson indicated to me that they were interested in participating in a Moravian-Reformed dialogue."

#### **R-15**

**To join with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ in initiating a Moravian-Reformed Dialogue.**

Reasons:

1. Doing so would support the "Ecumenical Mandate," Part III, A. 4.

2. This recommendation is in keeping with the RCA's "Affirmation of Christian Unity":

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

kThe advisory committee recommended a substitute motion for R-15:

**R-15 (substitute)**

**To instruct the general secretary to accept the invitation of the Moravian Church to enter into Moravian-Reformed dialogue, with the understanding that any proposal for a fuller expression of Christian unity with the Moravian Church be accomplished as a church-to-church relationship, and that during the course of dialogue the term "full communion" be understood to mean "the recognition in other churches that the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Word of God; and that we as a denomination make provision for the orderly exchange of ministers in accordance with the authority of the classes; and further, that we share a common commitment to evangelism, mission, and service" (*The Ecumenical Mandate, MGS 1995*, p. 183). (ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. We wish to enter into dialogue in a way that establishes the freedom of the RCA to establish a church-to-church relationship with the Moravian Church.
2. The recommendation presents a clear understanding of how the RCA interprets the term "full communion" in relationships with churches with whom we do not already have a relationship of full communion either by right of common Reformed heritage or common membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.]

**THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN LUTHERAN AND REFORMED CHURCHES**

In 1997 the General Synod of the RCA, by a substantial margin, approved the proposal declaring that "it is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." The exact language of the resolution is as follows (*MGS 1997*, p. 186):

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, 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.

This action was the result of a dialogue between the Lutheran and Reformed churches that had its genesis in 1962. The last round of conversations began in 1990 and concluded in 1992, issuing a dialogue report, "A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformed Churches in

North America Today.”

### Intent

As was stated to the General Synod of 1997, the meaning and intent of the *Formula of Agreement* must be clear. 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 heritage these three Reformed churches are already in partnership in the way that Reformed polity understands full communion. For the RCA each local board of elders governs admittance to the Lord’s Table, and each classis governs admittance to the pulpit, in keeping with the RCA doctrinal standards, the RCA liturgy, and the RCA *Book of Church Order*. The intent of the *Formula of Agreement* is to make explicit the implicit relationship of the Reformed churches to each other, while at the same time declaring a completely new relationship between these Reformed churches and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The *Formula of Agreement* sets forth a fundamental doctrinal consensus among the four churches that is based on, and presumes, the theological agreements of earlier Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, including the 1983 statement that “Our unity in Christ compels us to claim our strong affinities in doctrine and practice” (*MGS 1997*, p. 180). 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 their servanthood to God and their 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.

### **Accomplishments: The Congregational Level**

The question is raised as to the effect and capacity of such formal agreements as the *Formula of Agreement*. Do official formulae have any real impact on the church other than a brief moment of celebratory events? CCU is pleased to report that since the passage of the *Formula of Agreement* in 1997 much has happened at all levels of church life. There have been a number of joint worship services of celebration at the national, regional, and local levels from California to New York and from Texas to Michigan. Pastors have reported that clergy of *Formula* churches have established weekly study groups focusing on the lectionary readings for the week. Pulpit exchanges as well as joint celebrations of Holy Communion by Lutheran and Reformed congregations have taken place. Such have been new to both churches and are reported to be welcomed and enlightening. Cooperative mission projects are being discussed and implemented between *Formula* churches. At local levels meetings of pastors are being convened to discern ways to support congregations in ministry, especially in urban and rural locales where challenges are great and human and financial resources are stretched. As one pastor has said in summation of all that is taking place, “the passage of the *Formula of Agreement* has given us permission to work together and even prods us to do so. It has been a wonderful gift to the churches.”

### **Accomplishments: The National Coordinating Committee**

At the national level a Lutheran-Reformed Coordinating Committee has been established with three representatives from each of the four churches. Membership consists of one lay and clergy person from each church, along with a member of the ecumenical staff. Representing the RCA are the Rev. Dr. Louis Lotz, elder Carol Wagner, and the Rev. Douglas Fromm, associate for ecumenical relations. The coordinating committee ensures that commitments made are carried out, refers matters that require internal legislative decision-making to appropriate decision-making bodies of the participating churches, refers matters related to programs to the appropriate units of the participating churches, monitors the reception of the full communion agreement by the partner churches, and reports to the appropriate ecumenical committee or commission that has responsibility for ecumenical relations in the partner churches.

### **The Orderly Exchange of Clergy**

With regard to the orderly exchange of clergy among the *Formula* churches, a working group was established and given the mandate to develop principles that would guide the churches. The RCA was represented by the Revs. Howard Moths and Allan Janssen. RCA staff from Ministry and Personnel Services met with the working group as consultants. The results of this working group are published in a manual entitled *The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament: Principles, Policies and Procedures*. The manual contains a summary of the various practices of each church with regard to clergy calls, installations, contracts, and ecclesial oversight. Among the topics addressed in the principles are categories of service, nature of calls and contracts, the approval process, supervision of congregations, services of installation, accountability of pastoral care, and benefits such as pension, medical insurance, and life insurance. Published in a user-friendly format, the manual contains a question and answer section comprised of the most frequently asked questions with regard to the topic of clergy exchange among the four *Formula* churches. The CCU is pleased to report that the manual has been mailed to all stated clerks of classes and regional synods.

