

Report of the General Synod Council on the RCA's Multiracial Future Freed from Racism

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

The work of the office of Multiracial Initiatives and Social Justice is guided by three core principles.

- Scripturally Grounded
- Collaboratively Strong
- Racially and Ethnically Equitable

The above core principles support the vision statement of the RCA's office of Multiracial Initiatives, which is "everyone who wants to experience the RCA as home may experience the RCA as home." As we move into our multiracial future freed from racism, the RCA is called to affirm its commitment to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Multicultural Growth at Our Savior's

Minnesota is home to at least 3,000 Liberians—refugees from Liberia's 1990s civil war. "Liberians found a welcoming culture in Minnesota," says Lori Walber, pastor of Our Savior's Church (OSC) in Brooklyn Park, a suburb of Minneapolis where many of the refugees settled.

OSC is within walking distance of apartment buildings that housed many of the new immigrants. The number who came increased slowly, which Walber says worked well. "That was the timing our congregation needed to make the adjustment to being open to another culture," she says.

"At OSC they found a caring congregation that helped to meet some very real physical needs and welcomed them as brothers and sisters in Christ. Each new immigrant will say that OSC is their church home. Most of the Liberians have Christian backgrounds coming from Catholic, mainline, and Pentecostal churches. They have the option of attending many Liberian national churches, but they stay at OSC.

"We have received three great rewards. One is to see families reunited. One of our women was here for six years before her children were allowed to join her. What a celebration that was! Secondly, our congregation has a greater global awareness. We have studied and prayed for lands around the world. Thirdly, we have been encouraged in our Christian walk by people with great stories of persecution, faith, and prayer.

"We have seen that as we have become more welcoming, God has brought us into contact with Africans from Liberia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, and Sudan. Not all stay, but all are welcome."

The Multiracial Congregation Team

The mission of the Multiracial Congregation Team (MRCT) is to assist the RCA to engage its multiracial future. The team is involved with a variety of denominational initiatives. Members of the MRCT lead pastoral affinity networks geared for pastors who lead or are interested in leading multiracial congregations. MRCT members have taken foundational coach training; they have also completed network facilitator training. The MRCT supports

training programs such as Sankofa and Joining the Journey that advance the RCA's multiracial future freed from racism. MRCT members are represented in the Multiracial Strategy Coalition. The team also cosponsors conferences that focus on the RCA's multiracial future freed from racism.

Multiracial Strategy Coalition

In February 2009, participants of the new Multiracial Strategy Coalition gathered for the first time. The group is intergenerational, with strong representation from both genders and from people of color. Participants represented a number of constituent groups: racial/ethnic councils, congregations, regional synods, RCA colleges and seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, the Multiracial Congregation Team, and General Synod Council members and staff. The Multiracial Strategy Coalition provides strategic discussion, reflection, and recommendations on RCA multiracial goals pertaining to growth, communication, and leadership development in ways that integrate with Our Call.

Multiracial Training Programs

The RCA supports several training programs that help participants understand and combat racism, and engage with people of different cultural backgrounds.

Sankofa Bus Trips

Sankofa is a West African word that means "looking backward to move forward." It implies that as we engage the RCA's multiracial future freed from racism, we must look backward to see the contexts and experiences of our multiracial past punctuated with racism.

Sankofa is a cross-racial/ethnic three-day bus trip that helps Christians move toward righteous responses to racism. This intensive, interactive, cultural awareness training involves exploring historic sites and viewing videos and provides times for processing the experiences of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. In addition to consciousness-raising, the trip invites participants to grow to understand and value each other. Participants move toward healing the wounds and racial divides caused by hundreds of years of racial injustice in the United States. Participants become more equipped to fruitfully address racial righteousness in our church, our nations, and our world. The Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) has hosted twenty-five RCA members, including members of the staff of the General Synod Council offices, commission members, pastors, and other leaders, on three Sankofa trips. With the ECC's assistance, the RCA is building its own capacity to sponsor Sankofa trips. The first RCA trip occurred in April 2009. We plan to provide several trips each year, customizing them for each region of the United States and Canada.

The Breakfast Club

The Breakfast Club is a twelve-month cross-racial relationship-building ministry. Cross-racial pairs meet monthly over a meal to discuss race, faith, and personal life journeys. Discussions are guided by sets of questions developed by this ministry's originators, the Chicago Urban Reconciliation Enterprise (CURE). To date, the RCA has one club at Fort Washington Collegiate Church in New York City and another at Living Springs Community Church in Illinois. We are exploring the establishment of two more clubs at churches in other locations. We hope to begin five other clubs over the coming year.

