

REPORTS ON WORSHIP AND THEOLOGY

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship met November 6-8, 2003, at the Illinois Beach Resort and Conference Center in Zion, Illinois, and February 19-20 at the InterChurch Center in New York City.

The commission had no referrals or business from General Synod 2003.

Continued Work on the Book of Worship

During the course of its meetings, the commission continued work on bringing to completion the multiyear project of publishing the most current liturgies of the Reformed Church in America in bound form. This work had been piloted for many years by the Office of Worship, without which the project may never have been undertaken. It appears that the commission will be able to present *Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America* to General Synod 2004.

Request for Advice on Bible Translations

Following the advice of the Advisory Committee on Christian Worship at General Synod 2003, the commission contacted the General Synod professors of theology to solicit their advice concerning the best translations for congregational use. Numerous responses were received. Rather than presenting an entirely new paper to the General Synod (a project that could take up to two years to complete), the commission resolved that the most timely response ought to take the form of reminding the classes and consistories of prior work done by those professors. Thus, the commission refers those interested in choosing a new Bible for congregational use to the following articles:

“Pastor, Which Bible?” in *Reformed Review*, 43:3 (1990), pp. 204-216

“Selecting a Translation of the Bible for Public Reading,” in *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, XXIV:4 (1990), pp. 191-194

Infant Dedication

The Commission on Christian Worship met with the Commission on Theology at its November meeting to discuss the practice of infant dedication, which has been occurring in several RCA congregations and even appears to be a recommended practice by at least one RCA classis. While the discussion of the issue was energetic, no resolution was reached. The Commission on Christian Worship reminds RCA ministers of Word and sacrament and elders of their ordination vows to accept the church's order and to administer the sacraments in purity. Ministers additionally subscribe to a vow to conduct the work of the church “according to the *Liturgy* and the *Book of Church Order*.” In no place does the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America view the dedication of infants as an optional practice. Infant baptism remains the normative practice in the RCA, not merely for the sake of tradition but based on a rich theology of the covenant. The commission urges those who encounter resistance to infant baptism to consider such resistance as a teachable moment in which to educate newcomers to the RCA in our strong belief in the sovereign grace of God.

Assisting Congregations with the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

In the interest of assisting congregations with celebrating the Lord's Supper, the commission has begun the process of publishing a laminated version of the 1987 Liturgy for the Lord's Supper, to be made available for insertion in hymnal racks. If all goes well, copies should be available from the RCA Distribution Center by the end of 2004.

Congregational Worship Survey

In 1987 and again in 1994 the Office of Worship initiated surveys of congregational worship practices. Since 1994 no such survey has been undertaken. In order for the commission to be most responsive to the actual needs of congregations, it must have information detailing what is actually happening in worship practices throughout the denomination. On behalf of the commission, the Office for Ministry Services has begun the work of contracting with the Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research to carry out such a survey on its behalf.

Belhar Confession

The commission notes with interest the movement toward the possibility of adopting the Belhar Confession. In order for the church to truly put that confession into practice, the Belhar will need to find expression not only in the pages of the *Minutes of General Synod* but in the pages of the weekly worship programs used in our congregations. Because the confession involves the work of many commissions, it is hoped that the November 2004 joint meeting of commissions might devote significant time to it. The commission will soon begin work on making available to congregations liturgical resources that will allow RCA members to give greater glory to God by confessing a common faith with fellow Christians in South Africa.

The Ten-Year Goal

The commission consulted with the Rev. Richard Welscott concerning whether and how it might best assist the RCA in accomplishing the ten-year goal adopted by the General Synod of 2003. The commission was informed that church-start pastors tend to be a very independent lot who look to any source to find "whatever works," and that church revitalization has tended to focus on programs like Focusing Leaders and Natural Church Development. The commission reminds the General Synod and its staff that worship is one activity in which both new congregations and revitalizing congregations are vitally interested; indeed, worship is the single act in which every congregation participates. The words and practices used in Christian worship inevitably shape Christian belief. What might established congregations have to teach new church starts about how patterns of corporate worship shape the beliefs of the worshipers? What might new church starts have to teach the older congregations? Revitalization will either begin outside of worship and find its way in, or begin in worship and spin outward from it. Worship practices will have profound effects, then, on both church multiplication and church revitalization. Congregational worship practices must be considered in the course of the continuing development of the ten-year goal. Some representative with both deep respect for liturgical tradition and a deep conviction for church growth should therefore be at the table as the ten-year goal continues to develop.

Elders and Deacons in Worship

Because ministry in the Reformed Church in America is carried out by minister, elder, and deacon working together, the commission has begun to identify and learn from congrega-

tions that include all three offices in the leadership of corporate worship. The commission hopes that it will soon be able to assist the Office for Ministry Services by offering resources and suggestions to the congregations to enhance this full sense of ministry. Such materials will be posted on the RCA's website (www.rca.org).