### **Partnership Appointments**

As a result of the passage of the *Formula of Agreement* in 1997, the RCA has received invitations from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to name a permanent member to its Committee on Ecumenical Relations. CCU has appointed the Rev. Liala Beukema to serve. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has invited the RCA to name a permanent member to its Church Council, comparable to the RCA General Synod Council. CCU has named the Rev. Richard Brihn to serve. The United Church of Christ has extended an invitation to the RCA to have a permanent representative on its Executive Council. CCU has named the Rev. David Baak to serve. In reciprocity the CCU has requested that the General Synod Council make allowance for representatives from the *Formula* churches to serve as observers on the council.

### **Theological Consultation**

A committee convened in 1999 has been working on two theological consultations to be held for theological faculty. In June of 2001 a consultation will be held in Geneva, Switzerland, for faculty of the more than twenty seminaries of the *Formula* churches. The consultation will examine the full communion agreement in North America vis-a-vis the Leuenberg Statement of Concord between the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe which was approved in 1973. In addition to a reflection on the ecumenical works of 1973 and 1997 in Europe and North America respectively, the consultation will focus on theological education from an ecumenical perspective, courses taught by teams of faculty from different schools, cross registration for students, faculty exchange programs, and joint education offerings for laity.

### **Joint Consultation of Racial/Ethnic Councils**

Most recently the RCA's racial/ethnic councils have met with their counterparts in the *Formula* churches on several occasions. CARE (Communion Agreement Racial Ethnic) Partners continues to explore networking, shared mission, participation in multicultural events sponsored by the *Formula* churches, sharing resources, development of resources on multicultural sensitivity, and sponsoring a joint training event targeted for 2001. A strategy for new church development in racial/ethnic communities is being considered for recommendation to each of the four partner churches with a clear desire that such work be done cooperatively.

### **Common Mission**

In addition to the above, staff members of the partner churches have met to review areas of common mission in education, congregation life and ministry, human resources, policy planning and administration, and mission services. In the brief time since the fall of 1997 when the last of the *Formula* churches voted for full communion between Lutheran and Reformed churches, much has been accomplished in bringing the intent of written and signed ecumenical documents into the mainstream of the life and ministry of the RCA and its *Formula* partners. CCU rejoices in this manifestation of God's gift of unity that offers witness to the power and purpose of God who reconciles a broken and divided world.

### **Concerns**

The CCU is aware that the *Formula of Agreement* has raised concern over the presence of the United Church of Christ as a partner church in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in America. The issue is that the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America have different positions with regard to the presence of gay and lesbian Christians in the life and ministry of the church.

The concern is raised by the language of the *Formula of Agreement* in which it states that in declaring full communion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ “recognize each other as churches in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God” (*MGS 1997*, p. 179).

It must be made clear that such language has a very specific meaning and usage. It is the formal language that refers to the basic, defining marks, which are part of the heritage, theology, confessions, and standards embraced by churches. The defining parameters of the historic confessions and creedal affirmations of each church, the RCA and the UCC alike, identify what is said to be a “true church in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.” These marks provide the foundation for the recognition of “true churches.”

Constituted in 1957, the UCC merged two confessional and covenantal traditions bringing together the North American Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church of continental background. It is Calvinist on both sides of its lineage. The UCC is a confessional church affirming the ecumenical creeds and the evangelical confessions of the Reformation. Among its standards are the Cambridge Platform/Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, and Luther’s Small Catechism. In the preamble to its *Constitution* the UCC claims as its own the faith of the historic church expressed in the ancient creeds, the Apostles’ and Nicene, and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant reformers. Based on the public declaration of its confessions, creedal affirmations, and Trinitarian foundation, the UCC is said to be, and recognized by, the wider church as a “true church.”

Repeatedly and with consistency the General Synods of 1986, 1993, 1994, and 1995 have adopted recommendations that either affirmed full communion or commended the commission for its continuing work in the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue and the development of the *Formula of Agreement* (*MGS 1997*, pp. 181-182).

The 1996 General Synod took no action to postpone the proposed vote of 1997 for adoption of the *Formula of Agreement* as was proposed in an overture concerned with the differing positions on homosexuality held by the RCA and the UCC. No conditions were implied or stated by the General Synod that would have affected the 1997 vote on the *Formula of Agreement*. In response to the expressed concern over the differing positions of the RCA and the UCC, General Synod voted to engage the UCC in a dialogue on the issue of homosexuality (*MGS 1996*, R- 4, p. 211). The dialogue continued for two years and reported its results to the General Synod of 1999 (*MGS 1999*, pp. 170-182).

