

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

Since its inception ten years ago, the members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) have served out of deep theological conviction that racism is sin and that our Lord redeemed for himself a church that is to be intentionally inclusive of all races and ethnic groups. The members of CORE also believe that the witness and credibility of the church are undermined and invalidated when the church does not radically transcend the norms of secular culture, which often perpetuates the grasp on privilege, power, comfort, and security by one group at the expense of others. Furthermore, as the Scriptures challenge us to look into our own hearts for hidden motives, CORE believes that racism can be so subtly present that those who are privileged may not even be conscious of its influence in their lives.

The General Synod of 1998 recognized the importance of this when it received a report from the Commission on Christian Action entitled “Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism.” That same General Synod voted to declare the decade beginning in 2000 as the “Decade Freed from Racism in the Reformed Church in America” (*MGS 1998*, R-9, p.131).

The General Synod of 1998 also charged CORE to “coordinate planning for the 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 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 multiethnic objectives.

Currently, the RCA is eight years into the “Decade Freed from Racism.” According to its mandate to “monitor, evaluate, and report,” CORE presents the following:

Progress Report on the Decade Freed from Racism

Note: the original 1998 report can be viewed on the RCA website:
<http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/BringingRacismToLight.pdf>.

1. Summary of key activities suggested in the 1998 report

Talk Activities

- Talk with people we normally do not talk with
- Tell our stories
- Gain new perspectives on ourselves
- One-to-one, plus other venues
- Planning and decisions must be made cross-racially
- Long-term commitments

Work Activities

- Work to learn each others' ways and cultures
- Build cross-racial work teams
- Promote reciprocal exchanges between economically diverse congregations
- Think out of the box to develop creative projects
- Share agenda-setting power

Models Activities

- Create models of preferred futures that promote racial unity, racial reconciliation, and racial justice
- Publicize models to make our approaches to the future flexible and familiar
- Focus on racial healing
- Assess failure to promote learning
- Provide grants to facilitate development of models

Advocacy Actions

- Recognize that discomfort can lead to denial and to deliverance—engage for deliverance to be the outcome
- People learn to change biased-based structures in order to attain greater levels of racial justice

2. Overview of actions taken relative to those suggested activities

1998—General Synod designated 2000-2010 as the “Decade Freed from Racism in the RCA.”

1999—A recommendation from the African-American Council was approved, commending action against racism at all levels of the church. The council also had discussions with Faith Alive Christian Resources that produced changes in the way they did curriculum, including: 1) intentional ways of expanding the pool of writers to include more racial/ethnic writers, and 2) the establishment of a racial/ethnic review team for new curriculum projects.

2000—The Commission on Christian Action reported on a number of specific resources connected to the decade that had been offered to the church.

2001—CORE presented an extensive action plan for the decade, including:

- Adoption of the Belhar Confession.
- Increase in educational resources that are racially and ethnically sensitive, with diverse input and discussion.
- Cross-cultural dialogue within regional synods, classes, and congregations.
- Anti-racism/ethnic diversity training for a wide variety of General Synod Council (GSC) staff. (Apparently much of this anti-racism training for GSC staff was done through 2003.)

2002—General Synod instructed GSC, in consultation with CORE, to survey the church on attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the commitment of the RCA toward freeing the denomination from any forms of racism and those barriers that inhibit the achievement of this goal. General Synod also instructed the Office of Christian Education to explore the unique educational needs of racial/ethnic communities.

2003—CORE noted the failure of the denomination to carry out the recommendations from the previous General Synod concerning consultation and survey. General Synod instructed GSC director of Mission Services, in conjunction with the

Urban Ministry Team, to identify ways to link congregations facing demographic change.

- 2004—CORE noted various accomplishments, especially around forward movement with the Belhar Confession and with anti-racism training for staff, and recommended that people be trained to extend anti-racism training to classes and churches.
- 2005—Minutes of General Synod reflected that there is work going on in racial and ethnic churches regarding discipleship, leadership, ministry, justice, mission, multiplication, and revitalization. CORE encouraged participation in cross-cultural events for all RCA bodies.
- 2006—General Synod adopted recommendations to:
- Affirm the Belhar Confession and commend its study.
 - Instruct GSC to explore development of a multi-day denominational conference on racism.
 - Require a report from GSC on which GSC staff and General Synod staff had undergone anti-racism training.
 - Instruct GSC to specify who should undergo anti-racism training.
 - Instruct GSC to ensure training of people to conduct anti-racism workshops and to make these workshops available for each regional synod in 2007.
 - Create a staff position to move the denomination toward its goal of being freed from racism.
- 2007—Provisional adoption of the Belhar Confession. General Synod also voted to:
- Instruct CORE to gather stories of racial discrimination, healing, and reconciliation.
 - Instruct GSC to hold a youth conference on anti-racism and other forms of social injustice.
 - Urge seminaries, colleges, classes, and congregations to study the Belhar and incorporate it in worship and policy making.
 - Instruct GSC to develop by January 2008 a set of hiring strategies and practices that fully ensure a diverse slate of candidates for all new staff hires.

Note: a more detailed version of the above progress report can be accessed at <http://images.rca.org/docs/multiracial/DecadeFreedReport.pdf>.

In order for the various RCA agencies, staff, and judicatories to be maximally aligned with the objectives of the “Decade Freed from Racism” (*MGS 1998*, pp. 119-131), CORE recommends:

R-66

To urge that the General Synod Council, staff, regional synods, classes, congregations, colleges, and seminaries study the “Progress Report on the Decade Freed from Racism” together with the original 1998 paper “Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism,” and consider whether any operating procedures and practices need to be revised in order to be more consistent with the denomination’s goal of becoming a multiracial denomination freed from racism.

The Advisory Committees on Inclusivity offered an amendment to R-66:

R-66

To ~~urge instruct that~~ the General Synod Council, ~~staff, and to~~ **strongly urge** regional synods, classes, ~~congregations~~ **consistories, and RCA** colleges and seminaries **to study** the “Progress Report on the Decade Freed from Racism” together with the original 1998 paper “Bringing Racism to Light for a Decade Freed from Racism,” and ~~consider whether any operating procedures and practices need to be revised in order to be more~~ **to evaluate and, if necessary, revise their policies and practices to ensure that they are** consistent with the denomination’s goal of becoming a multiracial denomination freed from racism; **and further,**

to instruct the General Synod Council to prepare guidelines to be distributed with the two papers named, and to request and receive responses from the assemblies and institutions named above, for report to the General Synod of 2010. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Reason:

The intent of the original recommendation needed strengthening and clarity of process.

Ongoing Concerns

During the “Decade Freed from Racism” various General Synods have approved far reaching recommendations, and a good number of them have been implemented or are in the process of development. These are good tactical steps that evidence the denomination’s desire for racial justice. But how well has the Reformed Church in America in its administration and grassroots life progressed toward being freed from racism? As we are now in the eighth year of the decade, can we say that personal and institutional racism and all their consequences have been eight-tenths eliminated, and that in another two years we will be freed from racism, thank God, freed indeed?

Eight years into the “Decade Freed from Racism” CORE observes that:

- RCA churches in changing communities continue to move to racially homogeneous communities.
- The RCA has few strong “minority” churches that take leading roles in the denomination.
- There are not many “multiracial” congregations in the RCA (the accepted standard being a church that has at least 20 percent membership of people belonging to a different race than the majority of the congregation).
- Until a year ago (which was the seventh year into the “Decade Freed from Racism”) all staff and employees of the denominational office in Grand Rapids were white, and many people in the denomination appeared to be comfortable with that.
- Various General Synods have voted for the establishment of antiracism training workshops for members of the RCA, but little has been done to make them available at regional and local levels.
- If the General Synod itself is a true microcosm of the denomination at large, the racial makeup of its delegates reflects that the RCA is still a denomination with only a token presence of minorities, and we have made insufficient progress in changing this.
- Multicultural competency training for RCA clergy, staff, and lay leaders is not a major objective of most of our judicatories.
- Sunday morning is still the most segregated time in America, and the RCA is not an exception.

