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 disproportionately 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,
Pattricia Sealy, moderator

---

Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education has four amended mandates, which received their second approval at General Synod 2016 as required by the *Book of Church Order* in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 (2016 edition, p. 121). The amended responsibilities (listed below) maximize the relevance of the work of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education.

- The commission shall develop and advocate for strategies for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA.
- The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families.
- The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship within RCA congregations.
- The commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry. (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b; 2016 edition, p. 117)

Our work began with research—each member chose a book about discipleship in our current culture with a goal of getting a better feel for the current reality and trends in spiritual formation in order to be more effective in our work. We found that four significant themes emerged from the books we read that are vital for the church today:

1. Life lived in discipleship with one another in a one-to-one nature across all generations is vital.
2. Story and relationships with one another are crucial.
3. Intentional, authentic relationships in a solid community are essential.
4. Discipleship is a timeless, continual process through life that happens continuously beyond our structured plan.

While the word “discipleship” is often tossed about, many of us have different concepts of what we mean when we say it. As a commission, our operational understanding for the work we did is summarized well in the following passage from *We Make the Road by Walking*, by Brian McLaren:

Disciple ... to be a follower, a student, an apprentice, one who learns by imitating a master ... to be sent out to teach others, who will in turn teach and train others in this new way of life. This revolutionary plan of discipleship means that we must first and foremost be examples. We must embody the message and values of our movement. That doesn’t mean we are perfect—just look at Peter. But it does mean we are growing and learning, always humble and willing to get up again after we fall, always moving forward on the road we are walking. As Jesus modeled never-ending learning and growth for us, we will model it for others, who will model it for still others. If each new generation of disciples follows this example, centuries from now, apprentices will still be learning the way of Jesus from mentors, so they can become mentors for the following generation.

For further reading, we have compiled the list of books we shared in our commission at the conclusion of this report.
In line with our fourth mandate, “the commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry,” the CCDE continues to urge churches to provide continuing education money and study leave for all paid staff in the ministry of Christian discipleship and education and urge classes to include time and money allotments for continuing education in their published guidelines for congregational positions. The Association of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) annual event was held in Denver, Colorado, this past January. Two members of the commission, Jane Schuyler and Bethany Popkes, attended with the Christian Educators of the RCA (CERCA) group. (CERCA can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/CERCA-489640711071946.) They cannot say enough about the value of this conference.

Regarding her experience as a first-time attendee, Bethany wrote: “A community of full-time ministers who know how to reflect yet aren’t afraid of play is a gift that is so very rare in our world. Space was given to process in playful ways as well as in stillness, silence, and deeply thoughtful reflection. It is rare for conferences to have this balance done so well and for conferences to be able to laugh at themselves while still offering such valuable content.”

The 2018 APCE annual event will be held in Louisville, Kentucky, from January 31 to February 2. RCA Christian educators are invited to come for enriching experiences and engaging spiritual practices that will open doors to demonstrate boundless hospitality in our congregations, our communities, and our world. Scholarships for first-time RCA attendees are available through the SEED fund (contact Joann Koning at jkoning@rca.org for more information on the SEED fund). For more information on the APCE annual event, see www.apcenet.org.

The RCA’s camps provide a valuable place for discipleship and faith formation to happen throughout our denomination. Countless lives have been changed through these ministries. Our commission would like to not only lift up the ministry of these camps, but also urge greater utilization of the camps for youth and adults alike by our RCA churches. Many churches are willing to underwrite a portion of the cost for kids to attend summer camp or retreats. We hope to see more churches adopt this investment into one of the greatest discipleship tools we have.

Here is one minister’s story of the value of our RCA camps:

My family was moderately involved in a church as I was growing up. When I was in third grade, they saw a flyer at church promoting summer church camp. The flyer stated that the church would cover half the cost for any children of the church. They signed me up. As a third grader, I found something uniquely special and spiritual about camp. I saw God in new and amazing ways that I had never seen before. I came back year after year.

The summer of my eighth grade year, the counselors performed a skit that demonstrated what it meant that Christ died for my sins. For the first time I saw my place in the gospel—that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. My heart awakened to the gospel in a personal way and I responded. My life would never be the same after that moment. I came back from camp passionate to live out my faith and share the good news of the gospel with those around me. I developed a passion for learning and obeying the Word of God. In early high school, I felt God calling me to ministry to teens, just as the counselors had ministered to me. I spent four years working at Christian camps through my college years and have now spent 15 years serving in youth ministry. I now support camping ministries by serving on the board of Camp Manitoqua.
I will be forever thankful for camping ministries and for my church that saw the discipleship value of camping ministry and chose to pay half the cost for any families wanting to send their kids. My life and discipleship journey is just one example of the fruit.

Dennis Colton

CCDE continues to deepen its working relationship with RCA staff in discipleship and next generation ministries and is pleased to see the growing interest and collaboration through learning communities.

**Further Reading**

- *Confessing Christ in the 21st Century*, by Mark Douglas
- *Making Disciples in Messy Church: Growing Faith in an All-Age Community*, by Paul Moore
- *Insourcing: Bringing Discipleship Back to the Local Church*, by Randy Pope
- *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*, by Mark Dever
- *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, by Lisa Miller
- *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*, by Brian D. McLaren
- *Live the Story Not the Dream*, by Jackie Smallbones
- *The Discipleship Difference: Making Disciples While Growing as Disciples*, by Robert E. Logan
- *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin
- *Live Your Calling: A 40-Day Devotional for Women Leaders*, by Amy Jackson

Respectfully submitted,
Dennis Colton, moderator
Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2016 edition, pp. 65-66]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (MGS 1974, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its ratification by General Synod in 1975 (MGS 1975, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the Book of Church Order (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2016 edition, p. 110) in this way:

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America’s membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships.

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by General Synod in 1996 (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

The commission met twice since General Synod 2016: October 13–15, 2016, in Chicago in joint sessions with the GSC and other RCA commissions, and March 10–11, 2017, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed new ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Periodically through the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is, for us, clearly anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, and in which we in the RCA are seeking to invest our whole selves into the work of Transformed & Transforming, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is
committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming globally at this point in history.

This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. This first portion of the report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups, but on the work and witness of the Reformed Church in America. You will hear both the promise and significant impact of ecumenical work worldwide, and you will hear the challenges of seeking to connect the work of the commission and our various ecumenical endeavors with the local RCA congregation’s ministry context.

World Council of Churches

The largest and oldest organized expression of the modern worldwide ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, ‘so that the world may believe’” (John 17:21).

The WCC gathers its community from 345 churches in 110 countries, representing more than 500 million Christians worldwide. Member churches (or denominations) consist primarily of those from the historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox Church, including most of the world’s Orthodox churches; scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed churches; as well as many United and independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC’s founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Major parts of world Christianity, including churches from Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, however, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC but participates in various theological dialogues and cooperates in some other ways. Financial support for the WCC has decreased dramatically in the past decade, so the organization faces the challenges of managing programmatic expectations within available resources. The RCA has maintained its historic support of the WCC throughout this time.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years; it gathered most recently in Busan, South Korea, in October 2013, under the theme “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.” The Central Committee is the continuing body that implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget and secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies, focusing now on “The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.” The commission commends and thanks RCA general secretary Tom De Vries for his membership on the Central Committee. Tom’s commitment to this work continues the unbroken record of every RCA general secretary serving on the WCC Central Committee and illustrates both the historic and current commitments of the RCA to a worldwide ecumenical witness.

The work of the WCC is not simply programmatic or related to formal initiatives. At times, it is to provide a Christian witness in ways that perhaps no other group in the world can do. “Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” is one
example. This comprehensive study seeks both to affirm and challenge the church’s biblical and Trinitarian commitment to mission and evangelism even as it sets our efforts in the rapidly changing contemporary context, the relevance of marginalized peoples to mission, and the larger purposes of mission and evangelism in God’s own mission of love to the world. It is available directly from the WCC, and could be an excellent study resource for congregations. Olav Fykse Tveit from the Church of Norway is general secretary of the WCC.

For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, see www.oikoumene.org.

World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. The RCA was a charter member of the former World Alliance of Reformed Churches and enthusiastically worked to support the coming together of these two ecumenical bodies into one.

This renewed fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, Waldensian, United, and Uniting churches is a network of 230 Protestant churches in 108 countries with a combined estimated membership of 80 million people. The WCRC is, as a communion, committed to justice—churches participating in God’s mission that all may experience the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

The WCRC may be best known worldwide for the Accra Confession, a groundbreaking statement issued at the General Council of the then–World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates of social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at wcrc.ch/accra. The WCRC has also sponsored other consultations on contemporary issues, such as human sexuality, with an eye to answering the question, “How can we remain in communion despite our differences?”

The WCRC carries out considerable work through regional councils; the RCA is a member church of the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC). CANAAC has unique challenges as it attempts to bridge two very diverse regions: the United States and Canada, and the several islands in the Caribbean where there is a Reformed presence. RCA minister Lisa Vander Wal is chairperson of the steering committee of CANAAC and a member of the executive committee of the WCRC. Language differences and the inherent isolation of islands present significant communication issues. Additionally, visas are difficult to obtain for many Caribbean nationals for travel between islands and to the U.S. and Canada. Still, the commitment to working together for economic and ecological justice compels us to become aware of the inequities that exist within the region. Some of the issues currently being addressed are communication and building relationships among the member churches in the council, human trafficking, and relationship and leadership development among youth. One exciting new development is the possibility of opening up relationships with the Reformed churches in Cuba, which are experiencing new growth and vitality. CANAAC has historically benefitted from collaboration with Cuban theologians and churches and looks forward to greater ease of relationships with Reformed Christians there.

Like other historic ecumenical bodies, the WCRC has faced significant budget pressures in the past decade. As one response, the organization has relocated its offices from Geneva, Switzerland, to Hanover, Germany, in space at the Calvin Centre owned by the Evangelical Reformed Church of Germany. Phil Tanis, formerly of the RCA staff, serves as the executive secretary for communications for the WCRC.
The WCRC meets in General Council every seven years; the 26th General Council of the WCRC will take place in Leipzig, Germany, from June 29 to July 7, 2017, with the theme, “Living God, renew and transform us.” The council will deal with issues of theology, mission, justice, communion, and ecumenical engagement. More than a thousand delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests will gather in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). The RCA's Lisa Vander Wal is chair of the General Council planning committee. RCA delegates to the General Council will be Carlos Corro, Stacey Duensing, Monica Schaap Pierce, and Lisa Vander Wal. In preparation for the General Council, the WCRC has offered a collection of documents titled “Prayerful Preparation” for member churches to study the theme of the General Council. These documents may be viewed at wcrc.ch/gc2017/prayerful-preparation.

One of the significant events to take place at the General Council will be for the WCRC, which represents roughly 80 million Reformed Christians worldwide, to associate with the “Joint Document on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ). With this association, the WCRC will become part of the widening ecumenical consensus on a fundamental doctrine, which already includes the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Methodist churches and is affirmed in substance by the Anglican Church. The Commission on Christian Unity invited the Commission on Theology and the General Synod professorate to provide theological commentary on the JDDJ and the Letter of Association, and this commentary was sent to the WCRC for consideration as they prepare the final documents for the General Council.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, see www.wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence, drawing for the first time world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches into a new place of relational, rather than structural, fellowship. Begun quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity that is marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the global South, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. It defines its guiding purpose in this way: “To create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in his divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.” From the start, the WCC, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF’s work. RCA general secretary emeritus Wesley Granberg-Michaelson continues to serve on its steering committee and has participated in supporting the development of the Global Christian Forum.

In its document, “Our Unfolding Journey with Jesus Christ,” which reflects on nearly two decades of work, the GCF recounts the founding of the organization and then looks forward around a commitment to “engage in theological reflection in areas of mutual concern” among its diverse membership:

We experience the open space in the Global Christian Forum as a gift of God. In a fragmented world and church, this unique expression of unity ... is a source of inspiration and hope. ... We know that God’s Spirit draws the body of Christ into unity for the sake of God’s mission in the world. So we commit ourselves
to nurture the Global Christian Forum, as the Spirit leads, as witness to God’s saving and transforming love.

The pioneering work of the Global Christian Forum has continued since the 2016 General Synod, which highlighted this initiative in a well-received ecumenical presentation to delegates that year. Most notable has been ongoing work on the project “Call to Mission and Perceptions of Proselytism.” Practices of mission and proselytism have long been a source of major tensions between Christians, often placing evangelical and Pentecostal groups in conflict with Orthodox and Catholic bodies. Because of the breadth of the Global Christian Forum’s participation, efforts in dialogue and reflection to address these tensions have been one of the main challenges it is addressing. Meetings in Rome last October resulted in major progress, and a global consultation on this challenge is scheduled for June 2017 in Accra, Ghana.

The international steering committee of the Global Christian Forum held its annual meeting in March 2017 in Havana, Cuba, hosted by the Cuban Council of Churches and the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops. Plans for the third global gathering of the GCF, the most visible expression of its work, were finalized. This will take place in Bogotá, Columbia, in April 2018. The committee also reviewed progress in the search process for a new executive secretary of the Global Christian Forum, to replace Larry Miller when he retires in 2018. The Reformed Church in America is represented on the GCF committee by general secretary emeritus Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, who is also cochairing the search process to select a new executive secretary.

Updated information and reports on the Global Christian Forum can be found at its website: www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of Churches (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 37 NCC member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include 45 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC, and Tom De Vries serves on the governing board. By necessity, the work of the NCC has evolved in dramatic ways over the last decade in response to a precipitous decline in revenue. NCC general secretary and president James E. Winkler presides over a very differently structured organization than the one that existed a generation ago. Still, the NCC continues to offer an important witness to the power of a shared voice among Christians. The theme at its national gathering in May 2016 was “Fear Not: God’s Love in an Anxious Age.” It also continues to respond to urgent issues that face the U.S. and Christians worldwide with the same moral voice it has expressed throughout its history. The RCA has placed members on the NCC’s Interreligious Relations and Collaboration Convening Table and Christian Education and Leadership Convening Table, which Monica Schaap Pierce (RCA ecumenical associate) cochairs.

The website of the NCC is www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us.

Christian Churches Together

Formed in 2007, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from the Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition,
its membership includes eight national organizations: Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, International Council of Community Churches, International Justice Mission, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, Sojourners, and World Vision. It’s this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes the CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. CCT calls itself and its member churches and organizations “to celebrate a common confession of faith in the Triune God; to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer and theological dialogue; to provide fellowship and mutual support; to seek better understanding of each other by affirming our commonalities and understanding our differences; to foster evangelism faithful to the proclamation of the gospel; to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible; and to promote the common good of society.”

The 2017 annual convocation of Christian Churches Together was canceled, but the 2016 annual convocation was held in Arlington, Virginia, on February 17–19 with the theme “What God Can Do When We Come Together: The Tenth Anniversary of CCT.” Speakers and participants engaged in dialogue over the focal issues of the last ten years’ convocations: racism, hunger and poverty, evangelism, mass incarceration, and the impact of new immigrants in American Christianity. General secretary Tom De Vries headed the RCA delegation, which included Earl James, Stacey Duensing, Jodie Wu, and Monica Schaap Pierce.

RCA delegates lauded the convocation, one of the many benefits of participating in CCT, as an opportunity to build personal relationships with people across the church in the U.S., to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Carlos Malavé is the executive director of CCT, which has its offices in Indianapolis, Indiana. The CCT’s website (www.christianchurchestogogether.org) provides additional information about its mission and activity. There you will also find common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

RCA–Formula of Agreement Relationships

In 1997, the Reformed Church in America, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. For example, Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell serves as a member of the General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations of the PC(USA), and representatives from the Formula of Agreement churches serve as corresponding delegates to this body each year.

While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches meet both to support each other in their work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus Christ more available to more people in more places.
In 2017, the Formula of Agreement celebrates its 20th anniversary. A worship service and reception dinner took place in March 2017 in Cleveland, Ohio, to celebrate this milestone, involving local pastors, ecumenical officers, and members of middle judicatories. Another goal of the event was to reignite commitment to the Formula of Agreement among the formula partners and ministry staff. We commend Monica Schaap Pierce for her involvement in planning this event.