In 1999 the General Synod denied an overture that it had received pertaining to the UCC. The overture dealt with the issue of gay and lesbian Christians in the life and ministry of the UCC and called for the RCA to sever all ecumenical ties with the UCC until it repented of its affirmation of the homosexual lifestyle as appropriate for Christians.

In maintaining ties with the UCC, the General Synod declared that “despite differences with the UCC, the RCA recognizes the UCC as a Christian communion.” Furthermore, “the RCA should avoid the precedent of severing ecumenical ties with other Christian denominations over differences regarding interpretation of Scripture on social and ethical matters” (*MGS 1999*, p. 186).

The issue was clearly framed in the genesis of the RCA-UCC dialogue. Both the RCA and the UCC are churches in which Scripture is honored; however, they differ in their hermeneutical approach to Scripture. The differing hermeneutical approaches are what allow

for the divergent conclusions with regard to the participation of gay and lesbian Christians in the life and ministry of the church (*MGS 1999*, p.174). The question then becomes whether or not the UCC's hermeneutic and resultant position on homosexuality rises to the level of *status confessionis*, a state of confession. In other words, is this an issue that goes right to the heart of the gospel, thus becoming the basis for severing ties with the UCC? The CCU concurs with the decision of the 1999 General Synod that this issue did not rise to that of church-dividing status.

### **Internal Discussion**

The CCU raises before the General Synod of 2000 a deeply held concern with regard to the unity of the church. In spite of past General Synod decisions not to sever ties with the UCC and to maintain relationship, the issue of severing ties continues to be raised through overtures to the General Synod. It seems to the CCU that the focus has changed from the relationship between the RCA and the UCC and now becomes an internal issue for the unity of the RCA.

With implied and openly stated ultimatums that a congregation, classis, or regional synod may leave the RCA if ties with the UCC are not severed or the *Formula of Agreement* nullified, a new issue is introduced, that of schismatic behavior within our own denomination. It raises the question of how one lives with the decisions of one's own church when those decisions are not to one's liking. While this is a question of church unity, it seems to the CCU to move from one of ecumenical concern to that of church order and theology within the RCA.

For the CCU it is particularly disheartening to hear of and read circulated documents declaring that the RCA has ceased to be a true church because it did not raise the position of the UCC to that of church-dividing status. To read circulated documents that declare the RCA to be a dead and apostate church because it did not sever ties with the UCC is a disturbing statement to the CCU. When such a statement is then raised as a clarion call to action giving justification to schismatic behavior on the part of congregations, classes, or regional synods, the CCU is especially alarmed. To hear calls for the formation of a new and separate church seems to the CCU to warrant behavior that has gone beyond the boundary of what is acceptable churchmanship and Christian character worthy of RCA heritage of being a faithful agent of God's work of reconciliation in the world and in the church.

With deep concern for denominational integrity and the integrity of ecumenical relationships, the CCU recommends that the General Synod consider the schismatic voice and influence being put forward by those not in agreement with the actions of General Synods. The CCU recommends that the General Synod refer this concern to the appropriate commissions for consideration and review with the heartfelt need to conserve the integrity of church order and theological heritage.

## **Overtures**

### ***Relationships with Denominations Showing Strong Growth***

- 1. The Classis of Central California overtures the 2000 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity and appropriate RCA staff to search out and establish closer kingdom relationships with denominations demonstrating strong evangelistic growth and church planting success, such as the Assemblies of God and Evangelical Free, for the purpose of mutual learning and encouragement.**

Reasons:

1. For the past several years our denominational Christian unity efforts have been colored by negative and divisive issues instead of mission.
2. The Reformed Church in America has a demonstrated need to learn from others under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, nationally and internationally, in view of the thirty-plus years of declining membership.
3. Some positive working relationships with more healthy church communions would shape the average member's view of ecumenical relations constructively.

In response to overture 1, the advisory committee recommended:

**R-16**

**To instruct the General Synod Council's Office of Evangelism and Church Development Services to explore effective evangelistic strategies with denominations who demonstrate strong evangelistic growth and church planting success for the purpose of mutual learning and encouragement. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The intention of the overture can be more effectively accomplished by the GSC's Office of Evangelism and Church Development Services than by the Commission on Christian Unity.

***Separation from the United Church of Christ***

2. **The Classes of California, Canadian Prairies, Central California, Central Iowa, Illiana, South Grand Rapids, Rocky Mountains, and Zeeland overture the General Synod to direct the general secretary and the associate for ecumenical relations to begin immediately a process whereby the Reformed Church in America separates itself from formal ecumenical relationships with the United Church of Christ, including the declared relationship in the *Formula of Agreement*, at the national and regional levels, and report back to the General Synod of 2001.**

**The Classes of Ontario overtures the General Synod to direct the general secretary and the associate for ecumenical relations to begin immediately a process whereby the Reformed Church in America separates itself from formal ecumenical relationships with the United Church of Christ, including the declared relationship in the *Formula of Agreement*, at the national and regional levels, and to be in effect by the General Synod of 2002.**

Reasons:

