Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“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.” (Revelation 7:9).

The RCA: Thriving, Missional, Multiracial

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity are Rick DeBruyne (moderator), Alfonzo Surrrett Jr., Gerri Yoshida (secretary), Jo Anna Lougin (vice moderator), Karla Camacho, and Kyunghoon Suh. Alina Coipel Robinson serves as staff to the commission.


CORE thanks Lee DeYoung, vice president of General Synod as well as a member of GSC and the Commission on Nominations, for attending, observing, and participating in our February meeting.

CORE had conference calls with staff member Earl James on July 26 and November 15, 2016, and quarterly connect meetings with Tony Campbell, Eddy Alemán, and En Young Kim (staff coordinators of the racial and ethnic councils) on July 21, 2016, and January 19 and April 20, 2017.

Official Responsibilities of CORE

The Book of Church Order names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2016 edition, p. 113):

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 multiethnic objectives.

Toward a Multicultural Future Freed From Racism

CORE affirms the direction and progress that has been made in the RCA toward being a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. Our general secretary has structured staff to include persons of color at the highest levels of leadership. The racial and ethnic councils are now represented on the General Synod Council. Most of the commissions are diverse in an attempt to include all voices. Starting and strengthening racial/ethnic and multicultural churches has become a major focus in Transformed & Transforming. These are but a brief sampling of some of the things we are seeing across the denomination.
CORE also recognizes that there is still more to be done. While we have made gains in terms of the number of people of color involved and actively participating in the structures, life, and ministries of the church, there are deeper questions of how power is shared, how our racial/ethnic churches and members are involved in setting the pace and direction of the church, and how our story is changing so the various streams of culture and color are included in the narrative of who we are and what we do. As our general secretary has said before, it’s one thing to have people live with us; it’s another to have them rearrange the furniture and decide what color to paint the walls.

CORE is very concerned that the gains at the denominational level are not being realized to the same extent in the church’s regional synods and classes. As a church, we need to think seriously about how we can own at every level our shared goal of having a multicultural future freed from racism. Throughout the church, we need to be intentional about internalizing this as a core value.

**Monitoring of Recommendations from R-91 Task Force on White Privilege**

The 2014 General Synod instructed the Commission on Race and Ethnicity “to monitor the successful implementation of recommendations proposed by the R-91 Task Force on White Privilege and adopted by the 2013 and 2014 General Synods; and further, to include this information in their reports to General Synod for the next five years” ([*MGS 2014*, R-17, p.116)


**R-15**
To direct the General Synod Council to create a task force to assess the RCA’s governance utilizing the Five-Fold Test and make recommendations for changes to its order that are consistent with the tenets of the Belhar Confession and that will aid the RCA’s transition to becoming a more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism; and further, that the task force include the general secretary, the racial/ethnic council presidents, the General Synod president or vice president, the GSC moderator, a representative of the Commission on Church Order, and a number of additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups; and further, that the task force make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016.

**R-16**
To encourage the General Synod Council to experiment with at least one regional synod and at least five classes with the use of the Five-Fold Test as a means to assist these assemblies in fulfilling their responsibilities as outlined in the *Book of Church Order* in a multicultural and multiracial context, for report to the 2015 and 2016 General Synods on the efficacy of the tool and any recommendations for further use.

Both R-15 and R-16 have to do with the Five-Fold Test, a tool that has been used very effectively by the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) to become a more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism. The tool can help the RCA to the same effect. For
more information on the Five-Fold Test, see page 112 of the 2014 Minutes of the General Synod.

CORE is pleased with the current progress and momentum of the task force. Last year, in its report to General Synod, CORE expressed concern that “since June 2014, when these two recommendations were passed at General Synod, very little has been accomplished to carry out the mandates” (MGS 2016, p. 300). As we report this year, the task force is meeting, has selected a chair, had a conference call with the ECC, and is enthusiastic about engaging its work. CORE affirms the work and appreciates the new spirit of the task force.