One of the benefits of the Formula of Agreement is the opportunity to exchange ministers between the Formula of Agreement partner denominations. The commission heartily encourages the use of the document “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament—Principles, Policies, and Procedures,” to be found at www.rca.org/rca-basics/ecumenical-partners/formula-agreement.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

The eighth round of the Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue began in 2013. Included in the dialogue are representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Reformed Church in America. The RCA is represented by Allan Janssen and Monica Schaap Pierce.

Following the prospectus prepared by the previous dialogue and approved by the participating communions, including the RCA, this dialogue focuses on ecclesiology, and in particular on ministry. The first gathering divided the issue into four areas, each to be guided by a subgroup. The four areas are: mission and identity, unity and diversity, authority and episcopacy, and ministry and ordination. The commission continues to monitor this dialogue and its extraordinary conversations, and will present a full report to the General Synod in 2018. The dialogue anticipates completing its paper on ecclesiology later this year and releasing it as a celebration of our progress toward unity on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Ongoing Work of the Commission

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by General Synod in 1996 (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). This past year, the commission has spent considerable time in discussion about whether the current mandate is still applicable in our day; might it be time to reconsider the mandate in light of more recent changes in culture, the global state of the church, and the shifting demographics of the global church? The consensus of the commission is that although certain designations must be changed to reflect current ecumenical bodies, the bulk of the mandate is still as timely in 2017 as it was at its adoption in 1996, and it is still an important guiding document for the RCA’s ecumenical relationships and commitments.

The commission remains committed to the biblical mandate of unity in Christ, in whatever form, and in joining with the work of the Holy Spirit as the gospel continues to cross boundaries of geography, society, and culture. What is also clear, however, is that ecumenism in this new reality is not the work of the commission alone or simply the work of a denomination. These changing patterns of global Christianity have produced the unexpected opportunities of “glo-cal” (global + local) ecumenical work.

Many of the communities in which the RCA has congregations are now home to new immigrant Christian gatherings, the result of a global movement that brings millions of
immigrants to the United States and Canada each year—75 percent of whom are Christian. Many of the groups have ties to churches in their country of origin, but not here. The ecumenical challenge, then, rests not only in formal groups or structures, but also locally, even reaching into each congregation with this challenge: to engage ecumenically in our own communities by exhibiting both the meaning and importance of practicing radical Christian hospitality. In practicing such hospitality, local churches often find themselves recipients of remarkable grace and compassion. The commission will continue to hold this need before the church.

Additionally, many ministers of Word and sacrament, along with their congregations, participate in local ecumenical expressions such as ministerial associations and councils of churches. Many such associations are longstanding, offer member pastors support on many levels, and engage together in mercy and justice projects. Historically, the Commission on Christian Unity has not engaged those local expressions. In the future, the commission might connect with those associations and councils to promote and enhance learning, identify opportunities for wider impact, and explore together how the denominational mandate for the commission can serve local Christian unity efforts, perhaps especially given the enormous glo-cal trends, emergencies, and climate.

Reflecting on its mandate for Christian unity, the commission continues to be concerned about fissures within and among local churches, classes, regions, and in the RCA as a whole. Diversity of thought is realistic and healthy. Diversity is realistic because the church comprises a multiplicity of people with differing gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Diversity is healthy because through these diverse gifts, creativity emerges, and with it fresh approaches to upholding sacred traditions as well as addressing new issues in changing times. Diversity is not inimical to unity. Rather, the unity that has already been established in Christ comes to its fullest expression through the various gifts of the faithful, which are unified in their service to the gospel.

The Reformed Church in America has a long history of collaborating with other Christians of diverse cultures, histories, gifts, and beliefs. Whether in hospitals founded by missionaries, in a local vacation Bible school hosted with neighboring churches, or in dialogue with other communions, we partner with other believers in order to advance Christ’s mission on earth. Our common, unifying work is a response to Jesus’ prayer that we “may all be one” (John 17:21). In the Bible, Christian unity is described as a gift and a call. It is a gift that has already been realized by Jesus Christ, who has broken down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). It is a call to bear one another’s burdens so as to make visible to all a unity that God already sees (Galatians 6:2). The Belhar Confession further reminds us that unity is both a gift and obligation. In light of a growing divide evident in our society, with fear of the “other” acutely evident, the commission invites RCA congregations to actively engage these difficult conversations about visible unity among themselves, with other churches, and between individuals and members of their workplaces and neighborhoods.

Yet within our denomination, we have turned away from the gift of oneness. Stymied by fear and pride, we have fallen short of our call to manifest the unity that we have in Christ. Rather than modeling wholeness within the Reformed Church in America, we have allowed walls to be built up and allowed hostilities to fester. The ecumenical pursuit of Christian unity is deficient without internal concord. It is inconsistent for us to reach out in ecumenical relationships while failing to reach across our own denomination to extend hospitality and strive for compromise.

The urgent work of reconciliation and cooperation within our denomination requires renewed strength and courage, which we can only find in God. It necessitates trust in, and openness to, the Spirit. It demands an unqualified, intentional, and prayerful commitment
to heal the brokenness of the body of Christ. As a commission, we prayerfully urge our denomination to seek a deeper and more authentic expression of oneness that we have in Christ. For Christian unity—while universal in God’s promise—must begin at home.

The commission believes that the time is right for greater attention to be given to ecumenical relationships within our local contexts because it is there that community and common witness and work can best be accomplished. Our world and society are clamoring for good news and wholeness, and there is much injustice that must be righted if we are to be faithful to the teachings of the prophets and the gospel. Indeed, there is much more to be accomplished than any one church can do, but our effectiveness can be greatly enhanced by working together.

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to formally acknowledge and express its appreciation for the work of Thomas Song, who has completed two full terms of service. Lisa Vander Wal will continue in the role of moderator of the commission for the 2017–2018 work year.

Finally, the commission appreciates the work of ecumenical associate Monica Schaap Pierce.

Respectfully submitted,
Lisa Vander Wal, moderator

REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS TASK FORCE

In response to a report and proposal by the Commission on Christian Unity, General Synod 2015 approved R-39 (MGS 2015, p. 181), which directed the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Unity, to establish a three-year task force on interreligious understanding and relations. This task force is to “explore the challenges and opportunities of relationships and evangelism between Christians and people and groups of other religions,” working closely with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and with other ecumenical partners that are involved in interfaith discussions.

The Interreligious Task Force met three times during the past year—twice by conference call, and once in a face-to-face meeting at West End Collegiate Church in New York City. The task force’s initial task was to set the parameters of its mandate, which led it to divide into four working groups operating under the following four rubrics: 1) The interreligious dimension of mission; 2) the Scriptural and theological rationale for interreligious engagement; 3) the cultural urgency of the task; and 4) the benefits of dialogue and consequences of inaction.

Each group produced a report, which constitutes preliminary thoughts on a longer process of discernment. Here are key statements from each report, indicating the basic thrust of each.

1. The Interreligious Dimension of Mission: Because of the breadth of God’s mission, we are called to mission both with and to people of other faith traditions. In the renewing and reconciling work of God, we stand ready to work with all those who side with good versus evil, the oppressed versus the oppressor. And in word and deed, we seek to bear witness to the gospel that is to and for all people.

2. The Scriptural and Theological Rationale for Interreligious Engagement: To enable Christ’s followers in the present day to interact responsibly with those
who practice other religions, we must become familiar with those religions and their practices enough to be able to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and not bear false witness against them (Exodus 20:16), so that we can live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18).

3. **The Cultural Urgency of the Task**: This is the time for Christians to speak and act with urgency to pursue dialogue, love, and justice for and with our neighbors of different religions who are threatened with insults and violence and narrowed into categories where their humanity is ignored. The safety and welfare of our neighbors is at stake. The witness of the life of the church is at stake. Our urgency comes from our desire to love our neighbor and to love God by following the witness of Christ in this world.

4. **The Benefits of Dialogue and Consequences of Inaction**: Interreligious dialogue and action is today’s response to living and loving like Jesus. Far from compromising our faith, interfaith work invites us to live into a greater fullness of who we are as Christians. We bring our full selves to the table, even as we invite others to bring their full selves to the table. And we need not see that as fearful. Iron sharpens iron. Dialogue with persons of other faiths in fact invites us to know our full selves as Christians, not unlike our missionary forebears knew.

The final report of the task force will be brought to General Synod 2019.

Respectfully submitted,
John Hubers, moderator
Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship met three times over the past year. The group convened online on August 31, 2016. The commission met in person in Chicago, Illinois, October 22–24, 2016, in conjunction with the joint meetings of all the General Synod commissions and General Synod Council (GSC). Most recently, the commission met in New York City on January 26–28, 2017.

The commission is pleased to update the synod on its work.

The commission believes that worship with theological richness has the potential to unify the RCA. A Transformed & Transforming focus on worship would enable the commission to further its goal of informing churches of ways to create and shape transformational worship. Worship cultivates transformation in Christ, builds disciples, and increases our personal and corporate devotion to God.

In reviewing the commission’s stated responsibilities, it became clear that changes in churches require a change in the way the commission functions. The commission used to provide the program (liturgy), and churches no longer seem to need or want a program. In a paradigm shift from program to process, churches need a process that will help them engage in dialogue about the theological significance in worship. A clear commission goal is to communicate the essential role of worship in Transformed & Transforming to the RCA.

Commission discussions this past year have centered around three questions: What are churches doing now? What resources do churches need and want? How can the commission help provide the resources that churches need and want?

Last year, the General Synod committed $5,000 to help fund a survey on worship practices in the RCA in partnership with the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship (and the affiliated Center for Social Research). The survey is currently in development. The answers from the survey will guide the future work of the commission and provide valuable direction for potential workshops and learning communities.

While the survey is in process, the commission would like feedback regarding the role the Lord’s Supper plays in worship in the individual congregations. Since the commission still awaits the worship survey information, the commission’s verbal report at General Synod this year will take the form of a questionnaire, asking delegates to share stories of celebrating the Lord’s Supper in diverse worship contexts.

A Summary of the Commission’s Review of Its Responsibilities

Advising the Church of Changes Needed in the Liturgy and Directory for Worship

A plan to revise the Directory for Worship pointed out the need for a worship survey. While the Commission on Nominations has done its work in forming a diverse group of commission members, it is impossible to know what is happening throughout the RCA.

As the survey goes forward, the commission continues to commend to all RCA congregations the guidelines for General Synod worship found in the commission’s report to the 2016 General Synod, available in the 2016 Minutes of the General Synod, pp. 253-257 (www.rca.org/minutes/2016-minutes).
Create and Disseminate Worship Resources for Church and Personal Use

The Reformed Church in America has placed the Liturgy within its constitution. It aligns us with God and one another as a confessing church in our worship through Word and sacrament. Because the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is being offered with greater regularity within many Reformed churches during the liturgical year, one task of the commission was to identify the prayers reflecting specific liturgical seasons within the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. As the Directory for Worship instructs, “A [Communion] prayer shall be offered which includes thanksgiving to God for his creative work, providence, and revelation, especially in Christ. … This exclamation, which brings the historical past of the incarnate life of Christ together with the eschatological future, is entirely appropriate to the celebration of the Supper.” Prayers specific to the liturgical season would be appropriate within the Lord’s Supper in that they portray the history of salvation through Jesus Christ. The commission is looking into resources and encourages pastors, worship teams, classes, and General Synod professors to seek and create seasonal liturgical prayers. These could be shared during workshops, denominational gatherings, and seminary classes.

During these discussions, a concern was raised about the nature and emphasis of sacramental theology in the context of the local church and ministry. The Commission on Christian Worship will seek to host workshops, perhaps at General Synod or in learning communities, regarding the sacraments, particularly the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Professors from colleges and General Synod professors would be asked to participate in these workshops. The commission hopes to then make this design and discussion available to classes and regional synods to encourage greater use of the sacrament and to acknowledge its relationship to the preaching of the Word.

Recommend Standards for Worship Music

The commission reviewed the essay “The Theology and Place of Music in Worship” on the RCA website (www.rca.org/resources/theology-and-place-music-worship) and considers it up to date and useful. It will be reviewed again in light of worship survey results.

Advise the Church with Critiques of Various Versions of the Bible

In 2016, the commission commended the Common English Bible for use in devotion, study, teaching, and prayer, but the last time the commission gave substantive guidance to the General Synod on the use of biblical versions in worship was in 2004. Those choosing a new Bible for congregational use were referred to two articles written by James V. Brownson, James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

- “Pastor, Which Bible?” in Reformed Review, 43:3 (1990), pp. 204-216.

These articles remain relevant and helpful guidance to congregations seeking to sort the accuracy, eloquence, and inclusivity of biblical translations for their use in public worship and reading.

The publishing of new Bible versions has yielded only minor translation variations in the years since those articles were published. However, the use of Scripture in worship has, in this time, been significantly affected by the popularity of biblical paraphrases as well as by the growing use of electronic means to access Scripture. The commission recognizes this shift of attention; the concern for right translation seems increasingly accompanied by a
concern for meaningful engagement with Scripture. The commission will continue to seek input—from the churches as well as General Synod professors and relevant commissions—on right and meaningful use of Scripture in worship, in order to provide guidance on means of accessing and hearing Scripture in the unique setting of worship.

Inform the Church of Current Development in Liturgics, Hymnody, and Other Worship Resources with Appropriate Critique

In transitioning from program to process, disseminating current developments will require significant changes in the way the commission has worked in the past. The commission will seek to clarify the difference between creating additional resources for worship, helping to create resources for worship leadership, and creating communities to empower worship leaders and help them learn from each other. The commission realizes that some of this work is beyond the scope of the commission, would require staff assistance, and, depending on the topic, would only be possible with the expertise and participation of consultants. This discussion will continue following feedback from the churches.

In Appreciation

The commission gives thanks for and welcomes new members Dennis TeBeest and Bob Fretz, and for continuing members Katherine Lee Baker, Sarah Palsma, and Drew Poppleton. The commission is grateful to Ron Rienstra, whose term on the commission ended last year, for continuing his work on the worship survey. The commission also wishes to express its gratitude Nancy Hoerner, who concludes her service as member and moderator of the commission. Nancy is pastor of Allwood Community Reformed Church in Clifton, New Jersey.

Respectfully submitted,
Nancy Hoerner, moderator
Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) met October 13–15, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois, and again January 30–February 1, 2017, in New York City, New York. Communication also occurred through numerous emails and phone calls. The CCO worked with other commissions of the General Synod on the work assigned to it by the General Synod. The commission also provided advisory responses to requests for interpretations of the Book of Church Order (BCO).

1. Referrals from 2016 General Synod

No referrals from last year’s General Synod were received.

2. Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies

A member of the CCO participated on the Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies created as a result of R-51, adopted by the 2015 General Synod (MGS 2015, p. 242).

3. Board of Benefits Services

The RCA’s Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) requested guidance regarding ways to enforce compliance by consistories with BCO Formulary No. 5 (related to retirement plan contributions and life and long-term disability insurance) and ways to compel classes to fulfill their obligations under BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 3 (2016 edition, p. 53) to ensure that consistories honor their obligations under Formulary No. 5.

4. Work with the Commission on Theology regarding Commissioned Pastors

The 2016 General Synod voted to refer three separate recommendations regarding commissioned pastors to the General Synod’s Commission on Theology (COT) in consultation with the CCO (see MGS 2016, R 16-20 to R 16-25, pp. 146-149). The role of the CCO was to offer proposed changes to the BCO in response to the action of the Commission on Theology’s recommendation of whether the commissioned pastor is to be recognized as an elder or a minister in our polity.

The CCO presents the following paper, concluding with proposed amendments to the BCO:

THE COMMISSIONED PASTOR IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

History

The history of commissioned pastors in the RCA was reported to the General Synod by the Commission on History in 2015 (MGS 2015, pp. 197-211). The 2016 General Synod also received a report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit, held in March 2016 (MGS 2016, pp. 142-152). In response, the 2016 General Synod directed the Commission on Theology (COT) to review the place of commissioned pastors in our polity. Should the church order recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder or as a servant of the church who functions as a minister? There is an expressed desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies. Would the commissioned pastor be sent as an elder or as a minister delegate?
The Work of the Commission on Theology and Commission on Church Order

The COT looked at the commissioned pastor from many angles, and also looked at how our assemblies are formed. It concluded that office is the most significant identifying characteristic when forming our synods. Likewise, delegates are not present in broader assemblies because they function in a particular manner. They come as “officers of the church.” The office that a commissioned pastor bears and to which the person is ordained is the office of elder. Therefore, if commissioned pastors are to attend the synods as delegates, they would attend as elders because they are elders. The COT sent the following statement to the CCO requesting that changes in the 

The Commission on Theology commends the Commission on Church Order to join us in recommending a change to the 

Furthermore, we commend the Commission on Church Order construct a change to the current 

The underlying rationale for this is their ordination as elder.

With this directive from the COT, the CCO has been given the task of applying this directive to the role of commissioned pastors in the RCA as expressed throughout the 

Understanding the Office of Elder in the Reformed Church

“The 

“In Reformed thought an office, with its authority and powers, is not a response to community need, or even to the needs of the world, but to Christ’s ministry to and through his people, as shown above. Office does not follow function; function follows office” (Faithful Consistories, p. 6).

“The elder takes responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the congregation in a missional church, ascertaining that its members are nurtured through Scripture, worship, the sacraments, and prayer” (Faithful Consistories, p. 18).

The office of elder serves the local church. The purpose of this office is for the governance of the congregation and for the effectiveness of the local church in ministry. We see this application in the definition of the office of elder in the *BCO* (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1; 2016 edition, pp. 12-13):

Sec. 7. Elders are confessing members of the local church who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The office of the elder is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the local church elders are chosen members of spiritual discernment, exemplary life, charitable spirit, and wisdom grounded in God’s Word. Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call, are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. They are set apart for a ministry of watchful and responsible care for all matters relating to the welfare and good order of the church. They are to study God’s Word, to oversee the household of faith, to encourage spiritual growth, to maintain loving discipline, and to provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. They have oversight over the conduct of the members of the congregation and seek to bring that conduct into conformity with the Word of God, thereby empowering all members to live out their Christian vocation in the world. Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation. They seek to guard the sacraments of the church from being profaned. An elder may administer the sacraments, if authorized by the board of elders.

Commenting on this section of the *BCO*, Allan Janssen makes the following observations in his book *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*:

The elder is charged with oversight of the life of the members of the congregation (p. 47).

In recent years, the Reformed Church in America has expanded the responsibilities of the office of elder to permit elders, under certain circumstances, to preside at the Lord’s Table. This permissive action was taken that congregations not be bereft of the sacrament when circumstances prevent the availability of ministers. This action needs to be taken cautiously. The authorization is very simple: the board of elders designates one of its members to preside. This is not ordination to a new office” (p. 49).

The Reformed Church understands that the office of elder is imperative to the formation of the local church. The elder serves the local church and serves through the local church. Elders derive authority to act not from ordination, but by being granted that authority by the board of elders. For example, an elder may preside at the Lord’s Table not because the person is an elder but when the board of elders or the classis has authorized the action. Elders need to be connected to the local church for the office to have any meaning. To say this another way, an elder needs the local church in order to be an elder as much as the local church needs elders in order to be the church.
Understanding the Role of Commissioned Pastor in the RCA

“Commissioned pastor” is not an office. It is a role or a function for service. It was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry.

The commissioned pastor designation was never intended or designed to serve as a replacement for the minister of Word and sacrament, nor was it intended to be an easier path to professional ministry; it was intended to support, and be supervised by, ministers in a specific place within a classis for a specific period of time (report of the Commission on History, MGS 2015, p. 203).

Recommended Changes to the BCO

The Commission on Church Order offers a series of changes to the BCO to more fully integrate the commissioned pastor into our polity as a servant of the local church who is both an elder and a member of the classis.

The commission presents the following amendments to the BCO to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-41
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 1. Definitions

Sec. 1. A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, and the elders and deacons currently installed in office, and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 8.) A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. An organizing church has a classis-appointed governing body that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

Sec 8. … Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call and/or commissioned pastor/s (if any), are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. … Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Consistory

Sec. 9. A consistory or its minister may request the classis to terminate the minister’s relationship to that church. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8.) A consistory or its commissioned pastor may request the classis to terminate the commissioned pastor’s commissioning to that church.
COMMISSIONS

Sec. 11.
e. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by a Minister of Word and Sacrament, a commissioned pastor under contract with the congregation, a preaching elder under contract with the congregation, or a candidate for ministry appointed pursuant to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7.

1. A consistory or a governing body may issue an invitation to preach to a minister of another denomination whose character and standard is known.

2. A consistory or governing body may determine whether to issue an invitation to preach to a minister whose character and standard is not known to them once that minister has first furnished the consistory or governing body with written evidence of recent date of that minister's good ministerial standing and the minister's authorization to preach the Word.

3. A consistory or a governing body may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Sec. 11.
e. The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Chapter 1, Part II

Article 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body, commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis, and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds. The classis is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates, and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving
as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis, and commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 2. The classis shall exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds, and shall enforce the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The classis shall examine candidates for ministry throughout their training process and prior to granting a certificate of licensure, students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. The classis shall examine candidates for commissioned pastor throughout their training process and/or prior to commissioning.

Sec. 10. The classis shall approve and disapprove calls and contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between ministers and churches or congregations. The classis shall approve and disapprove contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between commissioned pastors and churches or congregations.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ministers of classis members and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers members and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers classis members and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 6. Transaction of Business

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, a members of a classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be a member of the classis or a confessing members of one of its the churches or congregations in the classis.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers its members and
COMMISSIONS

elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods:

m. Does the consistory or governing body regularly engage its minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s in a mutual reflection on the ministerial needs and challenges of the congregation?

n. Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?

Article 15. Supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament

Sec. 12. The classis shall keep a record book in which the declarations for licensed candidates, commissioned pastors, and ministers are clearly written. Those who are received on examination or on certificate shall subscribe to the proper declaration in the presence of the classis.

Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors

Sec. 1. A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis and under the auspices of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

a. A consistory or governing body may recommend a confessing member of a Reformed church to the classis as a candidate to become a commissioned pastor.

b. Sec. 3. Upon acceptance of the consistory’s application on behalf of a candidate, the classis shall approve and supervise a training plan for that person. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits ministry competence in 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the Government, the Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.

c. Sec. 4. In satisfying itself concerning a candidate’s ministry competence, the classis shall employ criteria established by the General Synod Council.
Sec. 3. Confirming an Invitation to Ministry

a. Sec. 5—Upon satisfaction by the classis of the candidate’s ministerial competence, the classis shall identify and confirm the specific form of commissioned service appropriate to the gifts and training of the candidate. When the classis receives an invitation for a ministry from one of its local churches or congregations it deems appropriate for the candidate, and upon the candidate’s acceptance of this invitation to ministry, the classis shall 1) authorize the ministry, 2) approve a contract, and 3) commission the candidate to the authorized ministry to the extent of the contract. A church or congregation shall not enter into a contract with a commissioned pastor except by the approval of the classis.

b. Sec. 6—After a classis approves a candidate for commission to an authorized ministry, the classis shall appoint a time and place for a commissioning service at a regular or special classis session. The service shall utilize a liturgy approved by the General Synod. The commissioned pastor shall read aloud and sign the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (Appendix, Formulary No. 16) shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis as part of that order for commissioning. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12.)

c. Sec. 7—The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor

a. Sec. 8—The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. a—Serve as presiding officer of the consistory at its request and may be appointed supervisor of that consistory.

2. b—Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.

3. c—Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by consistory and subject to state and provincial law.

b. Sec. 9—The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.

c. Sec. 10—The classis shall evaluate the performance of the
commissioned pastor at least annually.

d. **Sec. 11.** Upon completion of the authorized ministry by a commissioned pastor, the classis shall provide to that person a written statement of the training received and the ministry that was performed.

e. **Sec. 12.** The commissioned pastor shall remain a member of a local church, but is amenable solely to the discipline of the classis as set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 of the *Book of Church Order*, for the period of commissioned service.

f. The classis in which a commissioned pastor’s membership is held is the only classis to which the commissioned pastor is amenable.

g. **Sec. 13.** Upon request of the regional synod, the classis shall submit to an annual review upon request of regional synod of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision.

The advice of the All-Synod Advisory Committees, as expressed by the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team, was to vote in favor of R 17-41. See pp. 273-282 for the Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-41 as follows (additions and deletions that are part of the proposed amendment are highlighted).

Chapter 1, Part II

*Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors*

*Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor*

a. **Sec. 8.** The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. To serve as a member of consistory.

(subsequent sections re-numbered)

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R 17-41.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-41 as amended.

The final text of R 17-41 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**R 17-41**

To adopt the following changes to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):
Chapter 1, Part I

Article 1. Definitions

Sec. 1. A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, and the elders and deacons currently installed in office, and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 8.) A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. An organizing church has a classis-appointed governing body that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

Sec. 8. ... Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call and/or commissioned pastor/s (if any), are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. ... Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Consistory

Sec. 9. A consistory or its minister may request the classis to terminate the minister’s relationship to that church. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8.) A consistory or its commissioned pastor may request the classis to terminate the commissioned pastor’s commissioning to that church.

Sec. 11.

e. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by a Minister of Word and Sacrament, a commissioned pastor under contract with the congregation, a preaching elder under contract with the congregation, or a candidate for ministry appointed pursuant to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7.

1. A consistory or a governing body may issue an invitation to preach to a minister of another denomination whose character and standard is known.

2. A consistory or governing body may determine whether to issue an invitation to preach to a minister whose character and standard is not known to them once that minister has first furnished the consistory or governing body with written evidence of recent date of that minister’s good ministerial standing and the minister’s authorization to preach the Word.
COMMISSIONS

3. A consistory or a governing body may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Sec. 11. e. The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Chapter 1, Part II

Article 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body, commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis, and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds. The classis is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis, and commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 2. The classis shall exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds, and shall enforce the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The classis shall examine candidates for ministry throughout their training process and prior to granting a certificate of licensure, students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. The classis shall examine candidates for commissioned pastor throughout their training process and/or prior to commissioning.
Sec. 10. The classis shall approve and disapprove calls and contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between ministers and churches or congregations. The classis shall approve and disapprove contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between commissioned pastors and churches or congregations.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ministers classis members and two elder delegates. At least ten days' notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers members and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers classis members and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 6. Transaction of Business

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, a members of a classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be a member of the classis or a confessing members of one of its churches or congregations in the classis.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers its members and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods:

m. Does the consistory or governing body regularly engage its minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s in a mutual reflection on the ministerial needs and challenges of the congregation?

n. Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?
Article 15. Supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament

Sec. 12. The classis shall keep a record book in which the declarations for licensed candidates, commissioned pastors, and ministers are clearly written. Those who are received on examination or on certificate shall subscribe to the proper declaration in the presence of the classis.

Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors

Sec. 1. A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis and under the auspices of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

a. A consistory or governing body may recommend a confessing member of a Reformed church to the classis as a candidate to become a commissioned pastor.

b. Sec. 3.—Upon acceptance of the consistory’s application on behalf of a candidate, the classis shall approve and supervise a training plan for that person. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits ministry competence in 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the Government, the Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.

c. Sec. 4.—In satisfying itself concerning a candidate’s ministry competence, the classis shall employ criteria established by the General Synod Council.

Sec. 3. Confirming an Invitation to Ministry

a. Sec. 5.—Upon satisfaction by the classis of the candidate’s ministerial competence, the classis shall identify confirm the specific form of commissioned service appropriate to the gifts and training of the candidate. When the classis receives an invitation for a ministry from one of its local churches or congregations it deems appropriate for the candidate, and upon the candidate’s acceptance of this invitation to ministry, the classis shall 1) authorize the ministry, 2) approve a contract, and 3) commission the
candidate to the authorized ministry to the extent of the contract. A church or congregation shall not enter into a contract with a commissioned pastor except by the approval of the classis.

b. Sec. 6. After a classis approves a candidate for commission to an authorized ministry, the classis shall appoint a time and place for a commissioning service at a regular or special classis session. The service shall utilize a liturgy approved by the General Synod. The commissioned pastor shall read aloud and sign the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (Appendix, Formulary No. 16) shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis as part of that order for commissioning. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12.)

c. Sec. 7. The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor

a. Sec. 8. The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. To serve as a member of consistory.

2. a. Serve as presiding officer of the consistory at its request and may be appointed supervisor of that consistory.

3. b. Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.

4. e. Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by consistory and subject to state and provincial law.

b. Sec. 9. The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.

c. Sec. 10. The classis shall evaluate the performance of the commissioned pastor at least annually.

d. Sec. 11. Upon completion of the authorized ministry by a commissioned pastor, the classis shall provide to that person a written statement of the training received and the ministry that was performed.
COMMISSIONS

Sec. 12. The commissioned pastor shall remain a member of a local church, but is amenable solely to the discipline of the classis as set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 of the Book of Church Order, for the period of commissioned service.

f. The classis in which a commissioned pastor’s membership is held is the only classis to which the commissioned pastor is amenable.

g. Sec. 13. Upon request of the regional synod, the classis shall submit to an annual review upon request of the regional synod of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision. (ADOPTED)

5. Furloughing Missionaries

The BCO currently provides that furloughing missionaries may serve as delegates to General Synod (see Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; 2016 edition, p. 65, and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5; 2016 edition, p. 67). The issue with these sections of the BCO is that RCA Global Mission no longer uses the designation of “furloughing missionaries.” After conversations with RCA Global Mission staff, the CCO is proposing that BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5 (2016 edition, p. 67), be revised to reflect current terminology and practices.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-42
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1

... Certification Agency; a number of furloughing missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the bylaws of General Synod ...

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3

Sec. 5. The classis may appoint as a delegate one of its members who is a furloughing missionary on home assignment at the time of appointment with at least five years of service in the field shall be eligible for appointment to the General Synod. The missionary delegate from the classis of membership once during each furlough and shall not be counted as one of the regular delegates of that classis and may serve as a missionary delegate only once every five years. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-42.
6. Supersession of a Consistory

After receiving questions about the supersession process, the commission worked on Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9 (2016 edition, pp. 37-39), in order to simplify and clarify the necessary steps for supersession. Two particular topics were addressed: 1) the relationship of the pastor/s to the action of supersession; and 2) the repeated requirement in the text for a supermajority vote by the classis to take actions.

Regarding the relationship of the pastor to the action of supersession, the commission understands that if the consistory is dissolved then the call to the pastor/s no longer exists. In other words, the pastoral relationship dissolved since there isn’t a consistory with which to have such a relationship. Therefore, the proposed text plainly states that the pastoral relationship is dissolved. Please note that (a) a minister whose call is dissolved as a part of a supersession process may nevertheless continue to serve under contract in a capacity agreed upon by the minister and the group of persons exercising the functions that are necessary for the administration of the church, and (b) nothing prevents a reconstituted consistory from extending a new call to the minister whose call was dissolved as a part of the supersession process. These notes are intended to remind the General Synod and the broader church that supersession is a reparative process with an ultimate goal of “righting the ship.”

The commission presents the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-43
To adopt the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9

Sec. 2. Classis shall be directed by the following rules when superseding a consistory:

a. Before superseding a consistory, the classis shall notify the church—consistory and the ministers (if any) of its intention and summon the governing body—consistory to show cause why that consistory should not be dissolved and the church and its property be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may instead advise the classis of its approval of this action.

Sec. 3. The notice required by Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 2 shall include the following:

- a. The basis upon which the classis is seeking supersession, with specific reference to a condition found in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 1.

- b. Notice that the action of supersession causes the termination of the ministerial relationship.
2c. The time, date, and location of the classis meeting where supersession shall be considered.

3d. A statement that the consistory must appear at the meeting identified in Section 13(a)(2) the notice to show cause and show cause why it should not be dissolved.

b. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may, instead, advise the classis of its approval of this action.

Sec. 4. After having heard the consistory, the classis may act to supersede the consistory. A decision to supersede requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. In combination with a decision to supersede or thereafter, the classis may also elect, in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.

b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management, and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

Sec. 5. c. If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it shall dissolve the consistory and otherwise terminate the formal organization of that church and:

a. When a consistory is superseded, the consistory is dissolved and any ministerial relationships of that church are terminated. The classis shall take such steps as may be necessary to bring that church, its ministry, and its property under the direct administration of the classis.

d-b. Such a church shall not have a consistory, but the classis shall designate those persons, not necessarily members of that church, who, in lieu of the consistory, shall exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church. These persons shall serve the church in the same capacity as a consistory until such time as the life of the church has reached an end or a consistory for the church is reconstituted (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 97, Section 715). The supersession board is authorized to carry out the responsibilities of Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 2, 5, and 6, without further acts of the classis. In carrying out these responsibilities, the supersession board shall follow the requirements of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4. The classis may grant additional authority to the supersession
board or may impose restrictions on the authority automatically granted to the supersession board.

e. The final action of the classis to dissolve a consistory shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 7. When the classis has superseded a consistory, it shall have the authority, in the exercise of its discretion and in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

   a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.

   b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

   All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 64. The classis shall have the authority to reconstitute the consistory of a church when, in the judgment of the classis, sufficient growth has been achieved or suitable stability created so that the church can continue ministry without classis administration. The classis shall guide the consistory selection process (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 14). The decision to reconstitute the consistory requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-43.

7. Minister of Word and Sacrament

It is commonly understood that all ministers are ordained to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. However, discussions with ministers and candidates new to our denomination have shown that the current BCO text can be interpreted to mean that pastors are Ministers of Word and Sacrament, but specialized ministers have their own office. To clear away this misinterpretation, the CCO presents the following changes to the BCO.
This proposed text does not introduce new meaning, but clarifies the intended meaning of the current text.

The commission has agreed that for consistency of style the word “sacrament” should be capitalized when used in the phrase “Minister of Word and Sacrament.” Accordingly, other references to “Minister of Word and Sacrament” throughout the BCO will be adjusted as an editorial change.

Additionally, the commission is proposing to delete the word “only” in the proposed version of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3, since the use of that word implies one could have multiple memberships. Also, the phrase “under the authority of the consistory” is added to Section 4a since the consistory oversees the administration of sacraments in the local church.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-44
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament—the office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Ministers of Word and Sacrament. They are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or commissioned or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is the In the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation
that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

b. A specialized minister is a Sec. 5. The office of the minister in a specialized ministry is to serve as pastor and teacher of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. The specialized minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. The minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

c. Proper ecclesiastical designation of ministers shall accord with the nature of their ministry, such as pastor, teacher, professor, missionary, chaplain, president, executive secretary, director, or other appropriate designation.

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to amend R 17-44 as follows (additions and deletions that are part of the advisory committee’s amendment are highlighted).

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacraments is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is a the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R 17-44.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-44 as amended.

The final text of R 17-44 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

R 17-44
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):
Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or commissioned or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is a in the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

b. A specialized minister is a in a specialized ministry is to serve as pastor and teacher of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. The specialized minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. The minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

c. Proper ecclesiastical designation of ministers shall accord with the nature of their ministry, such as pastor, teacher, professor, missionary, chaplain, president, executive secretary, director, or other appropriate designation. (ADOPTED)
8. Supervisor of Consistory

The commission received a request from a task force of the Regional Synod of Albany asking the commission to consider proposing a BCO amendment that would authorize supervision of consistories with no installed minister by a minister from another classis. This authorization could make it possible for the classis responsibility to be more broadly held, thereby relieving stress when one classis has too many vacancies for its ministers to service.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-45
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendations to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 3. The classis shall appoint one of its ministers a minister as supervisor of all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister. If the minister to be appointed as supervisor is a member of another classis, then the classis shall consult with the minister’s classis of membership prior to making such appointment. The classis shall determine the appropriate responsibilities for the supervisor. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-45.

9. Affiliation of a Local Church with More Than One Denomination

Affiliation occurs when one local church maintains membership status in at least two denominations. An affiliated church differs from a union church and a federated church. Both the union and federated models begin with two churches coming together as one system. The affiliation model begins with one church connecting with more than one denomination. Examples of affiliated churches already exist in our denomination. CCO is hearing of other churches expressing interest in such a relationship. In order to provide an orderly way for affiliation with other denominations, the commission is providing language in our church order to allow affiliation. The commission does not offer an opinion on the merits of affiliation. The commission is presenting this new article so that the denomination can determine the merits of affiliation. This amendment proposes a new Article 9 to be added to Chapter 1, Part 1 of the Book of Church Order.

The second sentence in Section 1 of the new Article 9, “A church that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America,” means that the church’s relationship with the RCA—such as the requirements of Formulary No. 15, oversight of property, etc.—remain the same in an affiliated relationship as they were prior to such relationship. In the same manner, a church that chooses to affiliate with the RCA may also remain subject to its denomination. This provision is stated in Section 2c of the new article.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:
R 17-46
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 9. Affiliated Churches

Sec. 1. A consistory, with approval of its congregation and classis, may affiliate its church with another denomination in which the General Synod has declared the Reformed Church in America to be in full communion. A church that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 2. A church from a denomination with which the General Synod has declared the Reformed Church in America to be in full communion may affiliate with a classis of the Reformed Church in America. The approval of the classis that is most geographically proximate to the church and will receive the church, and the approval of the church’s current denomination/s, as well as congregational approval, are required before affiliation may occur.

a. Unless otherwise determined by the receiving classis, delegates from an affiliating church shall be corresponding delegates to the classis.

b. A minister of an affiliating church shall remain subject to the discipline of the minister’s denomination.

c. A church that affiliates with the Reformed Church in America remains subject to the governance of its current denomination, unless it is otherwise agreed. (NOT ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-46.

10. Request for Clarification regarding the Formation of “Leadership Team” (Consistory)

A stated clerk requested assistance from CCO to respond to the matter of a church that has chosen to name its governing body a “leadership team” rather than use the term “consistory.” Furthermore, that leadership team is composed of elders and a pastor, no deacons.

The BCO is clear that the governing body of an organized Reformed church is a consistory. A church can call the governing body by another title, but its composition and function must fulfill the requirements set forth in the BCO for a consistory. The classis is right to address and expect the leadership team to respond as the consistory of the church. Furthermore, it is clear and plain in the BCO that a consistory is composed of elders, deacons, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament and/or a commissioned pastor (that is, a member of the classis). In the absence of any one of these offices, a consistory simply cannot exist. The classis should
instruct the church to create a consistory (by whatever name the church chooses to use) that includes deacons as well as elders and pastor/s (i.e., all the mandated offices).

11. Communication from Commission on Theology (COT) regarding Inclusion of General Synod Professor as a Mandatory COT Member

The commission discussed a request from the General Synod’s Commission on Theology to prepare a proposed amendment to the Bylaws of General Synod that would have the effect of requiring that the COT’s membership always include a member of the professorate. The commission suggested possible wording for the change but referred the matter back to the COT.

12. Communication from Commission on Race and Ethnicity regarding Its Membership

The commission reviewed a communication from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) regarding CORE’s desire to propose amendments to the Bylaws of General Synod that would cause the racial composition of CORE to include at least one Native American and two Asian Americans (one from the executive committee of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries). The commission also discussed the matter with a member of CORE. The commission concluded that no amendments to the Bylaws of General Synod are necessary to enable CORE to achieve the results it seeks and encouraged CORE to contact Native American congregations directly regarding possible nominees.

13. Transferring Churches

The commission reviewed a communication from a classis leader whose classis had recently processed a declaration by a consistory that their church was withdrawing from the denomination for the purpose of transferring to another denomination. The classis leadership suggested that the BCO rubrics were not clear enough nor strong enough to prevent the church from leaving. The commission sympathized with the classis and its frustrations with the application and perceived shortcomings in the process but did not identify any particular issues related to RCA order and governance that weren’t already in place that would improve the process. Accordingly, the commission took no action regarding this matter.

14. Selection of Moderator and Secretary; Appointment of Corresponding Delegate

The commission elected Larry Schuyler to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2017. The commission also appointed Larry Schuyler to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2017 General Synod.

The commission thanks General Synod professor Allan Janssen and attorney Bruce Neckers for their service on this commission and therefore to the General Synod. Both Al and Bruce have completed six years of service on the commission and are rotating off its membership at the end of June.

Respectfully submitted,
Larry Schuyler, moderator
The commissioned pastor designation began with a group of RCA pastors around 1998. A plan for starting new churches was envisioned where exponential growth would take place. The number one bottleneck to seeing hundreds of new churches started was that the RCA had been dependent on seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead churches for almost 375 years. Yet there was a lack of approved seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead church planting efforts. A new type of position was needed to give proven, effective leaders a chance to serve in the RCA who may not have access to the traditional pathway to the ordination of the minister of Word and sacrament.

The commissioned pastor model intended to draw from Jesus’ apprenticing model in the New Testament, a Rabbinical tradition of competency-based, in-ministry formation, and the Pauline model of raising leaders from within. The result was “commissioned pastors.” These local, talented, theologically trained servants with missiological skills from their own context would serve in specific areas to advance the growth of the church.

The commissioned pastor process of leadership development empowers local churches, classes, and ministers of Word and sacrament to be proactive and effective in this crucial skill of multiplying leaders for the church’s mission. The role of commissioned pastor was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry. The Commission on Church Order offers a series of changes to the Book of Church Order (BCO) to more fully integrate the commissioned pastor into polity as a servant of the local church who is both an elder and a member of the classis (see pp. 252-257).

R 17-41 seeks to recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder. This reflects the desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies.

The Advisory Group Process

The 2017 all-synod advisory committees met to discuss R 17-41. Eighteen committees, including the moderator committee, met for a two-and-a-half-hour prayerful process. First, moderators met to run through their own process to prepare for facilitating the other 17 committees. Next, they guided the remaining 17 groups, consisting of General Synod delegates, through the process.

Each meeting opened with introductions, including their name, synod role, where they are from, and their relationship, if any, to a commissioned pastor. Time was then spent discerning together the guiding principles and core values the group deemed helpful to the process, such as listening well to each other, being fully present, and trusting the process. Since the work being done depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, each group spent time in prayer, following the wisdom of Philippians 2:1-11.

After prayer, each advisory committee was subdivided into four smaller groups and tasked with evaluating reports from the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Theology, and R 17-41. Each group then presented the main points as well as the pros and cons they discerned from the reports and recommendations. Each delegate was then asked to weigh items of importance from the feedback offered during the discussion. Each group also looked for common themes and patterns that emerged.

Based on this information, delegates returned to their smaller groups to draft an advice
statement they felt accurately reflected the shared wisdom of the committee. Selected delegates then worked to coalesce the four statements into one final group statement, while the rest of the delegates bathed the entire process in prayer.

The advisory committee moderators selected a summary team from its members who consolidated all 18 statements into this final report.

**Affirmations (Pros)**

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of affirmations of R 17-41, which included the following:

1. R 17-41 clarifies the role of the commissioned pastor in the BCO, allowing for their inclusion at broader assemblies in the RCA. In so doing, it acknowledges and validates the place of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. These changes provide a way for the commissioned pastor to have a voice in decisions, directions, and missions discerned by and for the church.

2. It should also be noted that much of the conversation was spent affirming the work, service, and impact of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. It appears that the all-synod advisory committees feel that commissioned pastors are one way of affirming the priesthood of all believers by raising up, training, mentoring, and supervising leaders from within local congregations for ministry.

3. The all-synod advisory committees affirmed commissioned pastors as one way to increase diversity and provide access to training not otherwise available to people.

**Concerns (Cons)**

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of concerns of R 17-41, which included the following:

1. Affirming R 17-41 may decrease the representation of elders who are not commissioned pastors at broader assemblies, skewing the ideal concept of equal balance between elder and minister representation.

2. Furthermore, it may inhibit the presence at broader assemblies of persons in professions that make them less able to set aside time for participation at those levels.

3. R 17-41 confines commissioned pastors to a church ministry without providing language to embrace commissioned pastors who serve in more broadly defined ministries outside of the traditional church model.

Note: There were also a number of concerns and observations raised about the ministry of commissioned pastors that were not germane to a yes or no vote on R 17-41. These concerns and observations will be addressed with additional comments and recommendations at the end of this report.

**Advice**

The advice of the all-synod advisory committees is to vote yes on R 17-41.
Reasons:

1. A clear majority advised yes. Twelve committees advised to vote yes, five committees advised to vote no and one committee abstained. Based on the clear majority of the advice statements, the synod is advising itself to vote yes.

2. The discussion during the all-synod advisory committee sessions overwhelmingly gave appreciation for the ministry of commissioned pastors and supported their representation at the broader assemblies.

For action by the General Synod regarding R 17-41, see the Report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 249-272.

Additional Recommendations

Furthermore, a number of strong observations and concerns were raised during the all-synod advisory committee discussions. The most significant observations and concerns included:

There remains a title disparity between “commissioned pastor” and “ordained elder.” There is significant confusion around the function and authority of commissioned pastors.

The training and implementation processes for commissioned pastors vary significantly throughout classes. Therefore, the advisory committees have indicated that it is difficult to trust that commissioned pastors are adequately trained and assessed in such a way as to preserve a high standard for ministry leadership. Additionally, without a standardized training path, the theological identity and polity practices of churches led by commissioned pastors may become diluted.

There are currently no protections provided for commissioned pastors regarding salary and benefits. This may put commissioned pastors at risk of not being provided with adequate compensation.

For these reasons, the all-synod advisory committee moderator summarizing team offers the following recommendations:

R 17-47
To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to investigate the tensions around the title of commissioned pastor, and, if appropriate, to present a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” for presentation to General Synod 2018. (ADOPTED)

R 17-48
To request that the stated clerks discuss and share their best practices of commissioned pastor training and compensation at their next stated clerks meeting. (ADOPTED)

R 17-49
To direct the general secretary to coordinate a video project that gathers the stories of commissioned pastors in ministry, using a model that requires no increase in assessments, and to present this video to the broader assemblies no later than General Synod 2019. (ADOPTED)

The following motion was made and supported:
R 17-50
To urge the GSC to consider a return to the former system of advisory committees, in which all delegates served on committees related to denominational commissions or concerns, and offered counsel based on their interest, expertise and spiritual gifts. (ADOPTED)

APPENDIX

General Synod 2017 All-Synod Advisory Committee Advice Statements

Advisory Committee #1

After reading R 17-41, we feel the intention is good and values the ministry and role of commissioned pastors. However, there are sections that seem limiting to the intent and expression of commissioned pastors for the RCA’s ministry and mission.

Advisory committee #1 advises a no vote as it has been presented.

A yes vote could happen with appropriate edits to the recommendation that provide more consistency to the role of a commissioned pastor within a classis (church, congregation, specialized minister, etc.) and with the various judicatories.

Reasons:
1. If considered a “minister” as a permanent member of classis, that should not change through our judicatories but should be consistent.
2. A commissioned pastor as an elder at regional and General Synods potentially reduces and/or could eliminate true elders.
3. The proposed wording does not allow for specialized ministry positions within a classis (i.e., chaplains, classis ministers, camp directors, etc.). The language limits it to “church or congregation.”

Note: Possibly explore a fifth office of commissioned pastors.

Advisory Committee #2

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we recommend voting yes in affirmation of the recommendation.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. It recognizes the role and value of commissioned pastors in the ministry of the local church, classis, and greater assemblies of the RCA.
2. It reflects the language and intent of the BCO regarding commissioned pastors as both elders and their functional roles as pastors in a variety of ministry contexts.

Additionally, we include these cautions and concerns along with our endorsement of R 17-41:

• We recognize the need to create a uniform training process across the denomination to ensure all classes are giving adequate training to commissioned pastors in training.
We highly value the voice of the laity at all denominational levels and do not want to see their voices diminished at the higher assemblies as a result of these changes.

Advisory Committee #3

Group #3 abstained from advising yes or no.

Reasons:
1. We, advisory committee #3, believe R 17-41 moves in the right direction in clarity and role definition for commissioned pastors.
2. We have a lingering concern that the 50/50 elder/minister of Word and sacrament participation at General Synod is deliberate and important, and the commissioned pastors attending as elders may dilute that balance, reducing the elder voice.
3. We’re not sure how to fix this but would like some attention to unintended consequences.

Advisory Committee #4

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #4 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. It normalizes and clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
2. It validates the work commissioned pastors are called to do.
3. It establishes oversight, accountability, and support to commissioned pastors.
4. It gives commissioned pastors a voice within local churches, classes, and synods.

Advisory Committee #5

Advisory committee #5 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. It further defines the commissioned pastor’s role—clarity of the training oversight of this position is long overdue. This will help with greater acceptance and implementation of more commissioned pastors.
2. Allows for participation in the higher bodies (regional/classes/GS).
3. Allows use of commissioned pastors when there are not enough ordained clergy in particular regions.
4. Additional training ensures consistency of understanding and execution of the role.
5. This will help with growth and revitalize the church.
6. To be more of an influence on the emerging (potential) leaders of the church.

Advisory Committee #6

Advisory committee #6 came up with the following advice statement:

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of its commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we find the participation of commissioned pastors and increased accountability at both classis and synod levels to be a joyful clarification for this important and unique ministry.
Advisory committee #6 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. We value participation by commissioned pastors at classis and synod levels.
2. We value diversity of voices.
3. We value clarity of roles that is provided in the BCO changes, which helps us to do things decently and in good order.
4. We value accountability and oversight at the classis level.

We would recommend that classes consider:

- Setting a recommended rate of compensation for the commissioned pastor as a way to honor the covenant relationship between the commissioned pastor and the congregation.

Advisory Committee #7

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #7 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. The recommendation gives greater clarity to the role of commissioned pastor.
2. It provides consistency throughout the BCO.

Furthermore, recognizing additional clarification is needed concerning the role of commissioned pastors, advisory committee #7 recommends the GSC bring to General Synod 2018 the following, but not limited to: educational requirements, duties and responsibilities, and compensation for further clarification.

Advisory Committee #8

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we find that the two concerns regarding office and function have been brought together very well.

Advisory committee #8 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41:

Reasons:
1. It clarifies the role of a commissioned pastor by recognizing its office of elder as well as its function as pastor.
2. It does not transfer any fundamental power to the church or its offices and the offices have parity.
3. This takes the priesthood of all believers seriously while allowing for congregations to have pastoral leadership where vacant, thereby allowing the church to grow through the gifts of the commissioned pastor.
4. The commissioned pastor is counted in classis quorum as a pastor.

Addendum (caution):

- There is need to clarify what the training and assessment of commissioned pastors is from classis to classis, so there is not such a wide variance.
Advisory Committee #9

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, and despite the ongoing confusion regarding the definition of the role of commissioned pastor, advisory committee #9 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. We affirm the effort to provide a voice for commissioned pastors at higher judicatories, thereby creating the potential of greater diversity at the judicatories.
2. We affirm the effort to acknowledge covenantal theology between judicatories as it pertains to commissioned pastors.
3. We like the balance that at classis level they are recognized for their ministry but at higher levels of assembly for their office as elders.
4. This provides checks and balances between the commissioned pastor, the church, and the classis.
5. This is a consistent expression of Reformed polity.

Concerns:

- We are concerned about the higher level of confusion about commissioned pastors, their role, and lack of defined training.
- We are also concerned about skewing representation at judicatories.

In light of our concerns, we urge an initiation of the formation of a standard education and curriculum for commissioned pastors across the denomination.

Advisory Committee #10

Advisory committee #10 advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. If the definition of a classis quorum would be changed, care is needed to clarify who has voting rights so that a church would not exceed standard voting representation. (In example, a church sending ministers, elders, and several different commissioned pastors.)
2. Lay elders would lose representation at higher assemblies if commissioned pastors took the place of lay elders at regional and General Synod.
3. We urge the General Synod Council to find a pathway, employing proper commissions, to create standards for constituting the grounds for commissioned positions and the approval of a commissioned pastor. Our institutions for theological education shall be leveraged in the teaching and training of commissioned pastors as standards are formed.

Advisory Committee #11

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #11 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. Clarity about the role of commissioned pastors at synods. They have a function, not an office.
2. Gives them a voice and an identity.
Advisory Committee #12

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission of Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, our committee has developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the role of commissioned pastor. We are grateful for the increase in clarity concerning the role of commissioned pastor in conjunction with the office of elder.

Accordingly, advisory committee #12 advises the General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. an increase in clarity as the roles relate to, and/or conjoin with each other;
2. and that commissioned pastors be given a voice in higher bodies.

However, our committee would raise two concerns and recommend:

- that a standard of curricula be established across classes, in order to ensure commissioned pastors are fully equipped for their ministry;
- that measures are taken to ensure that elders are not deprived of a voice in synods, should a commissioned pastor be assigned to fill the position of elder delegate.

Advisory Committee #13

Advisory Committee #13 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

After study and discussion of R 17-41, this advisory committee affirms the language of the suggested changes from the commissions.

Reason:
1. It brings clarity to the extent and role of the commissioned pastor, consistory, and classis, and higher assemblies.

Advisory Committee #14

After studying the reports, advisory committee #14 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reason:
1. The recommendation serves to allow commissioned pastors to attend the broader assemblies as elder delegates, giving them an opportunity to have a voice in the conversation.

However, there are several areas of concern which should be addressed.

- We believe it should be noted that commissioned pastors being sent as elder delegates creates and sustains confusion of the office of minister and elder in both form and function of commissioned pastors. There is currently a widespread confusion throughout the denomination about the role of a commissioned pastor, which has seemingly evolved since its inception.
- This confusion also surrounds the question of the authority, practice, and educational standards of commissioned pastors within the RCA.
- In addition, allowing commissioned pastors to attend broader assemblies as elder delegates may risk potential loss of “lay elder” participation and presence.
Finally, we feel this confusion will always remain because a commissioned pastor has the title of “pastor” and not “elder.”

**Advisory Committee #15**

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we affirm and celebrate the report from the COT.

However, advisory committee #15 advises the General Synod to vote no on R 17-41, but refer this recommendation back to the CCO.

Our reasons for this are:
1. Preserve balance of voice between ministers of Word and sacrament, delegated elder delegates, and commissioned pastors.
2. Find a way to divide the motion/recommendation according to the articles or bodies (i.e., GS, regional synod, classis, consistory)
3. Concerns around maintaining RCA identity.
4. And to clarify the role of commissioned pastors on consistories.

**Advisory Committee #16**

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #16 wants to affirm the work of the commissions in creating the avenue for the important voice and gifts of the commissioned pastors to be represented in our assemblies.

However, we recommend a no vote on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. Functionally, in the life of the church, a commissioned pastor acts more like a minister of Word and sacrament than an elder. Yet the proposed amendment situates the commissioned pastor in the role of elder within the broader assemblies.
2. If General Synod approves the recommendation from the diaconal task force, the number of elder delegates in assemblies could be reduced, further limiting the voice of “regular” elder delegates.
3. The 2015 report of the Commission on History states that, “The commissioned pastor designation was not intended to be an entry point into ministry, but was intended to enhance and resource people who were already in ministry, with the goal of helping these people to eventually enter seminary and work toward the possibility of the ministry of Word and sacrament” (*MGS 2015*, p. 202). Therefore, while the commissioned pastors should have roles within consistories and classes for the specific ministries to which they are commissioned, provisions should not be made for representation within the broader assemblies.

**Advisory Committee #17**

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #17 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.
Advisory committee #17 reasons:
1. The commission has done a good and thorough job addressing a difficult problem.
2. Very well considered and fills gap that needed to be filled.
3. It affirms the importance of commissioned pastors.
4. It clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
5. The committee has done a faithful work in crafting the reports.

Advisory Committee #18

Advisory committee #18 (the moderator group) affirms commissioned pastors’ gifts and the contributions to the ministries; however, we cannot support the language of proposal R 17-41. The advisory committee of moderators advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are the following:
1. There is an inconsistency of the title of the elder and the function of a pastor.
2. There is tension between original intent versus the current reality of commissioned pastors.

We recognize, however, that commissioned pastors fill a vital role in the church and should be represented at our assemblies. We recognize the commissioned pastor process allows for an increased diversity (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.) of individuals who, by pursuing commissioned pastor ministry, are allowed a path to leadership that they might not otherwise pursue.

Therefore, we urge the General Synod Council, Commission on Theology, and Commission on Church Order to attend to the following:

• To standardize the process denomination wide for classes to prepare and recognize commissioned pastors.
• To bring clarity around the role and expected compensation guidelines for commissioned pastors.
• To bring consideration for the designation of commissioned pastor of Word and sacrament (much similar to specialized ministers of Word and sacrament.
Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” (*MGS 2003*, R-41, p. 159). *The Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5; 2016 edition, pp. 111-112) further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination.” This is our 51st report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and aid our synods, classes, and congregations informed by the goals of Transformed & Transforming, approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history:

- the transformation begun eight years ago when we made the Belhar Confession our own,
- the transformation begun 44 years ago when a woman was first ordained to ministry of the Word and sacrament,
- the transformation begun 47 years ago when women were first ordained to the offices of deacon and elder,
- the transformation begun 48 years ago when the RCA responded to the Black Manifesto,
- the transformation begun 217 years ago when the first General Synod was formed,
- the transformation begun 228 years ago when we formed our own constitution through the Explanatory Articles,
- the transformation begun 233 years ago when we began training ministers on our own,
- the transformation begun 245 years ago with the Plan of Union,
- the transformation begun 389 years ago when Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America,

and countless other transformations that have occurred before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective. Memory allows us to see God’s faithfulness in the past, and it allows us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective that is not just a historical perspective but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.

To do this work, the commission met in Chicago, Illinois, October 13–15, 2015 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council); and in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 14, 2017; as well as communicating regularly via email.
Reflecting on the Past

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America is now in its 49th year. Donald J. Bruggink, general editor of the series since its inception, continues his capable, invaluable work. *Elephant Baseball: A Missionary Kid’s Tale*, by Paul Heusinkveld, has already been released, and copies of *A Ministry of Reconciliation: Essays in Honor of Gregg Alan Mast*, edited by Allan Janssen, will be given to all the delegates to this synod. We expect to see four other new books:

- *Growing Pains: How Race Struggles Changed a Church and School*, by Chris Meehan
- *In Peril on the Sea: The Forgotten Story of the William & Mary Shipwreck*, by Kenneth A. Schaaf

Also in the process toward publication are stories of missionaries, a new history of Hope College, a reexamination of the Canons of Dort, and a supplement to the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America*. What the series needs are more stories of the wide diversity of people involved in the life and ministry of the RCA from 1628 until the present. The Congregational History sub-series needs more stories of congregations, especially congregations outside of West Michigan. The more that our series can include stories from all of the corners of our church, the more it can help us all learn from all the aspects of God’s amazing transformation among us.

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with the archivist, Russell Gasero, to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries. Work continues with the Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and representatives from New Brunswick, Western, and Calvin Seminaries on an observance of the 400th anniversary of the Great Synod of Dort (in the spirit of ecumenism, the CRC spelling has been adopted) in 2019. This continues the cooperative work with the CRC that was begun with select volumes in the Historical Series; two of the titles on the current anticipated books list are CRC-related stories.

The commission also notes that 2018 will mark the anniversary of several important moments in the history of the ministries of women in the Reformed Church in America. These are moments of transformation that can help inform the transforming that comes in our future.

**R 17-51**

To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on History and the Commission for Women, to plan a time of celebration and thanksgiving for the gifts and ministries of women in the Reformed Church in America during the General Synod of 2018. (ADOPTED)

Providing for the Future

There have been archives of the RCA housed in Gardner Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) since Sage Library was built in 1875, and there were probably
archival materials kept in the seminary library long before that. Indeed, the combination of
the RCA archives and the NBTS library creates an invaluable and irreplaceable resource
on the history of the church. When a professional archivist was first appointed for the RCA
in 1978, his offices were also housed in Sage Library and have been there ever since. The
multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the archives be not
just a Dutch-American history resource, but a well of information for all of the cultural
expressions that now make up the RCA.

In October 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing
needs of the archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and
strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the trustees of NBTS pledged
an annual grant of up to $10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC),
for each of ten years, to expand the work of the archives, in partnership with the seminary
and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future.
Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC was unable to match
the first year of the grant, so this commission voted to provide the matching funds from the
Historical Series Revolving Fund. As will be seen in the report of the archives elsewhere
in these minutes, this has provided for an amazing transformation in the work that is being
done there, work that your commission trusts will be built on in coming years.

The GSC will have again responded to this challenge at its March meeting, after this report
has been submitted, but they again face the same budget constraints. This commission,
at its February 14 meeting, once again affirmed the plan, noted that it reflects just the sort
of new thinking, partnering, and imagining advocated by our general secretary as part of
Transformed & Transforming, and voted to once again make up to $10,000 available from
the revolving fund to match the NBTS grant for 2017–2018 if the GSC cannot find a way
to take this on.

Your commission does this acknowledging the strain that depleting the fund can put on
Historical Series finances, and also acknowledging the significant commitment this
represents on the part of NBTS. The Historical Series Revolving Fund was created for
publication of historical volumes, and that must be respected, even if not absolute. This
commission cannot promise to continue matching this grant from the revolving fund
beyond the coming year. While there are virtues in thrift, this is an opportunity that has
long-term benefits for the whole church, and we hope that the whole church, as represented
by the GSC, will be able and willing to respond to this challenge.

Reacting to the Present While Learning from the Past

The Perceived Need for Definitive Decisions

The commission has continued its work of offering the church a historical perspective on
matters before it. One element of the discussions over the place of LGBTQ people in the
life of the church at recent synods has been the question of whether one decision or another
will cause the church to grow or not. Your commission has come across two 19th-century
examples of the church not allowing numbers to influence its thinking. The synod is invited
to revisit the paper “Extra-Canonical Tests for Church Membership and Ministry” (MGS
2007, pp. 302-306). When concerns over Freemasonry and the potential loss of members
over that issue to the Christian Reformed Church led Midwestern classes to overture the
General Synod of 1868 to “discountenance” Freemasonry and “deliver a distinct utterance
of its disapprobation of the connection of the Lord’s people with the Order of Freemasons,”
the synod declined to act, feeling that such concerns were insufficient to impose new
requirements for membership upon consistories. After an additional overture to the Synod
of 1869, the repost of a special committee in 1870 insisted that such additional tests would
improperly “interfere with consistorial prerogatives.”
An earlier example came from a researcher who found a lecture by Edward Tanjore Corwin ("New Brunswick Fifty Years Ago," read before the New Brunswick Historical Society, April 1905, unpublished manuscript in the archives of the Reformed Church in America), which addressed the debate at the General Synod of 1855 over whether or not to admit a North Carolina classis of the German Reformed Church. Because some members of some congregations in that classis were slaveholders, the General Synod would potentially be taking a position in support of slavery—an issue the RCA had avoided addressing so far. In the end, the synod accepted the argument expressed by Isaac Wyckoff that, despite the potential gain in members, admitting such a classis "would either fetter our faculties and speech or rend our church in twain." The synod acknowledged that the church was not ready to decide, and forcing a decision, even to gain members, was wrong.

Ministerial Supply and Misunderstood Crises

Over the last several years, the General Synod has been involved in discussions over the training and place in the church of commissioned preaching elders and commissioned pastors, and how their work and their role in the assemblies of the church fits in with a historic Reformed understanding on the nature and function of offices. As the Commission on History reported to the 2016 General Synod (MGS 2016, pp. 275-276), there are video presentations on the nature of office available from the Reformed Church Center at NBTS.

A leading perception throughout these discussions has been that the RCA has or soon will have a shortage of ministers of Word and sacrament available to pastor congregations. The following paper has been prepared to examine that view.

MINISTERIAL SUPPLY, 1900–2010: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Several church leaders have called attention to an apparent shortage of ministers of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). In his general secretary’s report to the 2001 General Synod, Wes Granberg-Michaelson stated that there is a shortage of ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA. After supporting his claim with several statistics, he declared:

Friends, those numbers don’t add up. The Reformed Church in America faces an urgent challenge of calling forth pastors and leaders who can guide our congregations into future mission.¹

The concern about an adequate supply of ministers is not new in the history of the Reformed Church in America. Ministerial supply was one of the concerns facing the denomination at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1900, the RCA’s Board of Education reported 90 candidates under its care in colleges and seminaries preparing themselves for the office of minister of Word and sacrament. One year later, the number of candidates had decreased by 19, leading the Committee on Education, Academies, and Colleges to present the following resolution to the General Synod of 1901:

That in view of the decrease in the number of students preparing for the ministry under the care of the Board, that we urge our Pastors and Churches [sic] to press the claims of the Master for laborers in his harvest; while at the same time we heartily endorse the suggestion of the Board that there shall be a thorough preparation for the work, and no short cut into the ministry.²
The concern was justified. The downward trend continued until 1906 when the number of candidates stood at just 56.

By 1907, however, the prospects were improving. The number of candidates continued growing until they had reached the 1900 level of 90. The following year, even that level was surpassed. This shift from ministerial shortage to ministerial surplus is a cycle that was repeated four times in the first half of the 20th century.

History can be a tool for understanding. What understanding does the history of ministerial supply in the first half of the 20th century offer the 21st-century church?

**A “Serious Condition”: 1901–1906**

In its annual report to the 1902 General Synod, the Board of Education observed that the number of candidates under its care in colleges and seminaries was the lowest since 1886. The number of pre-seminary candidates in colleges—28—was called “alarmingly small.” The report also noted that the number of ministers serving the church for the past four years had decreased by 56 due to death. The situation was not unique to the RCA but was similar in other denominations across North America.³

The state of ministerial supply was called a “serious condition” by the Committee on Education, Academies, and Colleges in its report to the General Synod of 1903. The committee noted that “the number of those enlisted for work in the Kingdom of God is far too small.”³ The situation was seen by the committee as “an index to the spiritual life of the Church” and its primary cause was to be found in “a prevailing worldly and materialistic spirit, which acts as a dry-rot in the life of the Church.”³ Accordingly, the committee urged pastors and consistories to “use prayerful effort in the direction of placing before the minds of promising and consecrated young men in their congregations, the claims of the Christian ministry.”⁴

**Increasing Ministerial Supply: 1907–1912**

Evidently pastors and consistories took the 1903 resolution to heart, for by 1907, the tone of the board reports was changing. In its 1907 report, the Board of Education pointed out that the 21 new students that came under the care of the board was the largest for any one year in the board’s history.⁷ In 1910, the board was able to report that the number of candidates preparing for the ministry under its care between 1905 and 1910 had increased by 50 percent.⁸

The 1910 report of the Board of Education, though generally positive in nature, did find some information disturbing: nine of the RCA classes east of Detroit (about a third of the classes in the three eastern synods) did not have any candidates in the RCA’s two seminaries nor any college students under the care of the board.⁹ In 1911, the Board of Education reported the largest number of candidates preparing for the ministry (90) under its care since 1900.¹⁰

**A New Challenge: 1913–1921**

After an increase in the number of candidates preparing for ministry under the care of the Board of Education from 1907 until 1912, the number again started to decline in 1913. By 1918, there were 63 candidates for the ministry under the care of the board in colleges and seminaries (plus five students preparing for service as medical missionaries). The impact of WWI was beginning to be reflected in the figures, as 19 candidates under the care of the board were on war leave.¹¹
The report of the board for 1919 offered this summary for the decade:

A glance at the situation for the past decade shows that during this period 211 students for the ministry were received under the care of the Board of Education. As this Board enrolls an average of 80 per cent. [sic] of the graduates of our seminaries, the number of students for the ministry of our Reformed Church, preparing in our own institutions during the past ten years, may be put at about 260, an average of 26 a year. But not all who begin to study for the ministry reach the goal. The number of students taken from the roll of the Board during the years 1909-18 was 47, or 22 per cent. [sic] of the total received. This would reduce the average number of students actually entering the ministry to about 21 a year. As the deaths of 170 of our Reformed Church ministers have been reported for the past decade, while our seminaries have recorded 173 graduates, it is clear that the growth of this part of the organism since the opening of the century has been hardly perceptible.12

The RCA’s “Five Year Progress Campaign” had the doubling of church membership as its first goal, which, if met, meant that the church’s leadership needs would also have to double. The reasoning behind this assumption failed, however, to take into account that small membership churches—more typical of many RCA congregations—would not necessarily need additional ordained pastors to care for twice the number of members. Nonetheless, the board report noted that:

The actual need of Reformed Church ministers and other Christian leaders, in the next five years, in view of the attempted doubling of the membership, of the present meager supply, and of the call of our Board of Foreign Missions for at least 12 new missionaries for each of the next five years would point to 50 recruits a year for the ministry or 250 for the five-year period.13

The Fifth Annual Report of the Progress Campaign Committee in 1923 showed an increase in communicant membership from 134,039 in 1918 to 143,475 in 1923, a gain of 9,436 (about seven percent).14

In order to meet the projected leadership needs for the five-year period of the campaign, the board calculated that each existing RCA congregation would have to recruit at least one candidate for the ministry.15 The number of candidates preparing for the ministry under the care of the Board of Education increased from 68 in 1918 to 92 in 1923, an increase of 35 percent.16

The vacancy rate in churches in 1920 was reported at 20 to 25 percent.17 By 1921, there was growing concern about a shortage of ministerial candidates in the RCA. The Board of Education’s report to the 1921 General Synod observed that the ranks of ministry were “sadly depleted” and called the scarcity of candidates for ministry “appalling.”18

From Shortage to Surplus, Again: 1926–1935

By the middle of the decade, it was reported that the student body at New Brunswick Theological Seminary had “increased quite materially” and that members of the senior class had all found placements. Nonetheless, it was asserted that two or three times their number could have been placed.19 One year later, there was a growing sense that the RCA had an adequate supply of ministerial candidates. In some areas, there were reports of anxiety about the possibility that the ministry had become “overcrowded.”20
Ten years after a shortage of ministerial candidates had been reported, one finds in the Board of Education report that “There is a pronounced unemployment problem in the ministry.” A rise in seminary enrollment over that ten-year period was noted as a possible factor in the change in the supply of ministerial candidates. The RCA was not the only denomination facing an over-supply of ministerial candidates.

One reason for the change in the ministerial supply picture is the attention given to recruitment by the Board of Education. In the 1920s, the annual report of the Board of Education began to reflect an emphasis on recruiting candidates for the ministry. Starting with the annual report for 1924, a special section of the report was entitled “Recruitment” or “Recruiting for the Ministry.” This heading appeared in Board of Education reports until 1927 and then disappeared until 1931.

In 1920, the first “Life Work Conference” was held in New Brunswick. The two-day conference was attended by almost 100 people, including Rutgers College students and high school students. The conference was organized by the Society of Inquiry, a student association at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In March of 1922, a second Life Work Conference, attended by 121 participants, was held at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Of the registered participants, 63 came from outside of New Brunswick, and 32 from Rutgers College and Preparatory School for Men. Life Work Conferences were also held in 1924 and 1926 (plans for a conference to be held at Hope College in 1927 were abandoned).

In 1922, the General Synod also gave its approval for making the first Sunday in May “Vocation Sunday.” Various resources were prepared for use by pastors in preaching and other activities. “Ministerial Vignettes” were published in publications such as the *Christian Intelligencer* and *De Hope*.

Given the increase in the number of ministerial candidates over the decade, by 1929 “recruitment” had been replaced by “The Bureau of Pastoral Exchange and Supply” as a heading in the Board of Education’s annual report.

If the 1920s were marked by a preoccupation with the recruitment of ministerial candidates, the early 1930s were marked by a shift in focus from quantity to quality. In their report to the 1932 General Synod, the Board of Education noted that:

> The churches are well manned with ministers. Many congregations which, ten years ago, found it impossible to secure ministers now have settled pastors. In many a classis it is not possible to find a vacant congregation capable of calling a pastor, even with the aid of the Board of Domestic Missions—if indeed that Board had even the necessarily modest amount to appropriate. We are in that condition which may be observed from a study of the statistics to which we come around, on the average, about three times in a century. From the point of view of the numbers, we have an over-supply of ministers. Practically every denomination faces the same situation. There are more ministers today than there are churches.

The report also suggested that there be no “short cuts” to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

The Board of Education report for 1933 devoted significant attention to the issue of “ministerial opportunity.” The report presented two graphs—one tracing the number of students under the care of the board and another (a “Chart of Ministerial Opportunity”)
tracing the vacancy rate in congregations between 1833 and 1933 (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The report offered several observations based on the data in these charts: 1) when the vacancy rate in congregations is 10 percent or less, opportunities for pastors seeking a change or seminary graduates seeking a placement are “increasingly difficult,” 2) when the vacancy rate in congregations is 15 to 20 percent, there is greater “ministerial opportunity,” 3) that for about 70 of the years between 1833 and 1933, the vacancy rate in RCA congregations was between 15 and 20 percent, 4) when the vacancy rate in churches dropped below 15 percent, it was usually for short periods of time, 5) the 1933 vacancy rate of eight percent was the lowest for a whole century, 6) from 1833 to 1933, there was a gradual but steady downward trend in “ministerial opportunity,” 7) the vacancy rate would increase again shortly, 8) the decline in the percentage of vacant churches between 1893 and 1898 coincided with a large enrollment in the seminaries, with the number of graduates offsetting the number of deaths of ministers, 9) a similar decline in the number of vacancies in churches between 1920 and 1932 corresponded with an increase in seminary enrollment, and 10) an increase in the supply of ministers tended to coincide with periods of national and global economic depression. 27

The “pronounced unemployment problem” reported in 1931 continued well into the decade. In 1934, the Board of Education reported that the seminaries were experiencing difficulty in placing graduates.

Twenty-six men are graduating from the two institutions. Our churches are so well supplied with ministers that there are few places for the seminary graduates. Many suggestions have been made as to ways in which these young men may be used. The situation, however, is unchanged at the time of writing this Report, hence we are still at the suggestion stage. 28

Toward the end of the 1930s, the Board of Education reported that the number of college students under its care who were preparing for the ministry was again decreasing. The board’s report for 1938 stated:

Attention was called in the report of this Board last year to the fact that the number of students in preparation for the ministry in colleges was decreasing and the suggestion was made that the claims of the ministry should be pressed again, particular attention being given to making the appeal to specially promising young men in our churches. The demands upon the ministry today are tremendous and only the best equipped survive the strain. 29

The very next year, however, one reads about “the rising tide of ministerial candidates.” The Board of Education’s report for 1939 observed again the connection between the economy and the available supply of ministers:

It will be noted that periods of economic depression are accompanied by a larger number of candidates for the ministry while periods of prosperity always bring with them a diminution in this supply. The present continued depression is running true to form in this respect at least. 30

Asking ministers to retire who had reached the age of 70 was one suggestion for addressing the problem of ministerial oversupply. 31
The Impact of War: 1941–1948

War, like economics, also impacted the RCA’s ministerial supply in the first half of the 20th century. During the First World War, the number of candidates preparing for the ministry under the care of the Board of Education dropped from 89 in 1917 (the year in which the United States entered WWI) to 68 in 1918 and 1919. The total war program of the 1940s had an even greater impact—the number of candidates preparing for the ministry in 1944 had dropped to 49 from 93 in 1940 (a 47.3 percent decrease compared to the 23.6 percent decrease from 1917 to 1918). With alarm, the board report for 1944 noted, “The number of students in colleges preparing for the ministry under the care of this Board is at the lowest point in 60 years!”

Several options for responding to the ministerial supply crisis were noted in the 1944 report. They included relaxing requirements of candidates preparing for the ministry, asking churches with multiple staff members to release assistant pastors for calls to vacant churches, and pressing gifted elders and deacons into service. The report asks,

Is it not feasible, however, for the purpose of furnishing leadership for our churches, to revive the time-honored custom in the Reformed Church of calling upon gifted elders and deacons to assume some of these necessary duties of the pastor, such as conducting church services “for the duration”?

By 1946, the number of students under the care of the Board of Education had dropped to 25. The report noted:

It will however be seen that the need for the discovery of leadership candidates for the church is one of serious concern. The Board of Foreign Missions alone needs some sixty candidates for the mission fields in the next several years. And although returning chaplains have serviced to staff a large number of our many pastorless [sic] churches, and others will, still there is great need for highly qualified ministerial candidates.

The report emphasized the need for “highly qualified” candidates: “We need young men and women today for the ministry and mission field who are intellectually competent, mentally alert, who possess cultural awareness and curiosity, and who, although still young, exhibit a strong professional responsibility in the direction of their proposed services.” It was not enough for a candidate to be simply devout. The report for 1947 expressed optimism with regard to the prospects for meeting the leadership needs of the church, noting that 177 young men and women had expressed interest in ministry or other forms of full-time Christian service.

The Board of Education had begun the 20th century with an enrollment of 90 candidates under its care. In 1950, the Board of Education was once more able to report 90 candidates under its care in colleges and seminaries preparing for the office of minister of Word and sacrament. The cycles had come full circle.

The 1950 General Synod Report on the State of Religion offered a century-long perspective on churches and ministers (See Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1925</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>161%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministers</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>201%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Time of Growth and Increase in Ministerial Supply: 1950–1990

In his report to the 1969 General Synod, the president of General Synod noted concerns about the future of the ministry in the Reformed Church. In response, the General Synod decided “to continue in greater depth its study of the whole problem of recruitment for and retention in the parish ministry.” In 1973, a report was presented to General Synod as a joint project of the coordinator of human resources (Office of Human Resources) and the director of professional development (Board of Theological Education). Among other things, this report examined probable retirement of ministers in the following decade, a view of the decade prior of numbers of churches and ministers, and the number of new ministers needed to maintain supply.

It was determined that in order to maintain the supply of ministers, figuring in projected retirements over the next ten years, there would need to be 28 to 35 new ministers entering the pastorate for the next ten years. This report also gave a series of charts, one of which was a comparison of churches and ministers from 1962–1971, which is very illustrative for our purposes (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Churches</th>
<th>Ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>1,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>1,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>1,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>1,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>1,203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>1,234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>1,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there may be some variance in methodologies between the previous two tables, one thing is clear: there was a significant increase in ministers between 1950 and 1962, from 884 in 1950 to 1,152 in 1962, an increase of more than 30 percent, while the number of churches in that 12-year period increased by just under 19 percent. Simply by looking at these raw numbers (even allowing for some variance in statistical methodologies), it is clear that the decade of the 1950s was a period of significant growth in both churches and ministers, with growth in ministers outpacing that of churches.

Additionally, from this it is clear that for the period of 1962–1971, the trend in both churches and ministers is upward. Indeed, the report noted that the number of churches increased 3.5 percent while the number of ministers increased 12.7 percent for the same period. And further, in order to facilitate the movement of ministers, it was determined that it is ideal for there to be a ten percent vacancy rate among churches.

The question of ministerial supply appears relatively quiet in the synodical record for the next decade, returning again in 1983 when the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations recommended that the Office of Human Resources, among other things, “assess the
potential opportunity for professional ministry likely to become available in the RCA between 1985 and 1990.”

