

The Inward and Outward Journey of Our Call

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Connecting with and Following Christ

A few weeks ago, my wife, Karin, and I had lunch at the Potter's House in Washington, D.C., with Gordon Cosby, founder of the Church of the Saviour. Gordon married us, and our lives and Christian faith were profoundly shaped in those early years by this unique congregation.

Some of you know this church's story. As a chaplain in World War II, Gordon concluded that the soldiers he ministered to were not prepared spiritually either to live or to die. He and his wife, Mary, felt called to establish a church that would insist on a high level of commitment, with serious discipleship training and intentional engagement in mission from all of its members.

Key to the Church of the Saviour's ministry has been its stress on both the "inward journey" and the "outward journey." Members are nurtured on their "inward journey" by being held accountable to disciplines of daily Bible reading, prayer, journal writing, and regular times of retreat. Every member is nurtured on the "outward journey" through participation in a "mission group" focused on specific mission and service that express the gospel, often with particular attention to poor and marginalized people. This journey clearly and consistently walks the path of discipleship.

When I encountered the Church of the Saviour after moving to D.C. in 1968, it was the first time I had experienced a church so deeply committed to living out the whole gospel. It grounded, deepened, and enlivened my personal faith in Jesus Christ as never before. That powerful encounter with the living Christ compelled me to search for how I would express my own call to participate in God's mission in the world, seeking the justice and peace that Jesus initiated.

In that congregation, the gospel was whole. To journey with Christ was serious, risky, and demanding, but fruitful. Evangelical faith was not severed from social justice. Fellowship was not separated from mission. The Word was not isolated from the world. This was the most "missional" congregation I have ever encountered.

More than four decades have passed since that first encounter with Gordon Cosby. I went on to complete seminary and become ordained in the RCA, my ecclesial home. Gordon is now ninety-one, and he continues to minister in one of the emerging church communities that has sprung up from the vision of the Church of the Saviour.

As we shared over lunch that day in the Potter's House, where years ago I worked and ministered every Thursday evening, I reflected on the journey of the RCA over these past years. God has been faithful. We've turned our heads and hearts toward following Christ in mission, and embraced Our Call, and we are experiencing fruitful and inspiring results.

Yet, there is more. When I began my service as general secretary in 1994, my heart's desire was to hold forth together a deepening intimacy with Jesus Christ with an uncompromised commitment to God's justice in the world. On retreat last year, I prayed again that in all we are doing, we might learn and show what it truly means to live out the whole gospel. We still fall short. The cultural pressure to conform ourselves to hedonistic and self-serving values is overwhelming. It requires tremendous commitment and discipline to conform

ourselves instead to Jesus Christ, and to shape our identities by his love and grace alone.

The more we are truly connected to Christ, the more we will go where his love leads—to the pain, suffering, and injustice that plague our world. If we follow Jesus, we will find ourselves with the poor, the broken, and the marginalized. Congregations will be challenged to set aside shallow self-preoccupations and embrace a life together where participation in God’s mission is central. This outward journey can and must engage each and every individual who has tasted the love of God in Christ, so that all are joined in the movement of God’s kingdom and we become people who “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

I believe that this inward and outward journey must continue to deepen in each of our lives, and our congregations must be places that nurture and reinforce our journeys at every stage of life. This requires that we learn freshly what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Sometimes the simple, basic truths are the most profound. At this time in the life of the RCA, I believe we are beckoned to hear and respond to the call of discipleship.

Discipleship, as we often describe it, is the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming more like him in all we think, say, and do, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

In the middle of March, shortly before my lunch at the Potter’s House, the RCA’s Discipleship Team met in D.C. and spent some days at the Church of the Saviour with people who have shaped its identity and ministries. When my staff colleagues Kirsty DePree and Vicky Menning returned from that experience, they were eager to share with me the excitement and radical challenge that they and the team had experienced. Being with Jesus meant being with the poor. They yearned to see more examples and models of discipleship in RCA congregations, models that can foster a deep and authentic intimacy with Jesus Christ that then empowers us to give our lives away for the justice and reconciliation God so desires in the world. I yearn for that as well, and this has been an answer to prayer.