Worship Seminars

Given the current shortage of resources and the lack of an Office of Worship, the hope of providing worship seminars in selected areas of the RCA is not likely to be fulfilled soon. However, in cooperation with the Office for Ministry Services, the commission has begun discussion with the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship to investigate whether a cooperative arrangement might be possible in the future.

Office of Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship marked with sadness the General Synod Council's recommendation to close the Office of Worship, which was approved by General Synod 2003. The General Synod will be hard-pressed to fulfill its own mission to equip congregations in its most vital ministries, to say nothing of being an effective and faithful partner with other denominations, without restoring the Office of Worship to at least one-half-time status at the earliest possible date. All of the work that must be done by the commission is simply too great for it to be accomplished on a volunteer basis. As noted above, the Office for Ministry Services has been very generous and forthcoming in giving assistance to the commission; however, the tasks of the Office for Ministry Services have their own integrity, and time taken away from its portfolio and given to worship may deter that office from its greatest effectiveness.

Retiring Commissioners

The commission offers its sincere gratitude to the Rev. Norman Kolenbrander, who served ably as both a commissioner and as the commission's moderator for the past six years, and to the Rev. Sandra Damhof, a servant of five years who is no longer able to serve. Their insights and spirit have proven invaluable to the work of the commission; they will be sorely missed.

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology met November 6-8, 2003, in Zion, Illinois, in a joint meeting with the other General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council. This joint meeting allowed the commissions and the council to collaborate, communicate, and coordinate their overall responsibilities more fully and to work cooperatively in their work on behalf of the General Synod. The commission also met February 6-7, 2004, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

Continuing Work on the Concept of Office

The primary work in both commission meetings has been its ongoing work on the concept of office. At the request of the commission, Dr. Paul Fries of New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Dr. James Brownson of Western Theological Seminary have been preparing

papers and collaborating with members of the commission. The commission envisions a dual focus in its report to the church—first, on the nature of offices in the Reformed tradition, and second, on how the different offices function in the life of the church.

As reported to the 2003 General Synod, the current study on office arises out of earlier referrals to the commission regarding the role of deacons in higher assemblies and proposals for the creation of offices of evangelist and commissioned pastor. It is the commission's view that a more thorough review of the concept of office should precede further action on these related issues.

The two papers continue to be under revision, and the commission is discussing a format for these studies, planning to bring the report to the 2005 General Synod.

Continuing Work on Baptism

In its discussions around the practice of baptism in our churches, the commission has reviewed resources that are currently available in RCA publications, along with statements prepared recently by sibling churches in the Reformed tradition. As reported to the 2003 General Synod, while the commission does not feel that an additional paper is required, it wants to be available to answer questions regarding baptismal practices from individuals, churches, and classes. Further, the commission has discussed the possibility of producing a digest of the existing documents regarding baptism, re-baptism, child dedication, and children at the Lord's Table as that relates to baptism. A digest would make the relevant documents more easily accessible for study and discussion. The commission plans to review the materials in the digest, providing a biblical and theological introduction in preparation for offering it to the churches.

Study Guide for "God's Sovereign Grace in Evangelism" Paper

General Synod 2003 approved for study and discussion in local churches the paper "God's Sovereign Grace in Evangelism." The synod also asked the commission to prepare a study guide to aid individuals and groups reading and studying the paper.

Earth and Ethics Working Group

The commission-sponsored three-year working group that is studying the interconnectedness of ecology and economics is continuing its collaborative study. The earth and ethics working group, which is grant-based, has brought together environmentalists, ethicists, geographers, and economists under the direction of Dr. Stephen Bouma-Prediger of Hope College. The commission is making plans to hear a full report at the fall meeting of the joint commissions and General Synod Council. This may also afford an opportunity for the Commissions on Theology and Christian Action to meet together to discuss how RCA churches might become more meaningfully involved in working with these issues.

Joint Commission Work

In the coming year the commission will be working jointly with the Commission on Christian Action on a paper dealing with Christian Zionism. At the joint meeting the commission met with the Commission on Christian Unity to discuss the possible adoption of the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity for the RCA. The feasibility of denominational acceptance of the Belhar Confession will require continued collaboration and cooperation between several commissions in the future, among them the Commissions on Church Order and Christian Unity.