1. The United Church of Christ (UCC) ordains practicing homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals as ministers of the Word, which the RCA 1990 General Synod affirmed as being contrary to Scripture (*MGS 1990*, p. 461). In 1998 the General Synod assigned a committee to admonish the UCC for this unbiblical practice.
2. After the 1999 General Synod and the "Final Report of the Dialogue between the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ on the Membership and Ministry of Lesbian and Gay Persons in the Church" (*MGS 1999*, pp. 170-182), it became clear that the UCC is not open to changing its position on affirming homosexual behavior and relationships within the church membership and leadership. UCC congregational

polity is such that the RCA cannot admonish the UCC in any meaningful way because each congregation is independent of the national structure. Therefore, the *Formula of Agreement*, which states that living in full communion implies an ongoing process of mutual affirmation and admonition, cannot be implemented in any realistic sense.

3. After the 1999 General Synod and the report of the dialogue group it has become clear that the UCC has no control mechanism to insure biblically sound preaching and teaching. An obvious example is the inclusion of seventeen congregations in the UCC who are aligned with the Universalist Unitarian Church.
4. After the dialogue process with the UCC we not only failed to produce a change in their position (as was our express intention; see 1998 overture), but our meetings actually served to reinforce their erroneous position. The UCC response to two and a half years of dialogue was: 1) to chastise the RCA for our position; 2) to express in a formal declaration that it is the UCC's desire to impact the RCA in such a way that we will one day adopt an "open and affirming" position toward practicing homosexuals, just as the UCC does; and 3) the UCC itself states that it will not return to the RCA position, which we believe is biblically based.
5. As one of the reasons, in asking the UCC to reconsider its position on gay/lesbian relationships, the RCA delegation submitted in its written report the following: "The fact that the UCC official stance threatens to divide the worldwide church of Jesus Christ [and that] to look at the RCA as being unenlightened and judgmental on this question overlooks the fact that the RCA position is that of the vast majority of denominations in North America and that the UCC position is regarded as a scandal by many overseas churches." (*MGS 1999*, p. 176).

The UCC position is one that is dividing the church of Jesus Christ, and the RCA separating itself from the UCC is to be seen as an act of unifying the church worldwide. The UCC delegation itself states that they will not return to the RCA position: "Yet we would say firmly that there is no going back for the United Church of Christ. As our lesbian sister puts it, "while there are some in the UCC who wish that I and my lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers were not at the table, there is nonetheless a growing sense of welcome at our table and a growing sense that we can trust the 'ties that bind,' since those God-given ties are stronger than the differences which may divide"" (*MGS 1999*, p. 180).

6. It is our purpose to be true to our own members and not alienate those within the RCA family such as the churches in the Regional Synod of Canada. A number of the RCA churches in Canada come out of a painful separation from the United Church in Canada over the issue of active homosexuals, Scripture, and the church's role. Many Canadian churches have made it clear that if the RCA does not remain true to the biblical perspective on this matter they will seek separation from the RCA. The Canadian position on this is not exclusive to Canada and there are many more segments of the RCA, including a number of RCA congregations and classes, such as our own, which would be seriously concerned if the General Synod does not withdraw from its relationship with the UCC.
7. The RCA cannot be in full communion with the UCC if, at the General Synod level, the UCC ignores the fact that 1) Scripture declares homosexual behavior as sinful, and that 2) the redemptive intervention of God's healing love through the Holy Spirit is to be brought to those who continue in sin.

The Rev. Paul H. Sherry, president of the UCC, states the UCC position when he wrote the following in October 1999:

I believe our voice among the churches and within society is urgently needed, bearing witness to the belief that God cherishes all and dignifies all, and to our experience of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons as gifts of God, called with us by their baptism into the fullest participation in God's mission of reconciliation in the world (UCC website, November 1999).

8. The dialogue clearly identified the different approaches to Scripture between the RCA and UCC. "Central to the differences in the two church's approach to, and use of Scripture, is in the relative weight given to the role of experience. This use of experience in the hermeneutical process allows one to challenge, reinterpret, or even set aside certain texts as culturally conditioned or irrelevant. One of the UCC's participants said, 'There are just some texts we need to leave behind'" (*MGS 1999*, p. 174). In summation, in the RCA, we let the Bible speak to our experience, unlike the UCC which lets experience define the Bible and how it is interpreted.