Since General Synod adopted Our Call in 2003, our life as a denomination has been witnessing important changes—even deep change. This is change that goes beyond just measuring incremental results or making good strategic plans. Deep change is change in organizational culture, in attitudes, in depth of commitment, and in inspired aspirations for the future. It’s change that moves from convictions in our heads to dispositions in our hearts. We’re seeing that deep change happen in the two major initiatives of Our Call, church multiplication and congregational revitalization, which are reaching and transforming the hearts and lives of disciples both new and old.

Today, there are 188 new emerging ministries and congregations in the RCA that reach out to over thirteen thousand people with God’s grace and love. This is unprecedented. Of these, 121 have submitted new congregation plans. At this synod we will welcome ten that have become fully organized RCA churches in the last year. And why is this important? First of all, this is not about the future of the RCA. Rather, it’s about the growing number of spiritually homeless people in North America.

Let’s be clear about the facts. On March 27, on the day that I met with the RCA’s Church Multiplication Team, *USA Today* featured a front-page story about the results of a new survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The survey found that although fifty million people have been added to the U.S. population in the past eighteen years, the number belonging to almost every denomination has gone down. Of all the classifications in the survey, the fastest growing group consists of people who identify themselves as non-religious, now 15 percent of the total population. The report concluded: “[T]he challenge

to Christianity...does not come from other religions but from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.” As Tim Brown, president of Western Theological Seminary, said after reading this article, “We’ve got to do something.” And we are.

When I met with the Church Multiplication Team, I was drawn to the story found in John, chapter four, of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. What struck me were the words he said to his disciples after this amazing encounter. He said to them, “I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper may rejoice together” (John 4:35b-36).

We’ve all heard that passage. But here’s the fresh insight I discovered. In John’s Gospel, Jesus shares this when going through Samaria, a place that Jews normally avoided, and after talking with a Samaritan woman, which radically broke the acceptable social norms of his culture. He is reaching out to those who are neglected and marginalized, and going into the places most people wanted to avoid. And that’s precisely where he shows his disciples that the fields are ripe for harvesting.

Further, I was struck by how he encourages the reaper and the sower to “rejoice together.” There’s a recognition of interdependence, and of ultimate dependence on God’s grace. Today, through our church multiplication movement, we are learning how to walk into those places and communities that we have often avoided. Our racial and cultural diversity is growing as a result. We are seeing that God has blessed us with deep roots that are now reaching out into unexpected places. We are learning the joys and struggles of mutual dependence as we work to maintain and nurture relationships between the existing churches and assemblies of the RCA and our newly emerging congregations. These new ministries require intentional and graceful nurture to become fully developed Reformed churches. Serious tensions and challenges can arise, and that’s why the sower and the reaper need one another. Together we rejoice that the grace of God, which has sustained our unity for centuries, is bringing thousands more into our fellowship as we are carried into a new century.

Moreover, because conversion drives much of the growth of our new churches, we see again the striking need for the call to deep discipleship. I remember talking some years ago with an RCA pastor who wanted to start a new church for those who had no connection to Christian faith. A few years later we met again. “We’ve been successful, by God’s grace,” he told me. “But that’s the problem. We now have a church filled with unchurched people.” Evangelism and discipleship are inseparable. It is not enough to count the people who come through the door. Jesus said, “Come to me,” but he also said, “Follow me.” And we must remember that his invitation is extended not only to new people but to people who have been in the church for years or all of their lives and who are spiritually adrift too. The bottom line is this: we don’t stop discipling people once we have them in the door. The church must be a place where we are challenged, equipped, and empowered to live as disciples.

Empowering Congregations and Transforming Lives

When it comes to making disciples, our existing congregations experience many of the same needs as our new congregations. Our Call invites congregations into pathways for revitalization and offers tools for the journey. What is a revitalizing congregation? Here’s our definition: “A revitalizing congregation is a body of believers, responsive to God’s call, developing a faithful and fruitful life through new mission, new ministries, and new members.”

Ultimately all this depends upon God's grace, and upon congregational readiness. But we've been discovering what helps. Here are some examples:

- Revitalizing networks gather a small group of pastors for transformational learning, covenantal accountability, and collegial support. Four hundred and forty RCA pastors now participate in sixty-nine such networks, and this is making a profound difference in their lives and their congregations.
- Natural Church Development is a tool to assess congregational health and help a church in furthering its mission. Since 2001, we've had 159 churches engage in this process.
- Coaching relationships are showing us the power of supporting and empowering one another in skilled ways as we move through the challenges of revitalization. About four hundred pastors are currently being coached, and the number keeps growing as more coaches continue to be trained.