Report of the General Synod Council on Worship

This past year witnessed a transition of the modest worship “portfolio” from the Office of Social Witness and Worship to the Office for Ministry Services. It was the intent of this change to locate the renewal of worship in the program office responsible for the nurture of local consistories. In consultation with the Commission on Christian Worship, it was decided to again survey a significant group of RCA congregations regarding their worship practices and needs. The first survey was conducted in 1987, the second in 1994, with the third scheduled to be conducted by the Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research of Hope College in 2004. The results of this survey will provide an evolving portrait of the worship practices of local congregations over the past seventeen years and will also provide important insights to assist in setting directions for the renewal of that worship life. It is expected that some form of regional worship renewal events responsive to the results of the survey and the perceived needs of RCA congregations and consistories will be sponsored by the Office for Ministry Services in 2004-2005.

Overtures

Weekly Celebration of the Lord’s Supper

1. The Classis of Albany overtures the General Synod to strongly encourage the board of elders of every congregation in the Reformed Church in America to move toward the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day worship.

Reasons:

1. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me”(Luke 22:19). The Lord’s Supper is a gift from Christ to the church. We would do well to follow Christ’s instructions to avail ourselves of this gift frequently.
2. The apostle Paul said, “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Certainly to proclaim, frequently and faithfully, Jesus’ death is a laudable goal for any church.
3. John Calvin, in Geneva in 1537, proposed observance of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. Disapproval of his proposal caused Calvin to leave his leadership of the Geneva church. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote: “The Supper could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week” (IV.17.43), and the Supper “was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians” (IV.17.44).
4. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (Q & A 75) says that, “Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup.”
5. The *Belgic Confession* (Article 35) says that “Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those whom he has regenerated and ingrafted into his family, which is his church.” In addition, it tells us, “This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself, as much as the merits

of this suffering and death, he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.” Would we not do well to desire this nourishment, sustenance, strength, comfort, and renewal very frequently?

6. There is no time-table for this to happen so that different congregations in different contexts with different practices may move gradually and prudently toward weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The discussions and instruction along the way could also be very beneficial. By the working of the Holy Spirit among us, the fruit this could bear toward the revitalization of our congregations is certainly “more than we could ever ask or imagine.”

In response to overture 1, the advisory committee recommended:

R-91

To encourage the consistory of every congregation in the Reformed Church in America to consider moving toward the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper more frequently, making use of the materials and resources available on the RCA website. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The Lord’s Supper is a gift from Christ to the church. We would do well to follow Christ’s instructions to avail ourselves of this gift frequently.
2. The apostle Paul said, “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Certainly, to proclaim, frequently and faithfully, Jesus’ death is a laudable goal for any church.
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6. There is no timetable for this to happen so that different congregations, in different contexts, with different practices, may move gradually and prudently toward a more frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The discussions and instruction along the way could also be very beneficial. By the working of the Holy Spirit among us, the fruit this would bear toward the revitalization of our congregations is certainly “more than we could ever ask or imagine.”

7. Celebrating the Lord's Supper four times per year is the minimum requirement in the *Book of Church Order* (Part 1, Article 2, Section 10c).

Definition of Marriage

2. The Classis of the Canadian Prairies overtures the General Synod to “affirm that marriage is properly defined as the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.”

Reasons:

1. This is the time-honoured biblical mandate ordained by God in creation (Genesis 2: 2 and blessed by Jesus in Cana of Galilee (John 2: 1-11; cf. Matthew 19: 5).
2. The legal and cultural landscape in Canada demands a clear mandate for the church in the face of recent changes to this definition.
3. The legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada may place Canadian pastors at risk of prosecution if they refuse to perform these ceremonies.
4. Clarity at this time should avoid the difficult and public schism being played out on the world scene in a sister denomination.

In response to overture 2, the advisory committee recommended:

R-92

To affirm that marriage is properly defined as the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others.

Reasons:

1. This is the time-honored biblical mandate ordained by God in creation (Genesis 2:24) and blessed by Jesus in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11; cf. Matthew 19:5).
2. The legal and cultural landscape demands a clear mandate for the church in the face of recent changes to this definition.
3. The legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada may place Canadian pastors at risk of prosecution if they refuse to perform these ceremonies.
4. Clarity at this time should allow the Reformed Church to avoid the difficult and public schism being played out on the world scene.

A motion was made and supported to amend R-92.

VOTED: To amend R-92.

A motion was made and supported to table R-92 until a time uncertain.

VOTED: To not table R-92.

A motion was made and supported to refer R-92 to the Commission on Theology to study and report back to the 2005 General Synod.

VOTED: To not refer R-92 to the Commission on Theology.

VOTED: To adopt R-92 as amended.

R-92 amended

To affirm that marriage is properly defined as the union of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others; and further,

To direct the Commission on Church Order to consider an amendment to the *Book of Church Order* which places this affirmation into our church order, for report to the 2005 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

The advisory committee also recommended:

R-93

To instruct the Commission on Theology to provide a study paper on “human sexuality and marriage,” and to bring a progress report to the 2005 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. There has been no study on this subject since 1962.
2. The changing legal and cultural landscape requires such a study.