In response to overture 2, the advisory committee recommended:

#### **R-17**

**To affirm the following statement and circulate it to all assemblies and congregations of the Reformed Church in America:**

**For years the issue of homosexuality has been a painful issue for the church. This has been particularly true regarding the manner in which the issue plays out in ecumenical relationships. In recent years the issue has come into focus following the landmark signing of the *Formula of Agreement* between the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).**

**In an attempt to clarify the position of the Reformed Church in America regarding its evangelical and ecumenical witness, we offer the following as clarifications to the church:**

1. **The *Formula of Agreement*, approved at the 1997 General Synod, while developed in cooperation with the PCUSA and the UCC, altered only the RCA's relationship with the ELCA (*MGS 1997*, pp. 183-192).**
2. **The RCA declares that the stated position taken by the UCC representatives in the dialogue with the RCA concerning homosexuality, as reported to the 1999 General Synod (*MGS 1999*, pp. 170-182), is contrary to the RCA's interpretation of Scripture as expressed by past actions of the General Synod.**
3. **Given the fact that the RCA in 1999 admonished the UCC for its position regarding ordination of practicing gays and lesbians (*MGS 1999*, p. 176), the RCA will not intentionally pursue a closer ecumenical relationship with the UCC beyond that which exists through a common membership in councils of churches (World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches, and World Alliance of Reformed Churches) and currently existing cooperative engagements between the RCA and the UCC for the purposes of ministry and mission. We therefore recognize that there currently exists a limit to "responsible and continual**

engagement and interaction at the levels of the General Synod and denominational program” (cf., *Ecumenical Mandate*, II.A.3.; p. 15, *MGS 1995*, p. 181).

4. **The polity and the structure of the UCC do not provide the means for consistent theological accountability throughout its structure and membership. Therefore, following the RCA’s understanding of pulpit fellowship as related to the classis, and table fellowship as related to the elders, cooperation between RCA pastors and churches and UCC pastors and churches is a local matter. We reaffirm that for the RCA “‘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” (cf., *Ecumenical Mandate*, II.A.3.; p. 15, *MGS 1995*, p. 181). (ADOPTED)**

Reason: We believe that it is in the interest of both the unity and faithfulness of the RCA to respond to this overture in a manner that speaks both clearly and pastorally, reaffirming the already stated positions of the General Synod while setting out the limit of further relationships with the UCC.

At the request of the president, a prayer of gratitude was offered by the Rev. Charles Morris, moderator of the Advisory Committee on Christian Unity.

#### *Partnership with Local Christian Congregations*

3. **The Classes of California, Canadian Prairies, Central California, Central Iowa, East Sioux, Illiana, and South Grand Rapids overture the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to call every RCA congregation to prayer and partnership with local Christian congregations and ministries to help lost people come into a saving, redeeming, and transforming relationship with Jesus Christ for the sake of individuals, families, and communities.**

Reasons:

1. Ecumenical activity is best done at the local level where life’s issues can be dealt with in the context of relationship. There are dynamic and exemplary models of ecumenical, evangelical movements in local communities led by RCA ministers and ministries that are changing lives and communities, apart from any denominational influence or contribution.
2. We believe ecumenical efforts and investments, above all, need to be rooted in the ministry of the local church, where the ministry of the RCA is actually centered. The RCA vision and mission statement emphasizes a thousand congregations in a million different ways.
3. This will encourage ecumenical activity in every local congregation at the broadest grassroots level.
4. As we look back at the past ecumenical efforts of the RCA (which have been predominantly based on a General Synod level), 1) we have seen division grow within our own denomination, and 2) we have failed to see local congregations move into meaningful ecumenical ministry as a result of the efforts of the General Synod and its counterparts of other denominations.
5. We are seeing a visible contrast between the divisive and ineffective efforts of

denominational leaders (getting leaders with leaders and writing papers) and the fruit-bearing, life-changing alliances being forged by local church pastors and congregations nationally and internationally as they gather to pray and build effective ministries.

6. We have a sincere desire to embrace and work with local UCC congregations that share our biblical, interpretive positions on the issues of homosexual practice and lifestyle even though we wish to separate ourselves at the General Synod level.
7. In light of this, we need to lift up models of ecumenical ministry and relations that are effective and fruitful, such as:
  - “Lighthouses of Prayer,” touching three million individuals in the U.S.
  - Modesto Miracle, where seventy local churches changed a community together.
  - “I’ll Be There,” where thousands of people were led to Christ by a combined effort of differing evangelical churches, representing many denominations.
  - “What If It’s True,” over two hundred churches in Michigan and over twenty in California combining outreach programs.

In response to overture 3, the advisory committee recommended:

**R-18**

**To instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to call every RCA congregation to prayer and partnership with local Christian congregations and ministries to help people come into a saving, redeeming, and transforming relationship with Jesus Christ for the sake of individuals, families, and communities. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: This will encourage ecumenical activity in every local congregation at the broadest grassroots level.

***Membership in the National Association of Evangelicals***

- 4. The Classis of Illiana overtures the General Synod to begin whatever steps are necessary to become a full member denomination of the National Association of Evangelicals.**

Reasons:

1. Recent changes in the bylaws of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) now allows for membership of denominations in the NAE while still holding membership in other organizations of a comparable ecclesiastical level (e.g. National Council of Churches).
2. Membership will be an encouragement for the evangelical churches.
3. Membership will give stronger connections to other evangelical denominations and ministries.
4. Membership will give better identification to our communities as an evangelical denomination.
5. The statements of faith of the NAE will encourage the evangelical spirit within our midst.
6. The RCA will have access to NAE resources.

7. Membership in the NAE and National Council of Churches (NCC) will give us the best of both and give the local church a choice as to who they wish to support.
8. Membership will give a means of expressing the evangelical voice to Washington and Hollywood.
9. Through membership, the RCA will be supporting World Relief, the service arm of the NAE, which only provides relief through the local evangelical churches, which is a more effective witness for the gospel. Presently the RCA works through Church World Service, which sometimes provides relief without the gospel.
10. A previous General Synod has permitted the Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) to explore the possibilities of membership. The CCU stated that it “believes the timing is right for the RCA to more directly pursue a mutually beneficial relationship with the NAE” (*MGS 1998*, p. 250).
11. In the CCU report to the 1999 General Synod it stated that a letter had been sent to the NAE expressing “the interest of the RCA in joining the NAE as a member denomination” (*MGS 1999*, p. 184).

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-19**

**To deny overture 4. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The substance of overture 4 was already dealt with in R-14.l

*Apology regarding Formula of Agreement*

5. **The Classes of Canadian Prairies and Ontario overture the General Synod to instruct the general secretary and the associate for ecumenical relations to send a letter to the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, apologizing for the misrepresentation of the Reformed Church in America’s position on the *Formula of Agreement* at the celebration of full communion (Oct 4, 1998, University of Chicago), where the RCA representative stated:**

**“We gather to recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered according to the Word of God” (Order of Worship, Declaration of Purpose, *MGS 1998*, p. 276, footnote # 1);**

**and further,**

**that this letter be distributed widely in the Reformed Church in America.**

Reasons:

1. The understanding of the two different definitions of the term “full communion” on which the RCA’s approval of the *Formula of Agreement* depended (General Synod 1997) was publicly contradicted at the “Celebration of Full Communion” (October 4, 1998), therefore leading the three partner denominations and their churches to believe that the RCA’s position is other than what it really is (see reasons 1 and 2 in the footnote below).
2. The distribution of this letter of apology within the RCA would provide needed clarification to our congregations as they seek to respond to the decision of the 1998

General Synod “to encourage congregations to make occasional use of the order of worship and guidelines prepared by the Lutheran-Reformed Subcommittee on Worship” (*MGS 1998*, p. 275) wherein the RCA representative statement is found.

Footnote:

General Synod 1997 approved the *Formula of Agreement* on the basis of the following interpretive resolution (*MGS 1997*, p. 185):

To resolve that in adopting the *Formula of Agreement* (if adopted), the Reformed Church in America declares that its relationship with the United Church in 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. 184-197):

For the Reformed Church in America “full communion” means “full table and pulpit 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 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*.

Reasons:

1. The intent of the *Formula of Agreement* is that the RCA will have a different kind of full communion relationship with the Reformed partner denominations than it will with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The language of the *Formula of Agreement* does not make this clear.
2. [This resolution] makes clear what might otherwise be open to ambiguity of interpretation.

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-20**

**To deny overture 5. (ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. The language used by the RCA representative at the October 4, 1998, celebration of full communion between the Lutheran and Reformed churches did not intend to alter the historic relationship of full communion between the RCA and its Reformed partners.
2. The language regarding “full communion” in the *Formula of Agreement* was chosen with the particular needs of the ELCA in mind.

*United Church of Christ to Repent*

6. **The Classis of Ontario overtures the General Synod to direct the general secretary of the RCA, the associate for ecumenical relations, and the Commission on Christian Unity to ask the RCA's *Formula of Agreement* partners, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (PCUSA), to join with the RCA in humbly requesting the United Church of Christ (UCC) to repent of its official denominational position of sanctioning the ordination of practicing homosexuals to the ministry of Word and sacrament.**

**It is understood that this request would be processed through the ELCA and PCUSA's appropriate channels of ecumenical relations and that they would report back their intent and procedure to the RCA's General Synod of 2001 through its Commission on Christian Unity.**

**It is also understood that should the UCC refuse to repent of their position on this matter, they would be asked by the RCA, ELCA, and PCUSA to withdraw from their partnership in the *Formula of Agreement*.**

Reasons:

1. This overture is in keeping with the spirit of our Lord's commands in Matthew 18:15-17. In those verses Jesus outlines a process for dealing with sin within the fellowship of a covenanted community. The *Formula of Agreement* is such a covenanted relationship, the first principle of which is "mutual affirmation and admonition" (p. 4, *Formula of Agreement*).
2. The RCA has taken the first step in this commanded process by speaking directly with the UCC about this issue. (See "Final Report of the Dialogue Between the RCA and the UCC on the Membership and Ministry of Lesbian and Gay Persons in the Church," *MGS 1999*, p. 70-182.)
3. From this report it is clear that this first step did not "win our brother over" (cf. Matt. 18:15). The UCC clearly stated that it is not changing its position on affirming homosexual behavior and relationships within the church membership and leadership.
4. Therefore the next step in this situation is to "take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16) in order to again seek a change of heart and position with the UCC. In the context of the *Formula of Agreement* this would obviously involve our partner denominations, the ELCA and the PCUSA.
5. Should neither the ELCA nor the PCUSA express the will and commitment to join in this process of addressing this matter with the UCC, then there is clearly a significant difference in biblical understanding and spiritual fellowship between them and the RCA. The RCA should then withdraw its membership in the *Formula of Agreement* in conviction and humility.
6. This process of discipline prescribed by our Lord gives the Spirit of God time to work within the fellowships of all denominations in the *Formula of Agreement*.