Mass Incarceration

CORE continues to support the initiatives on mass incarceration led by the Commission on Christian Action. Alfonzo Surrert Jr. served on that coalition and gave regular updates. Gerri Yoshida attended “Faith Call to End Mass Incarceration” at Mott Haven Reformed Church in the Bronx, New York, on January 14, 2017. That event was led by Pat Sealy, Earl James, Gloria McCanna, Terry Troia, Taylor Holbrook, and Cora Taitt. Alfonzo Surrert Jr. also attended the denominational mass incarceration connection event led by Earl James in Chicago, Illinois, on March 10–11, 2017.

Racial/Ethnic Councils

CORE continues to monitor the work of the racial/ethnic councils by having quarterly conference calls with Tony Campbell (staff to the African American Black Council), Eddy Alemán (coordinator of Hispanic Ministries), and En Young Kim (coordinator for Pacific and Asian American Ministries). CORE affirms the work that has been accomplished in the last year in starting and strengthening multicultural and racial/ethnic churches. Last year, CORE expressed its concern that lack of administrative staff impedes effective communication and coordination with the local racial/ethnic churches and pastors. CORE recognizes and is grateful for the existing support staff but continues to be concerned that it still may not be enough to ensure the goals of the councils are met.

CORE has been in conversation with the general secretary, members of the Five-Fold Test Task Force, and some members of the racial/ethnic councils about having a joint assembly of the councils in fall 2018 to hear the voices of our racial/ethnic members and to discern where the RCA is and what still needs to done for the RCA to be a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. Key staff, select members of the GSC, and regional synod executives should be invited to attend to listen and learn. Information from this joint assembly will help the GSC and the general secretary identify a baseline and establish measurable goals and objectives towards our common preferred future with regard to racial and ethnic diversity. Fall 2018 is suggested for the joint gathering because the councils already have their annual gatherings and budgets set for this fiscal year. Time would be allocated for each council to conduct its own annual meeting, along with joint times of conversation and discernment. To fund the joint gathering, CORE recommends that the councils each contribute what they would normally spend for their annual meeting.

Monitoring Diversity

CORE continues to perform its task of monitoring the racial and ethnic makeup of staff, GSC, commissions, task forces, etc. to make sure that all voices are heard. Of 149 total persons on the GSC, commissions, and agency boards, 18 are African American/Haitian American, 14 are Pacific/Asian American, six are Hispanic, and one is Native American/
Aboriginal. It is encouraging to see that more racial/ethnic people are serving on most commissions and on the GSC. CORE thanks the Commission on Nominations for its diligence and persistence in its ongoing efforts toward inclusivity.

Recently, CORE learned of GSC Executive Limitations Policy EL-13, which reads “The General Secretary will not plan, implement, or evaluate key projects or strategic priorities without ensuring that at least 25 percent of those assigned to the staff team are people of color.” CORE applauds this policy and feels that the contents of that report would be informative for its work. As GSC minutes only reflect that the report is made, CORE plans to ask the General Synod Council to share the general secretary’s EL-13 report with the commission.

As stated last year, CORE is concerned that the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business need racial/ethnic members. CORE recommends that General Synod encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions themselves to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates for these and other commissions. CORE also encourages the GSC to find more ways to include more racial/ethnic delegates at General Synod, the annual decision-making assembly. CORE has also suggested to the Commission on Nominations that they review their processes and update their form and outreach methods in ways that will be more user-friendly for all of the church.

R 17-55
To encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates to serve on commissions, particularly the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-55 as follows (additions are underlined):

To encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic and LGBTQ members as candidates to serve on commissions, particularly the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business.

The president ruled that the motion to amend R 17-55 was out of order because it was not germane to the subject of the recommendation.

A motion was made and supported to appeal the ruling of the president (that the proposed amendment to R 17-55 was out of order).

The vice president assumed the chair.

VOTED: To not overrule the ruling of the president.

The president assumed the chair.

R 17-55 in its original form was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.
VOTED: To cease debate.

R 17-55
To encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates to serve on commissions, particularly the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business. (ADOPTED)

Native American Ministry

CORE has been in contact with Luis Ruiz, supervisor of RCA mission in North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, about potential Native American candidates to serve on CORE. He has suggested four people who may be interested. CORE is working on this with the Commission on Nominations.

A Native American gathering in April 2017 included participants from five Native American churches. Jo Anna Lougin represented CORE at that gathering to advocate for Native American participation on CORE.