We're focusing our efforts in revitalization as we learn more about how lasting change occurs. You've read in the Workbook the goals and strategies that we have adopted in accountability to the General Synod Council, your executive committee. You'll see that we're not measuring activities; we're looking for outcomes.

One of the traps any congregation or assembly can fall into when seeking revitalization is to simply increase activities in order to get more people involved. But that alone may not bring the changes that are most needed. Willow Creek Church, which was founded by Bill Hybels, discovered this, and shared their lessons this past year in a study called Reveal.

The study used thorough research methods to discover what effects their church programs were having on the lives of their members. One interesting discovery was that an increasing level of participation by members in church activities did not predict an increasing love for God.

The researchers concluded that "Higher levels of activity do not seem to drive spiritual growth."

Reggie McNeal came to a similar conclusion. He tells of working with a large and seemingly successful mega-church in California whose staff was working frantically to keep members engaged in more and more creative activities. Reggie persuaded them to change their focus and instead to visit every member and family in the church over a period of weeks and months, asking them these five questions:

- What do you enjoy doing?
- Where do you see God active in your life?
- Where would you like to see God working in your life in the next six to twelve months?
- How would you like to invest in the lives of other people?
- How can we pray for you?

This congregation was transformed as the focus of its life and outreach shifted away from simply keeping members busy in "church activities" and moved toward empowering and nurturing people to discover God's work in their lives and to use their gifts to serve others.

Once again, we're driven back to the basics of discipleship. What matters is how we are deepening our inward encounter with God's Spirit in order to strengthen our outward ministry and mission to the needs of others. All that we hope and pray for in the revitalization of our congregations, and all the fruit we are seeing, is rooted in becoming more committed and more courageous followers of Jesus Christ.

Discerning God's Direction and Confronting Hard Questions

Our journey in the RCA since our beginnings in this land in 1628 has been one of faithfully seeking to discern and discover God's leading. Since we adopted Our Call in 2003, God has continued to lead us to new horizons and discoveries. Together we felt clear about where God was beckoning us to go, and after a long and careful process of discernment, we said so. Here's how we expressed it:

Following Christ in mission together, led by the Holy Spirit, and working with all the partners God provides, we believe that God is calling the Reformed Church in America over the next ten years to focus its efforts and resources on starting new congregations and revitalizing existing congregations, thereby empowering fruitful and faithful ministries for the glory of God.

But we didn't know how we would get there. It took much prayer, dialogue, and effort to discover how leadership, discipleship, and mission were the foundations for church multiplication and congregational revitalization. We then had to decide what strategies would work, and how the governing structures of the church could hold staff accountable for doing what General Synod had directed.

In this process, we in the RCA also began to discover the approaches and methods that would be most helpful to local congregations. Further, we had to contextualize our efforts to the various regions of the church and address the differing needs, histories, and contemporary situations of each. This is a remarkable ongoing process, marked certainly by mistakes and dead ends, but also blessed with creative, unanticipated discoveries.

We've learned the difference between new church development and church multiplication. We've discovered the role of parenting churches. We've seen what pastoral networks can do. We've been awestruck by the wisdom of the Fresh Wind letter. We've discovered the gift of coaching. We've become committed to nurturing young, emerging leaders. We're learning what a "missional congregation" actually looks like. We're exploring how being missional connects to our Reformed identity. We continue to discover the transformative power of focusing on discipleship at every stage of life.

This journey has also led us to engage tough questions, as it should—questions like: Should a classis only be defined geographically? What's the proper training and role for a commissioned pastor? How do we understand office and leadership? What marks of a Reformed congregation should be evident in any context of ministry? How do racial and ethnic groups within the RCA relate to global mission outside of North America, and vice versa?

Our Call has raised these questions and many more during the last six years. And all of these questions, I contend, need to be answered through being missional and Reformed. Let's remember this: a missional church places its commitment to participate in God's mission in the world at the center of its life and identity. When the RCA adopted our Statement of Mission and Vision in 1997, and then Our Call in 2003, committing ourselves resolutely to "follow Christ in mission together," we knew that much would have to change.

