

## Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

The General Synod of 1998 charged the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) to “coordinate planning for A Decade Freed from Racism” and to establish steps that would enable the denomination to work toward the goal of a multicultural denomination freed from racism. The four specific charges to CORE were (*MGS 1998*, R-10, p. 131):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multicultural objectives.

This year’s report seeks to inform the General Synod of some of the progress that has been made toward the goal of an anti-racist, multicultural denomination freed from racism, and to encourage General Synod, regional synods, RCA councils and commissions, and other interested parties to intentionally become an anti-racist denomination.

As a reminder of the powerful position taken by General Synod toward the denomination being freed from racism, listed below is the action plan that CORE adopted in 2001:

1. Affirming the theological foundations that inform our life and witness as a denomination.
2. Educating ourselves as members of the Reformed Church in America about the history and meaning of racism, our complicity in it, our reasons to oppose it, and the strategies by which we can participate in its elimination.
3. Participating in transformative experiences to reshape our thinking, feeling, and acting, such as anti-racism workshops, cross-cultural dialogues, and celebrations of diversity.
4. Developing lay and pastoral leadership from among the membership of racial/ethnic congregations for ministry within the whole church.
5. Reshaping institutional structures that perpetuate racism within the RCA in order to include and affirm the gifts and ministries of the diverse people who are and will be members of this denomination.

### 1. Affirming theological foundations.

CORE rejoices and praises God that the 2006 General Synod commended the Belhar Confession to the church for study. The Commission on Christian Unity (CCU) has produced an excellent study guide, and CORE commends the assemblies and congregations that have studied it. CORE is confident that if the General Synod of 2007 provisionally adopts the Belhar as a standard of unity, many more congregations will use the study guide.

Already the Belhar serves to provide CORE with profound biblical principles for understanding racial and ethnic issues. Adoption of the Belhar as a standard of unity will truly give us, and the entire church, a solid theological foundation for addressing the stronghold of injustice in all its forms.

**2. Educating ourselves as members of the Reformed Church about the history and meaning of racism, our complicity in it, our reasons to oppose it, and the strategies by which we can participate in its elimination.**

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity has committed itself to communicating with denominations which have developed methods to educate their members concerning the history, effects, and shame of racism. The purpose of the commission is to promote understanding of and appreciation for the paths walked by persons of color in a white society and the devastation wrought by a racist society on all of us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The commission commits itself to building a bibliography of resources available to churches to assist them in their own journey during A Decade Freed from Racism.

CORE celebrates and was glad to participate in the January consultation on the multiracial future of the RCA and looks forward to the creation of the denominational position supporting this future.

CORE's usual practice is to provide itself with a greater understanding of racial and ethnic settings and struggles. At its spring meeting the commission met in Atlanta, Georgia, visiting the King Center and worshipping at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. served as pastor.

**3. Participating in transformative experiences to reshape our thinking, feeling, and actions such as anti-racism workshops, cross-cultural dialogues, and celebration of diversity.**

Seven years into A Decade Freed from Racism and six years since the General Synod adopted a recommendation urging "the church's leadership to engage in Christian oriented anti-racism or ethnic diversity training," there have been no reports of new persons who have completed anti-racism training. CORE would like to commend the RCA colleges and seminaries who have conducted or participated in cultural immersion projects to reshape thinking, feeling, and actions about racism. CORE also encourages regional synod and classis staff, pastors, professional church workers, church leaders, and members to attend the Ecumenical Racial Ethnic Multicultural gathering "The Spirit of Wholeness in Christ" on July 13-15, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. CORE commends Middle Collegiate Church of New York City for sponsoring "Developing Multiracial, Multicultural Ministry: Resourcing Your Congregation for Inclusion," which was held April 29-May 1, 2007.

**4. Developing lay and pastoral leadership from among the racial/ethnic congregations for ministry within the whole church.**

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity commends the Regional Synod of New York for organizing and hosting the education consultants event in April 2006. This was a church leadership event that featured educational consultants, keynote speakers, and performers from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. This was a true sample of events that support and encourage diversity in our denomination.

**5. Reshaping institutional structures that perpetuate racism within the RCA in order to include and affirm the gifts and ministries of the diverse people who are and will be members of this denomination.**

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity affirms and commends New Brunswick Theological Seminary for committing to a long-term process of anti-racism with Crossroads Ministry, an inter-faith and community based anti-racism training organization. The process will include shaping a new multicultural institution of learning with structures that share the power of decision-making. CORE looks forward to learning along with the seminary as its future unfolds.

The commission is active in framing the new staff position responsible for intentionally and strategically moving the denomination toward its goal of being freed from racism. CORE asks for prayers for the search committee and for the candidates. May God's purpose be sought and achieved.

### **BELHAR CONFESSION**

The members of Commission on Race and Ethnicity are grateful to God that the General Synod of 2006 adopted recommendations from the Commission on Christian Unity and our own commission to commend to the congregations the study of the Belhar Confession. This was done with the implicit understanding—as stated in the 2006 report of the Commission on Christian Unity and in General Synod discussions—that the General Synod of 2007 would be presented with recommendations to provisionally adopt the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity.