CORE makes these points not just out of the blue, but in the context of the RCA being in its eighth year of the “Decade Freed from Racism.” These are the kinds of issues on which the church ought to be making great progress during this specially designated decade. There are many good things going on the RCA, but CORE believes that the commitment to a “decade freed from racism” has not received the energy, resources, and sense of urgency it deserves.

The members of CORE recognize that the 1998 commitment to a “Decade Freed from Racism” was in itself an expression of naïve enthusiasm. Eliminating racism and its consequences will not be accomplished in a decade. It requires intentionality, commitment, education, vision, passion, allocation of resources, and structural and attitudinal changes at all levels of church life. CORE believes that beyond the “decade” the RCA must be perpetually committed to a multiracial future freed from racism.

CORE is grateful that in the past year the position of coordinator of multiracial initiatives and social justice has been established, and filled so capably by Earl James. Under his leadership a number of significant decisions by various General Synods will soon be implemented. This will move the RCA forward.

But a staff position alone will not bring the denomination to its goal of being freed from racism. This objective must be built into the very structure of the church’s significant endeavors. Presently the RCA’s major undertaking is “Our Call.” Tremendous energy, financing, strategizing, planning, and training is poured into this revitalization vision. This is to be admired and celebrated. But it is noteworthy that as “Our Call,” with its five dimensions, was adopted and developed within the church’s declared “Decade Freed from Racism,” it did not include freedom from racism as a sixth dimension. CORE knows and appreciates that the denomination’s leadership has built into “Our Call” strategies for establishing ethnic and multiracial churches. Also, that there are plans for multicultural competence training for some church-planting pastors. But in order to accomplish, in some significant measure, the high vision of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the denomination would be well served if “freedom from racism” were elevated to become one of the dimensions of Our Call’s visionary kingdom building endeavor. CORE therefore presents the following recommendation:

R-67

To affirm that, in the spirit and intention of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the RCA’s racism-free multicultural future is a critical and strategic component of the working out of Our Call, and further:

to instruct the General Synod Council to suitably reflect that affirmation by adding to the five dimensions of Our Call the following as a sixth: “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism,” and to develop objectives, goals, and strategies for implementation and measuring outcomes.

The Advisory Committees on Inclusivity offered an amendment to R-67:

R-67

To affirm that, in the spirit and intention of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the RCA’s racism-free multicultural future is a critical and strategic component of the working out of Our Call, and further:

to instruct the General Synod Council to suitably reflect that affirmation by ~~adding to the five dimensions of Our Call the following as a sixth: “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism,” and to~~

developing objectives, goals, and strategies for implementation and measuring outcomes.

Reason:

In the advisory committee meetings, the recommendation as presented was not supported. However, the spirit and intent of the original recommendation was supported, and this must be lived out through all five dimensions of Our Call.

VOTED: TO NOT ADOPT THE AMENDMENT.

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

R-67

To affirm that, in the spirit and intention of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the RCA’s racism-free multicultural future is a critical and strategic component of the working out of Our Call, and further:

~~to instruct the General Synod Council to suitably reflect that affirmation by adding to the five dimensions of Our Call the following as a sixth: “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism,” and to develop objectives, goals, and strategies for implementation and measuring outcomes.~~

to direct the General Synod Council, in collaboration with appropriate commissions and agencies of the RCA, to prepare a proposal to integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice, for report to the 2009 General Synod.

VOTED: TO ADOPT THE AMENDMENT.

A further motion was made from the floor to amend the recommendation by inserting the deleted paragraph two as paragraph three:

To affirm that, in the spirit and intention of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the RCA’s racism-free multicultural future is a critical and strategic component of the working out of Our Call; and further,

to direct the General Synod Council, in collaboration with appropriate commissions and agencies of the RCA, to prepare a proposal to integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice, for report to the 2009 General Synod; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to suitably reflect that affirmation by adding to the five dimensions of Our Call the following as a sixth: “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism,” and to develop objectives, goals, and strategies for implementation and measuring outcomes.