This is the story of the New Testament. As the Spirit forms and grows the church, its missional outreach keeps challenging its assumptions and structures. And that pattern continues in the history of the church. As the gospel, rooted in the incarnation of God's love in Jesus Christ, keeps extending to different peoples, cultures, and places, the core message remains consistent, but the means, methods, structures, forms, and expressions continual-

ly change and adapt. That's the inherent power and inspired wisdom of our faith in the God who became flesh. This is what makes it universal.

The Reformed tradition captures the heart of this creativity by declaring that we are Reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God. This wise impulse must continue to guide us in our own journey as we in the RCA together answer the questions, confront the conflicts, and discover the new possibilities that Our Call has placed before us.

Embracing Our Multiracial Future

Perhaps the most striking discovery in living out Our Call during these last six years came when we embraced the necessity of a biblically grounded commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism. For decades, of course, we've acknowledged the sin of racism and made sincere efforts to empower those in the RCA who are from racial and ethnic backgrounds other than the white, Anglo majority. But in the last three years something more has been stirring.

Our Commission on Race and Ethnicity, founded in 1999, brought a series of challenges to General Synod in 2006. We also created a Multiracial Congregational Team composed of RCA pastors who are serving congregations with significant racial diversity.

Meanwhile, as our church multiplication movement grew, often reaching out beyond the previous cultural and racial boundaries of the RCA, we began to get a picture of a new future God was creating in our midst. We made a commitment that at least one-third of our new church starts would be an incarnate witness to a multiracial future, and we're ahead of that goal.

All this effort needed focused leadership and coordination, so in November 2007, Earl James began his service as coordinator for multiracial initiatives and social justice. At last year's General Synod, all these efforts came together in a focused deliberation on the relationship between our commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism and Our Call. We discovered that following Christ in mission requires a biblically grounded commitment to racial reconciliation, a commitment that must be lived out in concrete ways. So, after an inspiring debate, General Synod directed that this be added as a sixth dimension to Our Call.

The General Synod Council has implemented this direction. We've set forth ambitious goals and strategies, which are detailed in your Workbook. But let me tell you the story of one of the more remarkable strategies, which I and thirty-three others experienced a few weeks ago—the Sankofa journey.

We took the name of our journey from the word *sankofa*, part of the Akan language in Ghana, which is the name of a mythical bird that flies with its head turned backward, carrying an egg in its beak. It's a symbol of the importance of learning from the past. Our Sankofa journey was a three-and-a-half-day pilgrimage by bus that looked back to pivotal moments in the history of the civil rights struggle in the U.S. in order to move forward into the RCA's multiracial future.

Most of our regional synod executives and several members of the RCA's General Synod Council made this journey. Each person shared the journey with a partner of a different race in order to understand how race shapes our experiences and perspectives. Half of those on the bus were African American, and my partner was General Synod vice president James Seawood.

Our bus journey started five blocks from my childhood home in Park Ridge, Illinois. I grew up in this all-white Chicago suburb. My high school had four thousand students, and I don't remember a single person of color. So this trip felt really personal. I had never made the journey from Park Ridge to Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham, either geographically or psychologically.

We rode overnight to Selma, and relived the story of "bloody Sunday" during the voting rights march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. At each point on the journey we were in deep dialogue with our partners, responding to questions and videos that made this trip a seminar on wheels.

In Birmingham, Carolyn McKinstry told us, "We understood terrorism before 9/11." She was fourteen in 1963, and she was in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on that Sunday morning when it was bombed; four of her young girlfriends were killed.

On our journey we also visited models of inspiring Christian ministry where the racial divide is being bridged, and poor people are being given hope through the power of the gospel.

All of us were changed by these days. We built new and trusting relationships across racial lines, and together we faced tough and troubling questions. It was a powerful experience, and we hope to repeat these Sankofa journeys many times for others in the RCA.

We know that the vision of Revelation 7:9, with a multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb," defines the future we are called by God to seek. That will require a denominational Sankofa.

In the Reformed tradition, we believe in providence. I am convinced that God's providence is at work in placing the gift of the Belhar Confession before the RCA at the same time Our Call has led us to more intentionally seek a multiracial future freed from racism.