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-21  
To deny overture 6. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The substance of overture 6 was already dealt with in the response to overture 2.l

*Admonishing the United Church of Christ*

- 7. The Classis of Southwest Michigan overtures the General Synod to instruct the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America to dispatch, within the confines of Christian love, to the General Council of the United Church of Christ, a letter affirming the admonishment regarding the United Church of Christ's unrepentant acceptance of active, practicing homosexual lifestyles within its membership, as said admonition was reported on page 176 of the June 1999 *Minutes of General Synod*.**

Reasons:

1. Page 176 of the *Minutes of General Synod* for June 1999 reports "Admonitions" in accord with the Formula of Agreement stated above. To our knowledge, the admonitions have not been acted upon.
2. The UCC, contrary to the Scriptures, affirms active homosexuality and has announced this position as an appropriate Christian position.
3. The UCC has been implored by a committee of the RCA to repent of this affirmation but has failed to do so.
4. The RCA's ecumenical principal is to "be guided by the principal of 'mutual affirmation and admonition' to live in obedience to Christ."
5. This overture is advanced with Christian love and prayer that the UCC will repent of its affirmation of active, practicing homosexuality as an acceptable Christian lifestyle.

The advisory committee recommended:

**R-22**

**To deny overture 7. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The correspondence initiated by the 1996 General Synod was communicated by letter to the appropriate office of the UCC (*MGS 1997*, pp. 173-74).<sup>1</sup>

***Dialogue with the United Church of Christ***

- 8. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, in the spirit of the *Formula of Agreement*, to seek both a real unity with the United Church of Christ and genuine purity in the church by continuing the process which was begun with the dialogue on homosexuality with the United Church of Christ. Believing the initial dialogue with the United Church of Christ fulfills the call of Matthew 18:15 with regard to church discipline, we urge the General Synod to move to the next step of discipline outlined in Matthew 18:16 by:**

- **Communicating to the UCC the concern of the larger church with regard to their policies condoning homosexual behavior.**
- **Repeating and strengthening the admonishments to the UCC which resulted from the dialogue process (see *MGS 1999*, p. 176), and calling those in the leadership, General Synod, agencies, and regional and local judicatures of the UCC who support the ordination of homosexuals to the offices of the church to repent and honor the teaching of Scripture on this issue.**

- **And further to urge the UCC to demonstrate the fruit of repentance by suspending the ordinations of all ministers, elders, and deacons who practice, approve, and condone the practice of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle in God's church.**

**Should they remain unrepentant, we would then be faced with the painful prospect of breaking fellowship with the UCC with hope and in prayer that this would lead to their repentance.**

Reasons:

1. Scripture teaches and official statements of the Reformed Church in America have affirmed the biblical teaching that homosexual behavior is contrary to Scripture. The Commission on Theology wrote in their 1978 paper "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal" that "heterosexuality is not only normal; it is normative. Homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God for human sexuality" (*MGS 1978*, p. 235). Subsequent statements of the General Synod have affirmed this position (see *MGS 1979*, pp. 126-135; *MGS 1990*, pp. 460-62; *MGS 1994*, pp. 369-77; *MGS 1995*, pp. 381-88; *MGS 1996*, p. 214).
2. The RCA's dialogue with the United Church of Christ (UCC) on this issue has apparently had little if any effect on the position of the UCC. While, as humbly acknowledged in General Synod statements related to this issue, we as a denomination and as individuals acknowledge our own struggles with sin, our love for our brothers and sister in the UCC calls us to continue to urge them to repent of their policies and practices of affirming the homosexual lifestyle as acceptable in God's sight (see Galatians 5:22-6:1).
3. Our concern for both the unity and purity of the church moves us to urge the UCC to repent of its policy of condoning homosexual practices. As Christians we are called to seek both the unity and the purity of the church. We are not to seek one without the other. In his prayer for the church in John 17, Jesus prays for both the purity and unity of his church (John 17:15-23). In addition, the procedure for church discipline, of seeking purity, is to enjoy continued fellowship with one's brother or sister (Matthew 18:15-17). Furthermore, the letters of the New Testament urge us to seek both the unity and the purity of the church (see 1 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:1-4). To seek unity at the expense of purity or purity without regard for the importance of unity demonstrates a sub-biblical concern for both the unity and purity of the church and is ultimately harmful to the church's witness to the world.
4. We are concerned about the witness and testimony of the RCA and the UCC to the people around us. When those who proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ also approve of behavior that is detestable to God, it creates significant confusion and a quandary for all, especially new believers in Christ and unbelievers. We agree with our brothers and sisters in the Classis of Passaic Valley, who wrote in their 1996 overture to the General Synod of the RCA, "Denominational ambivalence furthers confusion as to whether or not homosexual activity is consistent with Christ-like behavior. The RCA witness must be clear and straightforward so that with tireless love, gentleness, and compassion, the RCA will be more effective in helping homosexuals win freedom from their bondage" (*MGS 1996*, p. 213). To fail to address the spiritual error of our brothers and sisters in the UCC clouds our own witness, because it appears to the world as if we approve of their error. (Such is the impression that was given in many brief newspaper reports and a report appearing in "The Pastor's Family Bulletin" in *Focus on the Family* magazine, October 1999, following the 1999 RCA General Synod).
5. From the report of the UCC participants in the dialogue with the RCA, it appears that at least some in the UCC believe that to love a homosexual person requires acceptance

and approval of a homosexual lifestyle. We would assert that one can love a person without condoning their sin. Further, while they would urge us to “seek out, welcome and listen to the faith and stories of gay and lesbian persons who are, or have been, members of the RCA,” we would urge them to consider that in openly embracing, accepting and approving of homosexual practice, that they may be keeping homosexuals within the UCC from experiencing the freedom, love, and joy of obedience to Christ which God desires them to experience.

6. Finally, we are concerned for the vitality and future witness of the UCC to the world around us. Failing to repent and continuing in deliberate sin coupled with a hermeneutic that places a strong emphasis on human experience (see *MGS 1999*, pp. 174-75) may start them on a slippery slope leading to further sin, with the result that they may come to abide less and less in Christ. It grieves us to think that Christ might remove their lampstand from its place (see Revelation 1:19-28; John 15:1-8).

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-23**

**To deny overture 8. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The substance of overture 8 was already dealt with in the response to overture 2.1

***Rebuke of United Church of Christ***

- 9. The Classis of Florida overtures the Synod of 2000 to publicly rebuke the General Council of the United Church of Christ for its toleration of Unitarian clergy and congregations.**

Reasons:

1. The General Secretary of the UCC clarified that there are fifteen congregations in the UCC which are union congregations with the Unitarian Universalist denomination, as well as many other Unitarian ministers serving in UCC congregations.
2. Unitarianism, in its denial of the Trinity and the deity of Christ, is explicitly condemned as the spirit of antichrist in 1 John 4:1-4 and 2 John 7. John, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, makes equally clear that we may not take them into our house or welcome them or we share their wicked work (2 John 8-9). Clearly maintaining a denomination with such wicked teachers involves sharing in their wicked work.
3. Congregational polity does not prevent separation from antichrist congregations. Indeed, congregations may be disfellowshipped from a congregational body, as has happened in the congregational polity of the Southern Baptist Convention.
4. Since the joint declaration of the *Formula of Agreement* speaks of seeing “the Gospel rightly preached,” we must clarify that we do not see the Gospel rightly preached in the Unitarian element which is a welcomed part of the UCC.

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-24**

**To refer Overture 9 to the Commission on Christian Unity for study and report to the General Synod of 2001. (ADOPTED)**

Reasons:

1. Sufficient information was not available to recommend action at this time.
2. In order that General Synod 2001 can make an informed decision, the Commission on Christian Unity should gather the necessary information.

*Membership in the National Association of Evangelicals*

**10. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures the General Synod to begin whatever steps are necessary to become a full member denomination of the National Association of Evangelicals.**

Reasons:

1. Recent changes in the bylaws of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) now allow for membership of denominations in the NAE while still holding membership in other organizations of a comparable ecclesiastical level (e.g., National Council of Churches).
2. Membership will give stronger connections to other evangelical denominations and ministries.
3. Membership will be an encouragement to the RCA and will give better identification to our communities as an evangelical denomination.
4. The RCA will have access to NAE resources and provide a means for influencing government and media.
5. A previous General Synod has permitted the Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) to explore the possibilities of membership. The CCU stated that it “believes the timing is right for the RCA to more directly pursue a mutually beneficial relationship with the NAE” (*MGS 1998*, p. 250). The CCU report to the 1999 General Synod stated that a letter had been sent to the NAE expressing “the interest of the RCA in joining the NAE as a member denomination” (*MGS 1999*, p. 184).

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-25**  
**To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The substance of Overture 10 has been addressed in R-14.l

*Communication to UCC on Congregations Opposing Homosexual Ordination*

**11. The Regional Synod of Mid-America overtures the General Synod to officially communicate to the United Church of Christ (UCC) our agreement with the UCC congregations who oppose the ordination of active homosexuals.**

Reasons:

1. We wish to express our support of the vast majority of the UCC congregations who oppose their denomination’s viewpoint on this issue.
2. This overture will give us an opportunity to continue our dialogue with the UCC denomination and is a better alternative at this point to breaking all ecumenical ties with the UCC.
3. We wish to communicate to our own members that we are still engaged in this issue

and together may be able to persuade the UCC leadership to change their position.

kThe advisory committee recommended:

**R-26**

**To deny the overture. (ADOPTED)**

Reason: The substance of Overture 11 has been addressed in the response to Overture 2.1