Understanding Racism: Joining the Journey

This one-day workshop focuses on understanding racism from an institutional perspective. Participants learn how history was racialized, how racism affects socialization, how socialization racialized our personal and Christian identities, and how racialized Christians benefit from and promote (albeit unknowingly) racialized institutions and systems, including churches. Participants also learn basics about dismantling race-based institutions. Joining the Journey is offered by the training organization Congregations Organizing for Racial Reconciliation (CORR). To date, 120 RCA people have participated in three sessions. Five more sessions are being explored for 2009.

Diverse Congregation Reaches Out in Manhattan

“We like to think of ourselves as a mission center on Manhattan Island,” says Charlie Morris, senior pastor of Fort Washington Collegiate Church in Manhattan, New York. “We are shifting to become a place where people come to fill others with Christ’s blessing instead of focusing on filling themselves.”

Fort Washington emphasizes connecting with and serving the community—it was the first element of a five-year strategic plan adopted several years ago.

To start, the church embraces Manhattan’s diverse people groups. “We are probably one of the most diverse congregations in the RCA,” Morris says. “We are about 40 percent Caucasian, 30 percent Hispanic, 20 percent African-American and Caribbean-American, with the remaining 10 percent representing a variety of other ethnicities.

“We believe in the vision of Revelation 7,” Morris says. The Fort Washington staff is also multiracial.

The church offers a number of programs for discipleship and outreach. “We offer several mini-courses for adults,” says Troy Schremmer, director of education and church life. “We’ve talked about ethics, race and culture, and other issues suggested by our congregation. People have a deep hunger to learn and stay connected to God’s call.”

Additionally, the church hosts a film series called “The Face of the Other” that explores the Israeli/Palestinian rift. “We’ve hosted several community forums on issues such as the war in Iraq and relations with Iran,” Schremmer says. “We were interfacing our congregation with socially minded folks from the community and Jews from area synagogues.”

Part of the drive to serve the community is inspiring people to be servant leaders. “We want to see a real integration of faith and life so that living out the gospel is seamless,” says Schremmer.

GSC MULTIRACIAL FUTURE FREED FROM RACISM ENDS MONITORING REPORT

The General Synod Council (GSC) adopted a new global ends policy in response to R-67 at General Synod 2008, which added “A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism” to Our Call and instructed GSC to develop goals, objectives, and strategies in this area. The ends policy changes also include a new sub-end.

Global Ends Policy

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, grounded in Scripture, and in covenant with the general secretary and staff, the General Synod Council will carry out its responsibilities in order to ensure that the Reformed Church in America will be a faithful and fruitful denomination where: congregations are following Christ in mission, equipped and empowered to embrace unity, reconciliation, and justice, which requires all we have and all we are to the glory of God.

Sub-End 1: Congregations and assemblies of the Reformed Church in America will reflect God's vision of the kingdom: embracing complete unity; reaching all people (every race, tribe, people, and language, every disability and special need, including those living on the margins) with the love and grace of Jesus Christ; actively engaging in love, acceptance, forgiveness and justice. (John 17:23; Revelation 7:9)

A Multiracial Future Freed from Racism—Ends Policy

GSC also adopted a new ends policy to guide the denomination's efforts around a multiracial future freed from racism:

The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations resisting the sin of racism and committing to a multiracial future engaging all of God's people in mission and ministry.

2009 Monitoring Report

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to GSC on progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The report for the RCA's multiracial future follows.

General Secretary's Interpretation

To fulfill this ends policy, I have instructed GSC staff to collaborate with regional synods, classes, and congregations in ways specific to each region to make a difference in the experiences of congregations, assemblies, agencies, and RCA-related nonprofits so that:

- Capacities for equitable and just ministry in multiracial contexts are increased.
- Institutional racism is identified and eliminated.
- Multiracial congregations are developed and strengthened.
- Geographic communities around RCA congregations are transformed.

This ends policy is focused on a long-term time horizon—2013 and beyond. It is my responsibility as general secretary to ensure that measurable outcomes for 2013 are established and yearly benchmarks between the years 2009 and 2013 are developed and monitored. To that end I have established the following goals, outcomes, and strategies.

Goal for Multiracial Training: *To increase cultural sensitivity and anti-racism capacities for one thousand RCA leaders and members by 2013.*

Outcomes

- Eight hundred RCA leaders and members will recognize and own the place of racism in their own hearts, minds, and lives.
- Seven hundred RCA leaders and members will increase their ability to listen effectively and empathetically to others' stories of pain and frustration due to racism.
- Seven hundred RCA leaders and members will be better able to identify and work to eliminate instances of institutional racism.

- One thousand RCA leaders and members will understand what biblical peace is, how racism destroys it, and what to do to restore it.

Strategies

- To develop and implement the training programs of Sankofa, the Breakfast Club, and Understanding Racism: Joining the Journey.
- To incorporate the key principles of the Belhar Confession into training programs.
- To establish meaningful relationships with regional synod executives to customize training offerings in each region.
- To make anti-racism programs available to:
 - Pastors, elders, deacons, and RCA members
 - Church planters, seminarians, and MFCA participants
 - General Synod delegates, GSC members, and members of commissions
- To develop and promote a guide that assists congregations to explore biblical and theological bases of a multiracial future freed from racism.
- To develop multi-generational training groups to address generational differences in experiences and perspectives about racism and a multiracial future.

Data

- Since June 2008, twenty-one RCA members have participated in Sankofa experiences sponsored by the Evangelical Covenant Church. The first RCA Sankofa experience took place on April 22, 2009, and included approximately forty people.
- Since June 2008, the RCA has begun two Breakfast Clubs, with at least forty participants.
- Since June 2008, the RCA has trained 126 people in Understanding Racism: Joining the Journey.

New Church Works toward Racial Reconciliation

The River, a multisite RCA church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, names racial reconciliation as one of its six stated values.

“A church can have thousands of things to value,” says lead pastor Rob Link. “Each church has to hone in, focus on a few. We focused on racial reconciliation because we believe it’s the vision of God himself. It’s what Jesus said in Matthew 28—go into all the nations. That means all people groups, all types of groups. John recorded in Revelation about every nation, tongue, and tribe gathering before God. We see the opposite of that in many places today—Hispanic churches, black churches, white churches. We would love to see some mutuality, a place where there is a shared fellowship.”

But, Link says, “In terms of actually being multiracial, we’re not even close to being where we want to be.

“We have four sites of The River, one of which could be called racially diverse. The River Downtown is several hundred folks with a very small percentage of minorities. The River on Campus has 50 or so members with a small percentage of minorities. The River East, with about 50 attendees, might be pushing 20 percent minority. The River on Lake Street is by far our most diverse community, with about 35 percent minority attendance.”

Though attendance isn’t yet representative of the multiracial body The River hopes to become, all four sites were purposely planted in multiracial environments. The River on Campus is located on the campus of Western Michigan University, which has a diverse student body, and the other three sites are located in or near downtown Kalamazoo.

“The way we are reaches different folks,” Link says. “We’re not a church that would necessarily appeal to upper-middle class folks who like church done in the same ways as it always has been. We have an appeal to a diverse crowd—not necessarily racially diverse, but certainly economically and other ways.”

Goal for Multiracial Leadership: *To facilitate the implementation of the Five-Fold Test in one hundred congregations by 2013.*

Outcomes

- One hundred congregations will become accustomed to assessing progress against an evaluation tool.
- One hundred congregations will recognize and own the race-based barriers to their progress toward a multiracial future freed from racism.
- Eighty congregations will develop skillful ministry teams to address race-based barriers to a multiracial future freed from racism.
- Eighty congregations will increase their reliance on God to help them eliminate race-based barriers.

Strategies

- To convene the Multiracial Strategy Coalition to discuss, reflect, and make recommendations on RCA multiracial goals pertaining to growth, communication, and leadership development in ways (such as the Five-Fold Test) that integrate with Our Call and guide the development of the RCA as a multiracial denomination.
- To pilot the Five-Fold Test in ten congregations.
- To conduct a series of two-day sessions to help congregations to establish customized activities that make the Five-Fold Test useful in their settings.
- To coach congregations that use the Five-Fold Test.
- To gather progress reports three times a year from each congregation that uses the Five-Fold Test.
- To develop multi-generational teams to address generational differences in experiences and perspectives about racism and a multiracial future.

Data

- Wes Granberg-Michaelson and Earl James cofacilitated the first annual Multiracial Strategy Coalition from February 27 to March 1, 2009. The coalition, intended to be an annual gathering for five consecutive years, discusses and makes recommendations regarding the RCA’s multiracial future freed from racism. During this first meeting, coalition members developed key activities and targets for the denomination using the Five-Fold Test. Many of the outcomes and strategies in this ends monitoring report emerged from this coalition meeting.

Goal for Multiracial Congregations: *To stimulate the development of one hundred multiracial congregations and three hundred congregations of color by 2013.*

Outcomes

- Forty pastors will be equipped and qualified to lead pastoral networks whose members either lead or are interested in leading multiracial congregations.
- Three hundred pastors will participate in pastoral networks whose focus includes the development of multiracial congregations.
- Two hundred pastors will be equipped to transition white congregations into ones where no less than 20 percent of members are people of color.
- Two hundred new RCA congregations of color and multiracial congregations will be planted through church multiplication efforts.

- Between 2011 and 2013, one hundred pastors, elders, and deacons of color, including those who are thirty-five years of age or younger, will exhibit excellent leadership values and skills and high levels of knowledge about using the *Book of Church Order*.

Strategies

- To develop partnerships and coordinate with GSC staff, especially those leading efforts in multiplication, the racial/ethnic councils, and pastoral networks (revitalization).
- To establish meaningful relationships with regional synod executives to identify opportunities in each region.
- To identify and promote the use of a tool that guides the development of multiracial congregations.
- To support the work of the racial/ethnic councils and exchange information with them.
- To support the work of the Multiracial Congregation Team.
- To promote regional and area gatherings focused on developing multiracial congregations.
- To enroll eligible pastors in the Multiracial Training Initiative.
- To develop and locate adequate funds for a training academy that equips persons for leadership in the RCA.
- To develop multi-generational teams to address generational differences in experiences and perspectives about racism and a multiracial future.

Goal for Multiracial Community Engagements: *To assist one hundred congregations in their efforts to engage in transformative, missional, multiracial relationships in their geographic communities by 2013.*

Outcomes

- Ninety congregations will increase their knowledge of their geographic community, including the people groups and dynamics involved.
- Ninety congregations will be able to articulate reasons for church-based community development.
- Seventy congregations will develop healthy relationships with leaders, churches, organizations, and other efforts within their communities.
- Fifty congregations will be revitalized as they deepen their transformative, missional, multiracial engagements in their communities.

Strategies

- To develop a relationship with the Christian Community Development Association and help congregations get involved.
- To utilize resources such as Communities First and Partners in Urban Transformation.
- To help congregations develop their own nonprofit corporations and establish meaningful ministry relationships with nonprofit corporations and other community development organizations.
- To develop and promote a guide that helps congregations explore biblical and theological bases of church-based community development.
- To develop multi-generational teams to address generational differences in experiences and perspectives about racism and a multiracial future.

Congregation Embraces Diversity to Reach Out

“We like to call our fellowship ‘Calvary on Eighth,’ because it grounds us in our community, on the main street of Holland,” says Blaine Newhouse, pastor of Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. “Our neighborhood is diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, and economics.

“When I came 13 years ago,” he says, “this was a great church, but it was focused primarily on the already convinced. This community was changing. I see so many churches that ignore that and get older and smaller over time, or they move to the suburbs. I see so much more potential impact for the kingdom if the church can learn to embrace and welcome its community where it is.”

The neighborhood around Calvary had undergone a distinct population shift before Newhouse came. One factor contributing to the neighborhood’s shift was the decision of the Holland city council to allow a high concentration of multifamily units to be built near Calvary.

Calvary decided it should be reaching out to the neighborhood, which had a racial and economic makeup very different from the church’s membership. “Initially we had to wrestle with what kind of church we wanted to be, and what defines success from God’s perspective,” says Newhouse. “We decided that it’s about trying to share the good news with those who don’t know it. How are we going to connect to these people?”

Calvary now runs community programs such as a supervised summer recreation program for neighborhood kids called Blacktop Recreation. The church also collaborated with two other area churches to form a nonprofit organization called Heights of Hope, which seeks to meet economic, social, and spiritual needs in the Holland Heights neighborhood.

“I firmly believe that people aren’t going to care what we believe until they know that we care,” says Newhouse. “And they’re not going to know that we care until we go and meet them where they are.”