Previous General Synod Recommendations

Over the years, CORE has made dozens of recommendations to the General Synod in order to help the RCA fulfill its call to be a multiracial and multiethnic church. CORE has taken a look at the approved recommendations to see if and how they were completed and whether or not any need to be revisited.

Three actions of past General Synods stand out in particular for CORE.

R-96 (MGS 2007, p. 336)
To instruct the 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.

CORE will continue to explore with Earl James, coordinator of Missional Mosaic and advocacy, ways to create short stories and vignettes to engage the church and lift up the contributions of our racial/ethnic churches and members.

R-99 (MGS 2007, p. 337)
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.

CORE will continue to explore the outcome of this action as it relates to the work of the commission.
R-68, 2008 (MGS 2008, p. 267)
To instruct the General Synod Council to so revise the annual Consistorial Report 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?

These questions were added to the Consistorial Report Form in 2009. In the intervening time, a two-page section was eliminated from the CRF that included these questions. Adding these two questions back into the Consistorial Report Form would provide valuable information on the progress being made toward a multiracial future freed from racism in local congregations.

R 17-56
To integrate the following questions into Part 2 of the annual Consistorial Report Form for at least the next five years: How does your congregation 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?

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-56 as follows (additions are underlined):

To integrate the following questions into Part 2 of the annual Consistorial Report Form for at least the next five years: How does your congregation 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?

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not amend R 17-56.

R 17-56 in its original form was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-56 as follows (additions are underlined):

To integrate the following questions into Part 2 of the annual Consistorial Report Form for at least the next five years: How does your congregation reflect the racial and cultural context (which includes LGBTQ people of color) in which you conduct your ministry? What are you doing to build bridges that develop and deepen mutual ministry that is multiracial or multicultural?”

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not amend R 17-56.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.
VOTED: To cease debate.

R 17-56 in its original form was again before the house.

R 17-56
To integrate the following questions into Part 2 of the annual Consistorial Report Form for at least the next five years: How does your congregation 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? (ADOPTED)

Racial Makeup of CORE

CORE continues to explore how to ensure that at least one Native American, two Asian Americans, two African Americans, two Hispanics, and two Caucasians serve on the commission. Currently, the Book of Church Order only mandates that “the membership shall include at least one person recommended from each of the racial/ethnic councils of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7a; 2016 edition, p. 112). CORE plans to consult with the Commission on Church Order to bring a recommendation to the 2018 General Synod.

Webinars

CORE has been in conversation with Earl James about more effective formats as well as new topics for webinars.

Electronic and Social Media

CORE maintains a Facebook page to stay in touch and communicate with the rest of the RCA. Please visit and “like” the page at www.facebook.com/RCACORE. Please contact Alina Coipel Robinson (arobinson@rca.org) if you would like to receive emails from CORE on its current activities and issues.

Resources

At last year’s General Synod, CORE reported three things that it would be working on:

• Researching the experiences and contributions of African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American people in the RCA and developing short vignettes and other low-cost resources to share with and engage the church. The commission’s hope is to have a number of these available by 2020.
• Working to update the resource list developed by the R-89 Understanding White Privilege Task Force in 2013 that is posted on the RCA website. There should be an effort every two years to add new books, DVDs, and other resources and to check the availability of older resources.
• Developing a list of racial/ethnic preachers and speakers who can speak to churches about multiracial issues and experiences. This list will include a brief biography and contact information for each person. The list will be available online and updated once a year to keep it current. The list of available speakers will be arranged regionally to cut down on travel costs.
As the commission has grown in its understanding of its role and responsibilities, it has become aware that these tasks are beyond the scope of CORE’s charge. CORE’s work is to advise, advocate, recommend, evaluate, monitor, and report. The commission continues to explore how these ideas might be brought to fruition.

**Giving Thanks**

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity gives thanks to Alfonzo Surrrett Jr. and Gerri Yoshida for completing two terms of faithful service. CORE thanks Amilcar Castillo and Jessica Bratt for their contributions to CORE. The commission also thanks Alina Coipel Robinson, its staff person, who has been tirelessly invaluable in accessing information, organizing meetings, and faithfully serving CORE in many ways.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator