Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The Commission on Christian Action has focused this year on following up on several recommendations from its 2016 report to the General Synod and discussion of concerns related to critical changes in the political and social climate of our nation.

Mass Incarceration

The General Synod requested that the coalition studying mass incarceration submit a report to General Synod for the next three years. The current work of the coalition revolves around advocacy.

Advocacy will be key to reversing the damaging policies of the past. Without revisions to state and federal criminal codes, there can be no hope for prison reform in the future. Restorative justice as an advocacy methodology seeks to repair the harm criminal behavior causes to victims, to the community, and to the perpetrator. Restorative justice involves everyone:

- The church, its lay people, and other faith-based and secular organizations.
- Correctional officers, who are crucial because they are the frontline people with the most contact and can influence prisoners in a positive way.
- Prisoners, who need our help through volunteerism and by listening to their needs.
- Family services that support families and children while prisoners are away.
- Reentry services for all involved: exiting prisoners, families, community leaders, and business owners.
- Advocacy on a state and federal level to change laws and policies in order to bring life and healing to all.

The coalition on mass incarceration will meet over the next year to identify ways that restorative justice methodologies can be identified and implemented in various church settings.

In 2016, the General Synod instructed the General Synod Council to fund a meeting of people interested in the study and work of mass incarceration as the beginning of a learning community (MGS 2016, R 16-45, p. 234). This recommendation has been implemented by the Missional Mosaic initiative of Transformed & Transforming, and a report on this work has been submitted by Earl James and Lindsay Bona. That report can be found on pp. 82-83 of these minutes.

Drone Warfare

As it reported to General Synod last year, the Commission on Christian Action has continued to learn about and research the issue of drone warfare to determine if and what kind of a recommendation should be brought to the church. The commission collaborated with the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare to develop and sign the statement “Drone Warfare: a Religious and Moral Perspective,” which was sent to the White House administration transition team in January 2017. The statement speaks to the moral and religious concerns related to drone warfare. It requests stronger requirements to be met prior to the use of drone warfare, consideration of the moral cost of distance killing, psychological care for military personnel who operate lethal drones, and international standards for the use of lethal drone warfare. The statement says that “the current drone program runs counter to the tenets of our respective faiths and violates the values held by most Americans.” In order to “reduce physical and spiritual harm caused by the drone
program,” the statement included 15 recommendations for consideration and action by the White House. The statement can be found at www.interfaithdronenetwork.org/action/public-policy.html.

Other Social Concerns

New issues of critical social concern brought to the commission include torture, immigration reform, gun violence, the refugee crisis, and our current national political and social climate.

Torture

A request came to the CCA from our ecumenical partner, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) to work on a joint statement on torture. The term of the current CRCNA member representative on the CCA is ending in June, so that work will begin with the appointment of a new CRCNA representative to the commission.

Immigration Reform

Since 1987, the General Synod has written and received several statements about immigration. In 1987, following the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, the church encouraged pastors to “provide counseling and urge persons who seek to change their status under the provisions of the bill to obtain legal counseling” (MGS 1987, R-39b, p. 79).

In 1993 the Commission on Christian Action offered a Scriptural call to receive strangers with open hands and hearts, entitled “Welcoming the Strangers in Our Midst” (MGS 1993, pp. 86-96).

The 1995 General Synod instructed the general secretary to communicate to the president of the United States the RCA’s support of the rights of immigrants to access public services (MGS 1995, R-9, p. 90).

Ten years ago (in 2007), the report of the Commission on Christian Action affirmed that “[t]he wellness and safety of immigrants in the United States … matters to the RCA and to Reformed churches” (MGS 2007, p. 252). In addition, General Synod voted to encourage the RCA to advocate for legislation that would protect and serve the undocumented immigrant population (MGS 2007, R-65, p. 253).

In light of current actions that have been taken against undocumented immigrants and their families, in support of immigrants who have resided and contributed to the economy and growth of the United States and who now live in fear of deportation, in belief that we are to receive strangers with “open hands and hearts,” and in the call to the church to do justice, the Commission on Christian Action believes that the time is right to revisit the advocacy that resulted from the 2007 recommendation and call the church to action beyond our former statements.

Therefore, the Commission on Christian Action will continue this work over the next year and will present a full report to General Synod 2018.

Gun Violence

In March 2016, the American Journal of Medicine published a study using 2010 data from the World Health Organization showing that Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than are people in other developed countries. Compared to 22 other high-
income nations, the United States’ gun-related murder rate is 25 times higher. And, even though the United States’ suicide rate is similar to other countries, the nation’s gun-related suicide rate is eight times higher than other high-income countries, the researchers said.

“Overall, our results show that the U.S., which has the most firearms per capita in the world, suffers disproportionally from firearms compared with other high-income countries,” said study coauthor Erin Grinshteyn, an assistant professor at the School of Community Health Science at the University of Nevada-Reno. “These results are consistent with the hypothesis that our firearms are killing us rather than protecting us.”