It wasn't planned this way. In 1994, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa came to our General Synod and presented us with the gift of the Belhar. No one could have predicted, or planned, that a confession which expresses with such biblical clarity the gospel's call to reconciliation, justice, and unity would come before the General Synod at a time when Our Call would lead us, so evidently, to embrace a multiracial future.

Your decision on the Belhar Confession will be the most important and historically significant one you will make at this General Synod. But by God's providence throughout the 381-year journey of the Reformed Church in America, we have been prepared for this moment. Through the Belhar, we have a historic opportunity to add a new dimension to our standards of unity, to confess to the world our belief that unity, reconciliation, and justice are at the heart of the gospel message.

In addition to considering adoption of the Belhar Confession, you'll be engaging in a number of other discussions and decisions during these days. I want to update you on developments since last year's General Synod that will be relevant to your work during these days.

Ensuring Economic Sustainability

I know all of you are interested in how the national and now global economic downturn has affected the programs and ministry of the Reformed Church in America, especially those efforts carried out on behalf of the General Synod.

We've taken decisive actions to ensure our economic sustainability. In December, staff went through a major strategic planning process as we evaluated each area of our work in light of Our Call. This was a timely opportunity that helped us to further prioritize our efforts, making sure that the work central to our mission would be sustained and supported. Then, after carefully analyzing financial trends through the end of last year and projecting some reductions in revenue, we cut \$800,000 out of our present budget, or about 4.5 percent. That included eliminating two staff positions, reducing another to part time, reducing various program costs, canceling the annual staff meeting, cutting travel expenses, and encouraging creative use of new technologies as alternatives to costly meetings. Those actions were not easy, but I believe they were necessary in order for us to remain good stewards of our financial resources.

We have also been communicating with classis clerks and many congregations as we struggle together in the midst of tough economic circumstances. In response to what we have heard, GSC is proposing to you an assessment budget for the coming fiscal year that is frozen at the same level as last year's. The assessment budget covers about 32 percent of the overall GSC budget, with other revenue coming from Partnership-in-Mission shares for global mission, contributions, sales, and investment income. In similar fashion, we are also freezing the salaries of all GSC employees at their present levels for the next fiscal year. The expenditures in the 2010 fiscal year budget are more than \$1 million less than those originally set for the 2009 budget.

These measures fulfill the constraints established by the GSC through its policy governance, requiring that expenses do not exceed available funds, and that a reserve equal to at least 25 percent of the operating budget is on hand. I am convinced that these steps will preserve a secure financial foundation as we focus on our mission and fulfill the expectations of Our Call in the year ahead, and that they will equip us to be better positioned to lead and to respond to new needs that arise.

Your wisdom is needed by the Reformed Church in America as we look at other matters before this General Synod. We need to decide how best to spend limited resources for the purpose of communication in a time when rapidly changing technologies are revolutionizing how we receive and share information, ideas, and knowledge. Because of the importance of this decision, every delegate will have a voice through participation in advisory groups.

Supporting Women's Ministry

Of particular concern to many of us, including me, is the future of the Office of Women's Ministries. In 1999 and 2000, Reformed Church Women's Ministries worked to establish an Office of Women's Ministries as an integrated part of the GSC. The decision was made to fund this work through a designated fund drive. This effort, "In Step Together," raised important funds for this purpose, although it was short of its goal. This office has been staffed by Mary Clark since April 2004.

By the end of the 2008 fiscal year, however, nearly all of the designated funding was depleted. Desiring to continue its work, we put together other available funds, including undesignated reserves, to this purpose in the 2009 fiscal year. Now those funds are depleted. Not having a sufficient revenue stream going forward, we made the difficult decision to discontinue financial support for the Women's Ministries staff position.

However, this issue is not settled. In my view, a view shared widely by leaders, teachers, commissions, and officers in the Reformed Church in America, we continue to squander the gifts of the Holy Spirit when women are not able to fully exercise their gifts and lead-

ership in the life of the denomination. We must be as passionate in our commitment to empower the ministries of women as we are passionate in our commitment to live into a multiracial future freed from racism. It is crucial for the goals of Our Call, and for all the future ministry and mission of the RCA, that we discover the best and most effective ways to fully support the gifts and ministry of women, and that we agree on how we as a church will fund this work.

We'll need to listen carefully to voices throughout the church, of women and men, to discover how best to proceed. To do so, the General Synod Council will convene a special consultation this September of stakeholders from throughout the RCA, which will then bring recommendations to the General Synod Council. A planning team of ten people met in May and is already designing the process, and a special committee at this synod will contribute further to advising our next steps around this issue.

Remembering the Main Thing

Dealing with issues of communication, finance, and polity, plus reports from several task forces, commissions, and committees, including the dialogue on homosexuality, has an important place in the life of this synod. But I would urge you as delegates to “keep the main thing the main thing.”

Here's the big picture, at least from my perspective. The Reformed Church in America finds itself in a North American culture where growing millions are living lives that are disconnected from the message of the gospel. My wife, Karin, is a hospital chaplain in Grand Rapids. Three weeks ago she was at the bedside of a dying patient. The family—brothers and sisters and children—had gathered. Karin asked if they wished to have a prayer. After an awkward silence, one of them said, “Well, none of us are religious at all.” The only exception was the mother, from a Christian Reformed church, who wanted Karin to pray with her.

I don't think we who are part of the church recognize how common this is becoming in our culture. And we won't recognize this as long as we just keep looking at ourselves. Remember that in John, after Jesus offers to satisfy the Samaritan woman's spiritual thirst with the “living water” that only he can bring, Jesus then says to his disciples, “Look around you.” When the RCA's Statement of Mission and Vision was adopted in 1997, it envisioned “congregations radically attentive to the world outside their doors.” We must keep hearing Jesus' words: “Look around you.”

That must become our holy preoccupation. This is where Our Call beckons us. This missional calling to participate in what God is doing in the world—that is the main thing.

When we follow Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God, we open ourselves to the pain, injustice, and suffering that are in our midst, and around the globe. In April, following the Sankofa journey, I was in Washington, D.C. attending the Mobilization to End Poverty. Twelve hundred Christians from a diversity of denominational backgrounds gathered for the common purpose of strengthening witness and action to end the scandal of ongoing poverty in the richest nation in the world. The event was organized by Sojourners, and one of several speakers was Rich Stearns, president of World Vision. We were reminded of grim statistics. In the United States:

- More than one in six children—13.3 million—is poor.
- One in three black children (33 percent) is poor, one in four Latino children (27 percent) is poor, and one in ten white children (14 percent) is poor.

- 35.5 million people—including 12.6 million children—live in households that experience hunger or the risk of hunger. That’s more than one in ten households.

We know that the Bible continually repeats God’s particular concern and compassion for the poor and those on the margins of society. The issues of wealth and poverty are addressed in the Bible about two thousand times. It is unmistakable that this is important to the heart of God. And that passion for justice for the poor should be a mark of any disciple of Jesus Christ.

The wider body of Christ is beginning to respond in historic ways to this challenge. You may have heard of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. This newly emerging fellowship, of which the RCA is a founding member, includes forty-three Christian denominations and organizations that span the full diversity of the church: Evangelical, Pentecostal, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and historic black churches. A coming together of this scope has never happened before.

We established and grew our fellowship with one another and then asked, “Where would we find a common united witness in society?” We focused on the issue of domestic poverty. You’ll see the result in your Workbook, in the report of the Commission on Christian Action. From across the theological spectrum we found ourselves in agreement around responding to this key biblical imperative.

And what about the RCA? Surely we could do the same. Last month I was sharing a meal with Gregg Mast, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Gregg told the story of how, years back, when he was serving as the RCA’s minister of social witness and the late Bob Bast was serving as minister of evangelism, they imagined combining the Offices of Social Witness and Evangelism. It didn’t happen then, but the idea was right.

Like others, for far too long the RCA has tolerated a division between social activists who encourage our work for justice and evangelicals who stress the priority of converting people to Jesus Christ. We’ve learned how to live with one another, and drink coffee together at General Synod. But that’s no longer enough.

It’s the whole gospel that calls for our commitment—the inward and the outward journeys, dependent on one another, because it takes both to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. And hear this: to a younger generation, alienated from religious institutions and skeptical about Christian faith, a gospel that doesn’t speak to injustice and suffering is seen as hypocritical. And a church that engages in social action but is disconnected from spiritual power is seen by them as empty. And they are right.

We must learn to “shout the gospel with our lives.” That will require new, deeper, and more radical forms of discipleship.

A whole gospel, of course, reaches out not just to our immediate neighbors but to the whole world. Rich Stearns reminded those at the D.C. gathering of these realities:

- Of the 6.4 billion people in the world, 1 in 7 doesn’t get enough to eat.
- Nearly 800 million people in developing countries go hungry every day.
- More than 26,000 children under age five die every day, most from preventable causes such as malaria, malnutrition, diarrhea, and pneumonia.
 - That means a child dies from preventable causes every seven seconds.
 - One dies from malaria every thirty seconds.

- One in six people in the world does not have access to safe water.
 - At any given time, half of the people in developing countries are suffering from water-related illness.
 - Roughly every minute, three children die because of unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation.
 - No other humanitarian intervention has such a drastic effect on life as providing clean water.

Living water is what Jesus offered the Samaritan woman. And living water is what our world needs, physically and spiritually.

Yet, for many of us, and many congregations, our response remains tepid and limited. Consider these facts: on average last year, the typical church member in the U.S. gave only 2.5 percent of his or her income to churches and Christian ministries. Of that amount, the average congregation gave just two percent of its budget to international mission efforts of any kind, whether evangelistic or for relief and development. In the RCA, our congregations give on average about 2.86 percent of their income to denominational efforts in global and local mission. So think of it this way: those in the church are giving only a little more than two percent of two percent of their income to address the overwhelming needs of the world.

Fortunately, this is not always the case. In a few moments we are going to recognize and celebrate RCA congregations that are giving either ten percent or more of their budget or \$40,000 beyond their assessment to be used by the RCA to carry out God's mission in the world. These gifts further our work in many areas including Global Mission, congregational revitalization, and church multiplication. In my view, a tithe of ten percent on a congregation's income to support mission beyond itself should be a normal expectation for any congregation, large or small, that answers the call to discipleship.

The RCA's steadfast commitment to global mission continues to produce amazing fruit. Inspiring stories abound from Ethiopia, Myanmar, Niger, Sudan, the Middle East, and many other locations. But one of the most remarkable developments since our last General Synod took place in the Dominican Republic. The Iglesia Reformada Dominicana—the Dominican Reformed Church—has been born out of a close partnership with the Reformed Church in America.

In January, I was in the Dominican Republic with other RCA colleagues to meet the executive committee of this emerging denomination. It has been thrilling to see this vision grow over the past five years. The Iglesia Reformada Dominicana deeply values Reformed theology and polity, and their churches will have an important impact for the gospel in the Dominican Republic. Just two weeks ago they were officially organized as a new denomination. In a few minutes we will welcome guests from this new denomination that will share a close and creative partnership with the RCA.

Following Jesus

In conclusion, I want to return to that lunch at the Potter's House. Gordon was telling Karin and me about the newest emerging faith community that he and a younger pastor, Becca Steele, are working with, nurtured by the vision of the Church of the Saviour. It's made up of "spiritual support groups" that focus on biblical study, discipleship, and prayer. These groups include many who have just been released from the D.C. jails, along with others who come from more privileged backgrounds. Racial and economic diversity, and the challenge of reconciliation, are built into the fabric of each small group.

This dynamic faith community was officially organized on April 15. Their membership commitment, or vows, included these words:

To Jesus—who is the Son of God, and crucified and risen Lord—I surrender all entitlement to time and energy, wealth and status, opinion and ego, protection and life...

...Putting on the full armor of God, and committing my destiny to Christ, I will seek God's kingdom with the disinherited, will build public kingdom structures, and will witness to God's reign in the non-violent Spirit of Jesus.

In Christ, we are fishers of men and women, commissioned to accompany every heart into a reconciled relationship with God.

I reflected again on the tremendous creativity, clarity, and power that are unleashed when we take seriously what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We have come to Jesus. We claim Jesus. Let us follow Jesus.

The *Book of Church Order* states that “[t]he General Synod shall have a general secretary whose duty shall be to present at each General Synod meeting a report articulating a vision for the church, including recommendations for the future.” That is what I have attempted to do this evening.

I have no specific recommendations to bring before you at this synod. Our direction, established through Our Call, is being faithfully carried out, and the General Synod Council and the commissions and agencies of the church have work well prepared for you. Rather, I offer from my heart one earnest pastoral plea as the foundation for all we are called to do:

Let us embrace the whole gospel, with our whole lives, for the whole world.
Let us commit, from the depths of our hearts, to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Amen.