**The Commission on Race and Ethnicity wholeheartedly supports and encourages the adoption of the Belhar Confession provisionally for two years in order to live with the confession as a standard of unity and to learn from it. Specifically, as a church that seeks to follow Christ in mission in a world so loved by God, may it be informed and guided by the confession's themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. The commission welcomes comment from the church.**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Canada and the United States are increasingly diverse in the ethnic makeup of their populations. This is reflected in the current membership of the RCA and also in the church multiplication goals for starting new ethnic churches and promoting diversity within all congregations. The members of CORE believe that a greater ethnic diversity among voting delegates of General Synod would enable General Synod to make better decisions regarding the diversity of peoples currently in our denomination and the multiracial future with which God is presenting us.

#### **R-95**

**To instruct the General Synod Council to develop a task force to explore strategies for further diversifying the General Synod body, as reflected by its voting members, so that myriad voices from our denominational diversity may be represented and heard, and the General Synod may more accurately reflect the rich diversity of God's kingdom; and further**

**to provide a report to the 2008 General Synod. (NOT ADOPTED)**

In the ongoing work of racial reconciliation, narratives of human experience can be powerful tools for promoting understanding and healing. This was demonstrated by the effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Council of South Africa, which facilitated that country's peaceful transition from apartheid to racial equality. There the world saw how biblical, kingdom-of-God principles can transform human society.

- The Committee of Reference presented an amendment to R-96:

To instruct the General Synod Council to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Council, Commission on Race and Ethnicity, in consultation with the coordinator of multiracial ministries and social justice, the racial-ethnic ministry staff, the multiracial team, and

the councils, to gather stories of discrimination, intolerance, etc., as well as stories illustrating healing, reconciliation, and diverse people coming together in unity, and to make these stories available for the purpose of understanding and informed policy making in RCA congregations and assemblies.

Reason:

Rather than creating a new entity to do this work, it can be done by the Commission on Race and Ethnicity in consultation with General Synod Council staff and existing committees.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R-96.

A motion was made from the floor to further amend the recommendation as follows:

...and to make these stories available for the purpose of facilitating forgiveness—actively forgiving as well as being forgiven—and understanding and informed policy making in RCA congregations and assemblies.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R-96. ◀

**R-96**

**To instruct the ~~General Synod Council to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Council~~, Commission on Race and Ethnicity, in consultation with the coordinator of multiracial ministries and social justice, the racial-ethnic ministry staff, the multiracial team, and the councils, to gather stories of discrimination, intolerance, etc., as well as stories illustrating healing, reconciliation, and diverse people coming together in unity, and to make these stories available for the purpose of facilitating forgiveness—actively forgiving as well as being forgiven—and understanding and informed policy making in RCA congregations and assemblies.**

**(ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

The members of CORE are eager to see the denomination engage a younger and more diverse generation about issues relating to prejudice, discrimination, and racism and to give Christian focus to their idealism about a better world.

**R-97**

**To instruct the General Synod Council to develop and hold a youth conference on anti-racism and other forms of social justice.**

**(ADOPTED)**

The commission believes that is important for people to recognize how vitally important the Belhar Confession is for dealing with racial issues in our own communities and churches. It is not just a South African document. There is much understanding and healing needed in our own cultures. The Belhar Confession and the study guide are powerful tools for seeing past and present racial injustice everywhere. These tools are not yet used as widely as they should be.

The advisory committees on the Belhar offered an amendment:

**R-98**

**To urge the seminaries, colleges, classes, and congregations of the RCA to develop strategies for studying the Belhar Confession and to incorporate it in worship ~~and policy making~~. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

Reasons:

1. The new recommendation resolves the confusion about what it means to use a provisional document for policy making.
2. The involvement of the classes adds a level of encouragement and support for the development of strategies for use in congregations.

As our denomination is becoming more racially diverse and is committed to being proactive in furthering this diversity, it is important that our denominational staff reflects this diversity.

#### **R-99**

**To instruct the General Synod Council to develop by January 30, 2008, a set of hiring strategies and practices that fully ensure a diverse slate of candidates for all new staff hires. (ADOPTED)**

#### **Conclusion**

The CORE is cognizant of its role and responsibility in assisting the denomination through a difficult and painful process as it frees itself from racism and moves toward a multicultural/multiracial future that mirrors God's kingdom. CORE is conscious of those who have faithfully served Christ's church in this struggle. We have stood on their shoulders as we prayerfully sought comfort and inspiration; we have learned from their example as we continue the journey they started.

CORE rejoices especially this year in the leadership of Ella Campbell and expresses its deep appreciation and affection to her upon the occasion of her retirement in January 2008. Ella has served CORE as staff since its inception with grace, skill, and humor. We have benefited by her astute thinking and provocative questions, as well as her gentle and generous spirit. May God's abundant blessings go with her into a bright and fulfilling future. She leaves, as we all will leave one day, aware that the task is not finished. The following words echo our thoughts. They are from "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," written by Bishop Ken Untener as a reflection on the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero and delivered in a homily by John Cardinal Dearden on October 25, 1979:

*This is what we are about:*

*We plant seeds that one day will grow.*

*We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*

*We lay foundations that will need further development.*

*We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders,*

*ministers, not messiahs.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*