The U.S. firearm homicide rate is 20 times higher than the combined rates of 22 other countries that have similar wealth. An average of seven children and teens under the age of 20 are killed by guns every day. The WHO data revealed that even though it has half the population of the other 22 nations combined, the United States accounted for 82 percent of all gun deaths and 90 percent of all women killed by guns in 2010. Ninety-one percent of children under 14 who died by gun violence were in the United States, and 92 percent of young people between ages 15 and 24 killed by guns were in the United States.

As we have begun to research this issue, it seems as if we live in a culture of violence. Gun violence is the second major cause of death in the United States. Every year, more than 34,000 people die as the result of gunfire, and 11,000 people commit suicide each year by pulling the trigger of a gun. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), firearms are one of the leading causes of death among children and teens, and kill more kids than cancer and heart disease. The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence cites the following data from the CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control:

In 2014, 2,549 young people, ages 0-19, were killed by gunfire in the United States. More than half of these deaths, 57% (1,455), were homicides, 36% (929) were suicides, and 4% (106) were caused by unintentional gunfire. Approximately 13,600 more youth suffered nonfatal injuries, many of which resulted in serious lifelong consequences.

In 1977, the General Synod spoke out in favor of gun control. It adopted four resolutions, three of which were:

- Request the Congress of the United States to ban the manufacture and sale of handguns for civilian ownership;
- Urge the members of the Reformed Church in America to render the handguns in their homes inoperable and/or enact stringent safety precautions for all weapons; and
- Urge the constituency of the Reformed Church in America to seek refinement and strict enforcement of present laws regulating gun ownership and use (MGS 1977, R-12 to R-14, p. 201).

The 1988 General Synod resolved to share the positions taken in 1977 on gun control again with all RCA congregations, saying that:

In 1977 the General Synod took strong stands on gun control. The constituency of the RCA needs again to become aware of and speak out on this problem of our society …

There is a growing concern among those committed to the sacredness of human life that the US is becoming an increasingly violent society. … The proliferation of handguns is contributing to this violence. … New factors are making the issue
even more urgent. Some of our present laws are being diluted. The development of non-detectable handguns reduces the effectiveness of safety procedures on airlines and of overall detection of potential problems” (MGS 1988, R-35, pp. 109-110).

The Commission on Christian Action believes that in the current environment of a culture of violence experienced in our urban, suburban, and rural communities, the church must reaffirm the statements of the past. But the church must also acknowledge that guns do not commit violence; human beings commit violence. John Calvin has taught us that man is totally depraved. If we believe this tenet of Reformed theology, then we must take action and support mechanisms that will reduce loss of life related to gun incidents by removing guns from the hands of those who are likely to use guns in a dangerous manner.

In speaking to the issue of gun violence, the church must understand the public health concern of violence in the United States. Questions we must wrestle with as a church include but are not limited to: What roles do poverty, poor education, unemployment, fear, mental health disturbances, and easy access to guns play in the daily incidents of gun homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, and shootings by children? Do we really believe in the sovereign protection of God or do we believe that we must hijack God’s protection by taking matters into our own hands? Do we believe that all humans are created in the image and likeness of God or that just some are created in his image and likeness and other lives are of less value? Do we stand for the sanctity of life for all people or just for some? What is the role the church is called to take in the preservation of life in a culture where some lives matter and others don’t? These are difficult questions, but they are questions the church must answer, the church must proclaim publicly, and on which the church must take action.

Since gun violence is integral to our current political and social environment, the CCA will engage in a thorough study of the issue of gun violence in America and give a report to the 2018 General Synod.

Other Important Issues

Several important issues that have been brought to the commission are the current national political and social climate, environmental stewardship, and civil disobedience. After discussion and determination that these are important issues to which the church should respond, the commission has decided to examine, discuss, pray, and craft statements on the current national political and social climate and how the church might address relevant policy issues. The Commission on Christian Action will consult with other commissions as necessary and will report to General Synod 2019.

The RCA and the Refugee Crisis

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

The world is facing the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Displaced by war in places like Syria and the Central African Republic, by economic hardship in the Horn of Africa, by racial or religious bigotry, and by natural disasters, millions of people are seeking safety away from their homes. Climate change has also produced refugees. Severe weather events, decreased water availability, and shifting growing seasons are often the root cause of political instability and conflict in fragile and weak states. People from developing countries are the most vulnerable to the economic and political effects of climate change.

In 2015, forcibly displaced persons and asylum seekers numbered around 65 million. This is 1 out of every 113 people in the world, an increase of about 40 percent since 2011. More
than half of the world’s refugees are women and children.

Our Christian faith calls us to welcome the stranger. We are reminded in Scripture of how many of our ancestors in faith were aliens and refugees in the lands in which they resided. Jesus himself was a refugee in the first years of his life. General secretary Tom De Vries has said, “As Christians, it is our responsibility to open our doors—to offer care and shelter to those refugees who are seeking a safe place to land. We cannot let fear and the rhetoric of terrorism stop us from extending this basic hospitality to people in need” (Letter on the Refugee Crisis, posted November 25, 2015, www.rca.org/news/letter-refugee-crisis-tom-de-vries).

Refugees have three solutions to forced displacement. The first is to return home because the causes of displacement (war, drought or famine, etc.) have been resolved. However, returning home is generally not an option for the majority of refugees because the average duration of displacement-causing crises is 26 years. The second option for refugees is to integrate into their country of refuge. The majority of countries of refuge are themselves part of the developing world and economically strained to absorb refugees. Finally, refugees can resettle into another country in the developed world. But countries willing to take and resettle refugees are comparatively few (information taken from the International Association for Refugees, www.iafr.org/refugee-crisis).

In the current political climate in the U.S., there are many misconceptions and even lies about immigrants and those seeking refuge on our shores. It is important to note that those who are able to seek refuge in a new country (not just the United States, but all countries) are just 1 percent of the world’s refugees. The vast majority of refugees end up living for years in makeshift camps that are plagued with poor housing, unemployment, and lack of educational opportunities. Secondly, refugees already undergo extreme vetting. For example, the U.S. has the most stringent screening process for immigrants in the world, a process that lasts years and involves vetting by five federal agencies, background checks, biometric scans, and more. More than half of the world’s refugees are children who would not have had any training or involvement with terrorist organizations. There is little to no evidence that refugees pose a security risk to the United States or Canada. Since 2001, a little over one million refugees have resettled in the U.S. Of these, not one has committed a terrorist act. These facts fly in the face of rhetoric that maintains that refugees are pouring into our country, that we do not know anything about their backgrounds, and that they are a threat to our security.

We ourselves in the RCA are part of an immigrant church. Our ancestors came to the United States and Canada not just for economic opportunity, but in some cases, for religious freedom. While our original heritage is Dutch (as recently as just after World War II), our church has become home to immigrants from China, Korea, Latin America, Mexico, and other nations. As descendants of immigrants, we should honor our heritage by welcoming the immigrants and refugees who come after us. In light of this, the Commission on Christian Action brings the following recommendations:

R 17-39
To urge RCA congregations and members to engage with the refugee crisis in a positive way by:

- Reading the general secretary’s statement on the refugee crisis (www.rca.org/news/letter-refugee-crisis-tom-de-vries) and using the refugee response resources on the RCA website (www.rca.org/refugees).
- Praying regularly for the needs of refugees.
- Reaching out to RCA missionaries and congregations that
actively work with refugees and issues of immigration in order to learn about and support their work.

• Financially supporting advocacy and relief for refugees through organizations such as Church World Service or Bethany Christian Services.
• Befriending or helping resettle refugees in or near their communities, inasmuch as this is possible.
• Observing World Refugee Day this year on Tuesday, June 20. (ADOPTED)

R 17-40
To direct the General Synod Council to continue to create and make available resources for churches to engage with this issue and the people who are most affected by it; and further,

To partner with the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well as our Formula of Agreement partners to resettle refugees, be active in advocacy for immigrants, and to support refugee relief around the world; and further,

To publish on the RCA website on a quarterly basis the amount of money raised for refugee work and the plan for investing those resources in efforts to address the global refugee emergency; and further;

To report progress to the 2018 General Synod.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-40 as follows (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

To direct the General Synod Council to continue to create and make available resources for churches to engage with the refugee issue and the people who are most affected by it; and further …

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R 17-40.

A motion was made and supported to further amend R 17-40 as follows (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

… To partner with the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well as our Formula of Agreement partners to resettle legal refugees, be active in advocacy for immigrants, and to support refugee relief around the world; and further …

VOTED: To not adopt the further amendment to R 17-40.

R 17-40 as amended was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-40 as amended.
The final version of R 17-40 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

R 17-40
To direct the General Synod Council to continue to create and make available resources for churches to engage with the refugee issue and the people who are most affected by it; and further,

To partner with the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well as our Formula of Agreement partners to resettle refugees, be active in advocacy for immigrants, and to support refugee relief around the world; and further,

To publish on the RCA website on a quarterly basis the amount of money raised for refugee work and the plan for investing those resources in efforts to address the global refugee emergency; and further;

To report progress to the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

The following is a list of RCA mission personnel and other organizations that are working to help refugees (it is by no means comprehensive but is a place to start for congregations looking for somewhere to connect in order to support work with refugees):

- JJ and Tim TenClay, working with the Waldensian Church in Italy (www.rca.org/tenclay)
- Paolo Naso, working with Being Church Together in Italy (www.rca.org/naso)
- Dick and Carolyn Otterness, working with the Hungarian Reformed Church in Hungary (www.rca.org/otterness)
- Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather, working with RECONCILE in South Sudan (www.rca.org/smith-mather)
- Church World Service (www.cwsglobal.org)
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (www.lirs.org)
- International Rescue Committee (www.rescue.org)
- World Relief (www.worldrelief.org)
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services)
- Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (www.hias.org)
- Episcopal Migration Ministries (www.episcopalmigrationministries.org)
- World Vision (www.worldvision.org/our-work/helping-refugees)
- Ethiopian Community Development Council (www.ecdcus.org)
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (www.refugees.org)

Respectfully submitted,
Patricia Sealy, moderator

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