VOTED: TO ADOPT THE AMENDMENT TO THE AMENDMENT.

R-67

To affirm that, in the spirit and intention of the “Decade Freed from Racism,” the RCA’s racism-free multicultural future is a critical and strategic component of the working out of Our Call; and further,

to direct the General Synod Council, in collaboration with appropriate commissions and agencies of the RCA, to prepare a proposal to integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice, for report to the 2009 General Synod; and further,

to instruct the General Synod Council to suitably reflect that affirmation by adding to the five dimensions of Our Call the following as a sixth: “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism,” and to develop objectives, goals, and strategies for implementation and measuring outcomes. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

As the RCA moves through the “Decade Freed from Racism” it would greatly facilitate the measuring of progress and setting of objectives if there were statistics on the racial/ethnic makeup of the denomination. Some may object to gathering racial statistics on the grounds that “we should be colorblind.” This may be a well meant objection. But the goal of being freed from racism is not to be colorblind. Race and ethnicity are realities of our human existence. We ought not to pretend that they do not exist. Rather, diversity should be recognized and celebrated. It appears that even in the eternal heavenly kingdom of God human distinctions are not eliminated, for it is said in the Bible that a great multitude “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” stands before the throne (Revelation 7:9). CORE recommends:

R-68

To instruct the General Synod Council to so revise the annual Consistorial Report that it will include a numeric accounting of the races and ethnicities among the members and adherents so that the church will have a benchmark by which to measure its progress toward a multiracial future; and further,

to use the following categories from the U.S. Census Bureau: American Indian alone; Asian alone; Black or African American alone; Hispanic; White alone; Other race alone; Two or more races.

The Advisory Committees on Inclusivity offered an amendment to the recommendation:

R-68

To instruct the General Synod Council to so revise the annual Consistorial Report ~~that it will include a numeric accounting of the races and ethnicities among the members and adherents so that the church will have a benchmark by which to measure its progress toward a multiracial future;~~ to include the following questions: How does your church reflect the racial and cultural context in which you conduct your ministry? What are you doing to build bridges that develop and deepen mutual ministry that is multiracial or multicultural? and further;

~~to use the following categories from the U.S. Census Bureau: American Indian alone; Asian alone; Black or African American alone; Hispanic; White alone; Other race alone; Two or more races. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)~~

Reasons:

1. The desire is to put questions before congregations and consistories that will invite reflection on their own ministries.
2. If the commission wishes to benchmark or determine current percentages of racial-ethnic persons in our congregations, they can still seek that information in other ways.

CORE joins with our sisters and brothers on the Commission for Women and the Commission on Christian Action observing that:

[C]urrent denominational staff, especially at classifications I and II (upper-level executives), do not reflect the diversity of the denomination, especially the female majority of the RCA's membership (63 percent). This overwhelming preponderance of male (and Caucasian) leadership defies a vision of equality, much less a practice of justice. The RCA has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to justice and equality by paying special attention to the manner in which future denominational staff positions are filled, especially key upper level staff positions.

From the Report of the Commission for Women

Especially in light of the Belhar Confession reminding us to live into Christ's call for justice, CORE fully supports the Commission for Women's recommendation:

That throughout the remaining years of Our Call (2008-2013), the General Synod Council develop and implement a process to recruit and train leaders who represent the array of ethnicities and races that make up God's world, with particular attention to gender inclusion, so that in the future the pool of candidates for denominational staff positions, particularly at classifications I and II, better reflect the denomination's commitment to a multicultural and multiracial future; and further, that the General Synod Council create a task force (to include representatives from the Commission for Women, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, and the RCA Women's Ministries Advisory Team) to develop a plan for greater inclusion of women and people of color at all levels of staffing within the RCA, and to develop leadership training opportunities consistent with this goal.

Conclusion

The members of CORE are Asian, black, Hispanic, Native American, and white. They are enriched by each other's diverse experiences and insights, which blend into a common vision for God's church. May the denomination as a whole increasingly experience how beautiful it is when diverse brothers and sisters dwell in unity together.