In its report to the 1984 General Synod, the Office of Human Resources noted, “Initially, this study only underlines what we have known for years; namely, that we produce more clergy than we can possibly assimilate in the parish.” Rather than a shortage, the problem was having an abundance of ministers to support adequate employment and movement of ministers.

To what and for what are we recruiting? A theological education does not guarantee life-time employment. It is important to be honest with the person who professes interest in ministry; and while we do not wish to impede the moving of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life, we should also indicate that prospects for employment in a church are not without limits.

It was also noted that the number of churches who cannot afford a full-time minister was increasing and there must be an openness to recognizing ministry beyond full-time parish ministry as this will not be a reality for many ministers or people entering the ministry. Furthermore, the General Synod of 1984 considered a proposal that was, in essence, the commissioned pastor but with a different name. This was rejected, among other reasons, because it “would make the present over-supply of ministers even worse.”

Indeed, in 1980, there were 930 churches and 1,240 non-retired active ministers. This surplus of ministers did not decrease in the following decade, but in fact increased, as there were 960 churches in 1990 and 1,438 non-retired active ministers in the same year. The number of churches increased approximately 3.23 percent during the decade from 1980 to 1990, while the number of ministers increased approximately 16 percent during the same period.

**Small Decrease: 1990–2000**

The decade following 1990 saw small decreases in both the number of churches and ministers, though nothing that could remotely be considered a shortage of ministers. The number of non-retired active ministers decreased by about 3.13 percent (from approximately 1,438 ministers in 1990 to approximately 1,393 ministers in 2000); however, it must be remembered that the number of churches also decreased by approximately 2.19 percent during the same period (from 960 to 939). Despite these decreases, however, the numbers show that there were still enough ministers in the Reformed Church in America to adequately supply the churches.

**Ministerial Surplus and Perceived Shortage: 2000–2010**

In 2000, the General Synod’s Advisory Committee on Church Vocations brought a new recommendation to the floor, which was subsequently approved by the General Synod.

To instruct the General Synod Council to do an impact study regarding the potential lack of ministry leadership in the Reformed Church in America in the next five years and determine possible courses of action to provide qualified leadership for all areas of ministry in the Reformed Church in America.

The committee’s reasoning was that “Current statistics indicate that all areas of RCA ministry will be facing an urgent need to find qualified leaders in the next five years.” At the time, however, no further data was presented to support such a claim.
In 2001, both the president of General Synod and the general secretary made reference to a survey that came out of this study which showed that 182 congregations, “almost 20 percent,” were without a full-time minister, and that for more than one-third of those churches, resource limitations provided little prospect of being able to call a full-time minister in the foreseeable future.\textsuperscript{51} Furthermore, the report continued to project retirements and new minister projections, and estimated that there could be upward of “29 percent of our churches without full-time ordained pastors. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are teetering on the edge of a full-blown crisis.”\textsuperscript{52} In the interpretation of the data, the term “clergy shortage” was used as a basis for arguing that the preaching elder designation, already in existence, was insufficient and a new designation was needed.\textsuperscript{53} The general secretary, in his report to the General Synod, used the same data to argue that there was an insufficient number of ministers to fulfill the need, and with the “plans to start 182 new churches over the next ten years” more ministers would be needed in order to fulfill the need that was to come.\textsuperscript{54}

The next year, the president of General Synod 2002 made the same claim of a shortage of ministers, citing the same number of “[a]lmost 20 percent of our churches are experiencing difficulty finding ordained ministers of Word and sacrament to serve as their pastors.”\textsuperscript{55} While there was a problem to be addressed, a shortage of ministers was not it. Indeed, from the data presented, the conclusion of a minister shortage seems to have been a gross misrepresentation that served to bolster support for the establishment of the previously rejected designation, which would become known in 2002 as the commissioned pastor.

While there may have been a season of slightly higher rates of vacancy, the numbers in no way support any hint of a shortage of ministers. Indeed, there were reports of ministers and candidates for ministry without calls.\textsuperscript{56} While the concept of a minister shortage appears for several years in the synodical record as a fact, the raw numbers show something very different.

Furthermore, the projected shortage not only never materialized, it could be argued that the surplus increased. The projected shortage was dependent, primarily, upon three factors: increasing retirements, decreasing numbers of seminary graduates, and an increase in the number of churches. The numbers, however, do not support this hypothesis. To be sure, the economic downturn in this decade likely pushed some ministers, who may have otherwise retired, to remain in active service. However, this cannot completely explain the difference. In the decade from 2000 to 2010, the number of churches decreased by about 1.6 percent (from 939 to 924), while the number of non-retired active ministers increased by about 8.9 percent (from approximately 1,393 to approximately 1,517). To put this in another perspective, in 1980, when the concern was the surplus of ministers, there were approximately 1.33 non-retired active ministers per church. In 2010, there were approximately 1.64 non-retired active ministers per church, which is an even greater surplus, not a shortage. Indeed, the 30-year trend for numbers of churches is stable, while the trend for ministerial supply is upward (see Table 3).

\textit{Table 3}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Percent increase/ (decrease)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministers</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>1,438</td>
<td>1,393</td>
<td>1,517</td>
<td>22.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>(0.65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

This brief study of ministerial supply in the 20th century yields several observations:

- There are cycles of shortage and surplus in the supply of ministerial candidates.
- These cycles are affected by economic conditions (shortage in good economic times and surplus in poor economic times) and by war.
- High standards for ministerial candidates were maintained throughout the 20th century despite the shortages in ministerial supply.
- Recruitment efforts were effective.
- Shortages can be perceived as real even when they are not.

What lessons may be taken from this survey of ministerial supply in the RCA? One lesson is that there are cycles of shortage and surplus. The current “crisis,” whether real or perceived, is not the whole picture. The cyclical nature of ministerial supply needs to be recognized in conversations about any ministerial shortage. Strategic thought needs to be given to the “surplus” side of the cycle and its implications for theological education, the placement of graduates, and the movement of ministers.

This cyclical pattern appears to be influenced by economic conditions and by war. This points to a second lesson: the forces affecting ministerial shortage and surplus are complex, and conversations about the current ministerial shortage need to be more nuanced. Vacancies alone cannot be used to defend claims of ministerial shortage; economic conditions within the churches must also be taken into consideration. Single-factor explanations and simple solutions will not produce effective or lasting strategies.

An emphasis on recruitment and on high standards are recurring themes throughout the first decades of the 20th century as the denomination experienced repeated cycles of an under-and over-supply of ministerial candidates. This emphasis on the quality of candidates for the office of minister of Word and sacrament is another lesson this survey offers. Ministers who are thought to have lower abilities than others (which is often an extremely subjective idea) tend to find ministry placements during periods of true shortage, but often find themselves without a charge in times of surplus.

A fourth lesson involves the kinds of strategies the church employed when faced with a shortage of ministerial candidates. In addition to approving resolutions urging parents, pastors, and congregations to recruit candidates for ministry, concrete actions were taken, such as the Life Work Conference and Vocation Sunday. The Wolfert Conferences of the 1960s are one example of how an earlier strategy was adopted for a new era of recruitment.

A fifth lesson speaks to the strength of perceptions even when they contradict reality. Since 1950, there has not been a true shortage of ministers. There may have been seasons when there were more vacant churches than average or when there were churches that could not afford a full-time minister, but this does not mean that there existed a shortage of ministers. Indeed, more often than not, there was an abundance of ministers to support the churches. Simply because it is assumed to be real does not make it real.

This survey of one period in the history of the RCA suggests that the narrative about ministerial shortages needs to be challenged and the perspective needs to be broadened. The Reformed Church in America is excellent at keeping records, statistics, and data. We need to be sure that our conclusions are based on good data and information rather than simply adopting the narratives and enthusiasms of the moment, and that we do not make significant and lasting (and, in particular, constitutional) changes based upon these momentary enthusiasms.
Future Work

This is but a brief snapshot of a much larger picture. A more comprehensive study on ministerial supply, retirement, ministers dismissed and received, and new candidates entering ministry is certainly warranted and would be exceedingly valuable.

Appendix A

JUNE, 1933

STUDENTS
under the care of

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION, R.C.A.
1864 - 1933

GRAPH NO. 1
Your commission feels it is wise to repeat this paragraph with some emphasis:

This survey of one period in the history of the RCA suggests that the narrative about ministerial shortages needs to be challenged and the perspective needs to be broadened. The Reformed Church in America is excellent at keeping records, statistics, and data. We need to be sure that our conclusions are based on good data and information rather than simply adopting the narratives and enthusiasms of the moment, and that we do not make significant and lasting (and, in particular, constitutional) changes based upon these momentary enthusiasms.

The paper points out that, historically, shortages of ministers have been cyclical and passing, not systemic. Yet while such perceived shortages have received so much attention, the paper also indicates that a larger problem has and continues to be access—especially financial access—to Reformed theological education for called, talented students of all races. The information presented here indicates that the ways in which the church pays for and supports theological education need to be addressed.

R 17-52
To refer the paper “Ministerial Supply 1900–2010: A Historical Perspective” to all classes and regional synods, as well as the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the General Synod professors, and further,

To request that all of those to whom the paper is referred discuss and prayerfully consider how high standards
for Reformed theological education, especially at RCA seminaries, might be made accessible to all those called to study for ministry. (ADOPTED)

Celebrating the Reformation

October 31, 2017, will mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing 95 theses, or questions for debate, to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. While this is truly the beginning of the Lutheran reformation, and our anniversary dates are somewhat different, it is 2017 that is popularly seen as the anniversary of the Reformation. To help the church begin to prepare for this teachable moment, this commission presented a paper, “What Was the Reformation?”, to the 2016 General Synod. This paper is available in video format as well as in the 2016 Minutes of the General Synod in the report of the Commission on History (images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2016MGS-History.pdf).

This commission has been working with the Commission on Christian Unity and the General Synod Council “to plan a time of commemoration and reflection regarding the 500th anniversary of the 16th-century Reformation during the General Synod of 2017” (MGS 2016, R 16-56, p. 278). There will be a few moments during this synod when we will be able to commemorate what happened and look forward to what can happen in the future.

Your commission also presents a few selected resources for congregations seeking to use the anniversary of the Reformation as an occasion for reflection and study:

- *Reformed Church Roots: Thirty-five Formative Events*, by Arie Brouwer (Reformed Church Press, 1977)—the commission is hoping this will be available electronically by the time General Synod meets
- Augsburg Fortress has a wide array of resources—print, electronic, and video—available at www.augsburgfortress.org (under “Bibles and Books,” click “Reformation 500”)
- Calvin Institute of Christian Worship has several resource suggestions for commemorating the Reformation: worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/worship-resources-for-the-500th-anniversary-of-the-protestant-reformation

Respectfully submitted,

James Hart Brumm, moderator

---

5. Ibid., pp. 350-351.
COMMISSIONS

6 Ibid., p. 351.
7 The Seventy-fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1907; p. 2.
8 The Seventy-eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1910; p. 3.
9 Board of Education Report, 1910; p. 3.
13 Board of Education Report, 1919; p. 5.
14 MGS 1923, p. 209.
16 MGS 1923, p. 209.
17 The One Hundredth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1931; p. 11.
18 The Eighty-ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1921; p. 11.
21 Board of Education Report, 1931; p. 11.
22 The One Hundred and First Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1932; p. 6.
26 Board of Education Report, 1932; p. 7.
27 The One Hundred and Second Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1933; pp. 7-8.
28 The One Hundred and Third Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1934; p. 4.
29 The One Hundredth and Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1938; p. 8.
30 The One Hundred and Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1939; p. 20.
31 Board of Education Report, 1939; p. 20.
33 Ibid.
37 Report on the State of Religion, 1950; p. 239.
38 MGS 1969, p. 319.
40 MGS 1973, p. 141.
41 Ibid., 141.
42 Ibid., 140.
44 MGS 1984, p. 203.
The term “non-retired active ministers” includes RCA ministers of all designations except retired or inactive ministers.

Board of Education Report, 1933; p. 3.

Ibid., p. 6.
Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The RCA’s Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) has eight members, one representing each of the regional synods. Regional synods are required to nominate laypersons and ministers in alternating six-year cycles in order to ensure that the commission’s membership includes at least three laypersons and three ministers. A broad knowledge of and background in the structure, government, and function of the RCA is required of all members; legal training and experience is required of lay members.

The responsibilities of the CJB are to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it in the RCA’s Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures (Chapter 2 of the Book of Church Order).

Since the 2016 General Synod, no charge, notice of intent to complain, or notice of intent to appeal has been referred to the CJB. Accordingly, the CJB has conducted no meetings since the 2016 General Synod other than one conference call to elect a moderator and secretary for the period from July 1, 2017, to June 30, 2018. Because the CJB has no business to bring before the General Synod this year, it has decided not to appoint one of its members as a corresponding delegate to the 2017 General Synod.

The General Synod receives this report for information only.
Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations convened in person on October 13–14, 2016, and January 17, 2017, and via teleconference on February 14, March 7, April 4, and April 25. Three final electronic votes were held through email, ending on May 22, May 24, and June 1.

Throughout the year, members of the commission actively sought qualified candidates, solicited completed profile forms (brief two-page documents), and checked references of those who were interested in serving on a commission or agency of the General Synod, or on the board of directors or trustees of an RCA-related institution. In these ways, the commission sought to fulfill its responsibilities as stated in the Bylaws of the General Synod—namely, “in consultation with the general secretary, [the commission] shall search the denomination for suitable nominees. In making nominations it shall consider the geographic location, occupation, and record of previous service to the denomination of persons suggested by classes, regional synods, and other sources. It shall consider this and other pertinent data in light of each commission’s or agency’s responsibilities, membership needs, suggested nominees, and place and schedule of meetings” (Book of Church Order Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8c; 2016 edition, p. 114).

The commission seeks to nominate individuals for service on agencies, commissions, and boards of directors on the basis of their spiritual gifts, interests, heart (or passion), abilities, personality, experience, and special leadership abilities. When possible, it seeks to involve young adult members of the RCA (so they can be nurtured and encouraged to serve the RCA in a variety of ways in the future). Through its efforts, the Commission on Nominations has proactively fulfilled its responsibility to “search the denomination” and believes those nominated have traits that make them well suited for the work of the positions to which they are being nominated. The commission is pleased to report once again that it has, to the best of its ability, fulfilled its responsibility for ensuring that the requirements of the Book of Church Order are upheld.

When the number of qualified candidates from which to choose increases, the commission’s work is enhanced and the work of the General Synod’s agencies and commissions is carried out more effectively. Consequently, the commission encourages anyone interested in serving to submit a completed profile form to the Commission on Nominations as indicated on the form. Profile forms are available from staff to the Commission on Nominations, Laura Tarbous (908-812-7897 or ltarbous@rca.org) or through the “Profile Form and Commission Information” link on the General Synod page of the RCA website (www.rca.org/profile).

Nominations

Nominees identified by the Commission on Nominations are as follows (* indicates a final term and # indicates an official nomination from the assembly, institution, or agency listed):

**GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL**
Class of 2018
Rev. Ned Beadel (Regional Synod of the Far West) #
Eric Moreno
COMMISSIONS

Class of 2021
*Charles Contreras
*Rev. Anthony De La Rosa
*Rev. Stephanie Doeschot (Regional Synod of Mid-America) #
*Rev. Anna Jackson
*Rev. David Landegent
*George Rounds (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics) #
*Ervin Sparapani – ELCA ecumenical non-voting member

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Class of 2020
Rev. Jane Brown
Curtis Dixon
*Rev. Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell
Vacancy – ELCA ecumenical observer
Vacancy – Reformed ecumenical observer

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION
Class of 2020
Pamela Van Beek
Vacancy (member from the faculty of an RCA-affiliated institution)

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Class of 2020
Rev. Donna Field
*Rev. Michael Hardeman
*James Payton – ecumenical member
*Rev. Jodie Wu

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Class of 2018
Dorene Horstman
Class of 2020
*Rev. Sarah Palsma
Jonathan Tamayo

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Class of 2020
Rev. Joshua Scheid
Jennifer Van Regenmorter

COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Class of 2020
Andrew Klumpp
Rev. Steven Pierce

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Class of 2020
Rev. Stephen Breen (Regional Synod of the Heartland) #
Vacancy (Regional Synod of New York) #

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Class of 2019
Rebecca Hudak (Regional Synod of Albany) #
Thomas Paarlberg (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes) #
Class of 2020
Rainey Enjady
Carol Mutch (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics) #
Rev. James Steward (African American Black Council) #
*Rev. Cary Winn (Regional Synod of Mid-America) #

COMMISSION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY
Class of 2018
Rafael Garcia (Council for Hispanic Ministries) #
Class of 2019
Rev. Douglas Banks
Class of 2020
*Rev. Richard DeBruyne
June Denny
Minsuk Lee

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
Class of 2019
David Komline
Class of 2020
Rev. Ronald Citlau
*Laird Edman
*Mark Husbands
Suzanne McDonald – Reformed ecumenical observer
Vacancy – ELCA ecumenical observer

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Class of 2020
*Rev. Susan Hetrick
Jessica Nunez

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES
Class of 2020
Rev. Jack Doorlag
*Rev. Nelson Murphy
*Jason Schnelker
Douglas Struyk
The Board of Benefits Services’ Constitution and Rules has been revised to read “The board of directors of The Board of Benefits Services shall consist of at least 9 and not more than 17 directors” (BOBS Constitution and Rules, II, 2.1). For the 2017–2018 year, the number of directors has been reduced from 17 to 13.

CHURCH GROWTH FUND
Class of 2020
Nicole Kouba
*Mary Linge
*Rev. Anthony Vis
As is provided for in its bylaws, the board has increased its membership from six to seven for the 2017–2018 year.

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY
Class of 2020
Rev. Dustin DeVriend
Rev. Frances Nelson
COMMISSIONS

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2020
Rev. David Choi
Brittnee Crawford
*Barbara Felker
*Richard Glendening (Regional Synod of the Heartland)
Rev. John Kapteyn (Regional Synod of Canada)
*Rev. En Young Kim
Russell Paarlberg (Regional Synod of Mid-America)
Ronald Slaughter
Timothy Taylor (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)
*Diane Tice
Dean Zimmerman

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2019
Rev. Lisa Vander Wal (Regional Synod of Albany)
Class of 2020
*Rev. James Poit (Regional Synod of the Far West)
James Veld (Regional Synod of Mid-America)
Rev. Brian Vriesman
Carol Wagner (Regional Synod of the Great Lakes)

CENTRAL COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2021
Jason Andringa
Steve Sikkink
Judith Vogel

HOPE COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2019
J. Lindsey Dood
Class of 2020
David Lowry
Class of 2021
*Rev. David Bast
Rev. Nathan Hart

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
This year there are no trustees to be appointed by the General Synod.

R 17-53
To elect the above-named nominees to the General Synod commissions and agencies and the boards of directors or trustees of RCA-related educational institutions as indicated. (ADOPTED)

R 17-54
To elect Carl Boersma as moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2017–2018 term. (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
Carl Boersma, moderator
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 Surrett 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 Surrett 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 Surrett 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.
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 (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.

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
Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 13–15, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and January 27–28, 2017, in Chicago.

The COT is privileged to do this work for the church and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way. The commission’s primary task this year was assigned by the 2016 General Synod; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies

The COT was directed by the 2016 General Synod to consult with the Commission on Church Order (CCO) and the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team to consider the capacity in which commissioned pastors would participate in regional synod and General Synod assemblies (MGS 2016, R 16-21, R 16-23, R 16-25, pp. 148-149). These referrals came out of the report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit (MGS 2016, pp. 142-152) and directed the COT to review the place of commissioned pastors in RCA polity. Specifically, should the Book of Church Order (BCO) recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder or as a servant of the church who functions as a minister? Recognizing an expressed desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that currently prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies, would the commissioned pastor be sent as an elder delegate or as a minister delegate?

In October, the COT met with the CCO to discuss the history, current practice, and issues concerning commissioned pastors at the broader assemblies of the church. The COT also engaged in conversation with various members of the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team (CPAT) during both its October and January meetings. The following rationale supports the COT’s conclusion that “office” is the most significant identifying characteristic when forming assemblies in the RCA. The office that a commissioned pastor bears and to which the person is ordained is the office of elder. Therefore, if commissioned pastors are to attend the synods as delegates, they would attend as elders.

A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR COMMISSIONED PASTORS AT THE BROADER ASSEMBLIES

Overview

The COT affirms the distinctive Reformed understanding that ecclesial “offices” are conferred by ordination as divinely appointed means for the representation, interpretation, and proclamation of the gospel and authoritative governing of church by the discipline of God’s grace. In response to the referrals from the 2016 General Synod (MGS 2016, R 16-21, R 16-23, R 16-25, pp. 148-149), the COT respectfully offers its rationale for permitting commissioned pastors to be delegated to regional and/or General Synod. Seeking to hold before the church a distinctively Reformed understanding of office, we joyfully confess that Christ continues to exercise his prophetic office. As such, no fundamental power has been transferred to the church or its offices. Instead, offices exist to bear witness to the prophetic ministry of Christ. We affirm the belief that General Synod is an assembly of offices and not simply a gathering of those called to ministry. Thus, we recommend that a commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.
Historical Background

The 2016 report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit states, “Commissioned pastors have been a vital part of the RCA’s life and witness since the designation was established in the early 2000s” (MGS 2016, p. 142). While celebrating the “wonderful impact of commissioned pastors,” the 2016 report admits that, as a church, “we’ve struggled to know how to best include them fully in the life, mission, and structures of our denomination” (MGS 2016, p. 142). In response to the recommendation of the 2014 General Synod (MGS 2014, R-56, p. 267), the Commission on History began important work detailing the original purpose, subsequent history, and development of the understanding of the commissioned pastor in the RCA.

A revealing judgment about the nature and status of commissioned pastors can be found in the 2015 report of the Commission on History (MGS 2015, pp.197-211). Its research indicates that the original designation of commissioned pastor was “intended to be for people who were already involved in and effective in ministry, providing more resourcing and commissioning to their ministry work,” adding:

Due to this, the commissioned pastor designation was not intended to be an entry point into ministry, but was intended to enhance and resource people who were already in ministry, with the goal of helping these people to eventually enter seminary and work toward the possibility of the ministry of Word and sacrament. The original intention was that commissioned pastors would serve alongside, and under supervision of, ministers of Word and sacrament, and they were never intended to replace or serve as a substitute for a minister (or serve on their own). (MGS 2015, pp. 201-202)

This lays bare the tightly defined function and status of the commissioned pastor. Likewise, two critical observations emerge from this history:

1. It was also never envisioned that commissioned pastors would be delegates to the General Synod.
2. Unlike ministers, whose training and education is overseen by the General Synod, the training for commissioned pastors was delegated to the classes, and therefore commissioned pastors could not move between classes, as ministers may (MGS 2015, p. 202).

In short, although the ministry of commissioned pastors is to be honored and received by the church for its wellbeing, the development of this new “ministry designation” (not ordination or installation) was for the purpose of carrying out a specific ministry under the supervision of a classis. As such, the commissioned pastor is not an ordained minister of Word and sacrament. As the 2015 report makes clear, the commissioned pastor is referred to as a ministry designation to which one is commissioned, and not as an office to which one is ordained or installed.

In 2006, the CCO offered an amendment to the BCO in response to a referral from the General Synod of 2005 (MGS 2005, R-84, p. 298) that would pave the way for consistories to recommend to the classis “a confessing member of a Reformed Church,” instead of an elder, as a candidate for commissioned pastor (MGS 2006, R-15, p. 69). Seeking to make clear that the basis of one’s candidacy for becoming a commissioned pastor was not the “internal sense of calling” or charism(s), the CCO tied the status of a commissioned pastor to the notion of office, arguing that “office is conferred by ordination, and ordination to the office of elder presumes election by a congregation” (MGS 2006, p. 69). The CCO cautioned that when individuals seek to become elders in order to become commissioned...
pastors and carry out functions historically reserved for the office of minister of Word and sacrament, the very office of elder is made an instrumental means to an end, thereby losing the Reformed distinction of parity (MGS 2006, p. 69). This risks violating Reformed polity by effectively diminishing the office of elder by reducing it to a “second class” status—that is, not equal to that of minister of Word and sacrament.

Regarding the recommendation to the CCO that a commissioned pastor may serve as elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod, the COT cited Volume 4 of Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation. Bavinck offers a crucial warning with respect to a “confusion of powers” that can arise when a distinctively Reformed polity and understanding of office is sidelined. A Reformed understanding of office is one that maintains a vision of parity rather than hierarchy. When this critical insight is lost, a political rather than properly ecclesial understanding of authority and power threatens the proper exercise of office. As Bavinck writes in Volume 4 (pp. 414 and 417):

As impermissible as it is, therefore, on the one hand to assign ecclesiastical power to the civil government, so it is also sinful on the other hand to change ecclesiastical power into political power. Both Romanism and Anabaptism are guilty to the latter, because both think in terms of an antithesis between nature and grace. …

Over against this [the ‘Romanist’] position the Reformers again viewed ecclesiastical power in the scriptural sense as a spiritual power. As a result the power to teach (potestas docendi), the administration of the Word and sacrament, naturally came to stand in the foreground.

By drawing a connection between the three offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, and the threefold office of Christ—prophetic, kingly, and priestly—Bavinck identifies three distinct kinds of power. These three distinct kinds of power follow from and represent, in their own distinct manner, the primary authority and rule of Christ: (1) the power to teach; (2) the power to govern (included here is the power to discipline); and (3) the power or ministry of mercy. While the power to teach has its origin in the prophetic office of Christ, it is crucial to see that this power has not been transferred to the church. Christ as Word continually exercises his prophetic office. The church, as such, must indeed herald the good news of the life-giving Word of God as the exercise of its divine calling. Put differently, one of the primary reasons a Reformed ecclesiology upholds the parity of office is because ecclesial power and authority are derivative—or, according to the BCO, representative.

According to the preamble to the BCO, all authority exercised in the church is “received from Christ” and authority “exercised by those holding office in the church is delegated authority” (BCO, Preamble; 2016 edition, p. 2). The BCO further explains the nature and consequence of this delegated authority in terms of the representative principle, whereby power is given to the church by Christ in the Holy Spirit. Seeking to steer clear of the “confusion of powers,” the BCO explicates the significance of the representative principle:

Since not everyone in the church can hold an office, and since the offices differ among themselves in function, some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them. (BCO, Preamble; 2016 edition, pp. 3-4)
Following the teaching of the New Testament, Reformed churches affirm the importance of the exercise of ecclesiastical authority on the part of “presbyters” or “elders.” Furthermore, the Reformed tradition understands ministers of Word and sacrament to be elders of a particular kind, namely “teaching elders.” Accordingly, ministers and elders share equally in the responsibility to govern the church. Of course, this insight bears directly upon the question of how, or in what capacity (that is, office), a commissioned pastor should serve as a delegate to General Synod. The answer to this question is illustrated in the liturgy for the “Order for Commissioning a Minister of Word and Sacrament into a Specialized Ministry” (*Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, pp. 163-169).

In 2010, General Synod adopted R-34 from the Commissioned Pastor Task Force, directing the Commission on Christian Worship “to create a liturgy for the commissioning of commissioned pastors to be developed in consultation with the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team” (*MGS 2010*, p. 145). While the commission based this new commissioning liturgy on the “Order for Commissioning a Minister of Word and Sacrament into a Specialized Ministry,” it did so with two crucial qualifications:

1. This liturgy is intended for the commissioning of an elder, not a minister of Word and sacrament; and

2. The commissioned pastor’s commission is valid for the period of assigned service, is under contract, and is subject to annual review by the classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Sections 1, 5, and 10; 2016 edition, pp. 58-59).

The 2011 General Synod approved the Order for Commissioning a Commissioned Pastor and commended it for use in the church. This liturgy states that it is an elder who is commissioned, and not a minister of Word and sacrament.

**Conclusion**

The 2011 General Synod approval of the Order for Commissioning a Commissioned Pastor demonstrates a critical insight reflected in the 2015 report of the Commission on History. Namely, “commissioned pastors are an exception in the order, and not the rule.” The COT agrees with the need to recognize “limitations on functions” (that is, the ecclesial and juridical limits of those who function as ministers of Word and sacrament but who are not ordained to such office) in order to maintain a distinctively Reformed understanding of ministry and office. Such distinctions should not threaten the full affirmation of both the representative function of ecclesial authority and the parity of offices. Careful distinctions, alongside a fundamental commitment to the parity (rather than hierarchy) of the offices, are necessary to the good order and wellbeing of the church and its witness to the gospel.

The COT honors and celebrates the gifts present in the ministry of commissioned pastors, upholding the fundamental equality and dignity of their office as elders, and honoring the distinctively Reformed understanding of the representative nature of ecclesial power under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the Commission on Theology encourages General Synod 2017 to approve the *BCO* changes that are suggested by the Commission on Church Order in R 17-41, which will permit classes to assign commissioned pastors to serve as elder delegates to a regional and/or General Synod.

For more on the shared work of the COT and the CCO regarding commissioned pastors and the specific changes being proposed to the *BCO*, see the report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 249-272.
Consultation Regarding the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

At the October meeting, the Commission on Christian Unity asked the COT to reply to a request from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) regarding the RCA's response to the WCRC statement on the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ). The COT considered the WCRC statement regarding the JDDJ carefully. While the COT found much to commend in the document, the COT issued some cautions and concerns regarding the statement. The statement itself can be found at wcrc.ch/theology/joint-declaration-on-the-doctrine-of-justification.

RCA COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY: A BRIEF RESPONSE TO WCRC

Ecumenical consensus on fundamental doctrines is a praiseworthy fulfillment of Jesus’ high priestly prayer (cf. John 17:21). Indeed, Christ teaches that the efficacy of our witness rests, in part, upon our union with Christ. Accordingly, the World Communion of Reformed Churches’ (WCRC) revised draft of the “Association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (“Association”) represents a positive move toward ecumenical agreement.

Sympathetic to the salutary efforts of the WCRC to respond to the invitation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation to associate with the Joint Declaration and grateful for the invitation to provide general feedback on the revised “Association,” the Reformed Church in America Commission on Theology respectfully submits the following brief response.

We welcome the WCRC’s efforts to make more visible the Reformed contribution to the common understanding of justification by highlighting the intrinsic connection between justification and justice. Indeed, according to Reformed understanding, “justification and sanctification, which cannot be separated, both flow from union with Christ” (cf. 4). Also, we concur that “the message of justification directs us in a special way to the heart of the biblical witness.” Furthermore, we wholly endorse the necessity and significance of conveying the dramatic significance of the relationship between justification and justice. Indeed, highlighting this connection is an important Reformed contribution to the growing ecumenical consensus on the doctrine of justification.

Regrettably, shortcomings in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification remain unaddressed in the “Association.” As such, we maintain that it is not wise to affirm “fundamental doctrinal agreement with the teaching expressed in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed at Augsburg on 31 October 1999.”

While a full treatment of the impediments to a fundamental agreement would require a more comprehensive document than is provided in this “brief response,” a number of critical points can be expressed concisely. To affirm the central importance of Calvin’s account of double grace is not to diminish the central role that doctrine plays as a hermeneutical category for the whole of Christian theology. In short, the doctrine of justification focuses the drama of salvation upon the finished, complete, and unrepeatable saving work of Jesus Christ. The Joint Declaration and the revised statement of association occlude a number of critical Reformation commitments.

For instance, divine righteousness is rightly identified with God’s declarative work that frees us from slavery to sin. The primacy of God’s saving work and its character as “event” rather than “process” is a significant Reformation understanding that must be retained—hence the crucial importance of *solus Christus*. The Joint Declaration and “Association” does not clarify the metaphysics of grace found in Roman Catholic theology.
Finally, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and revised “Association” does not uphold the force of *sola fide*. Failing to do so risks misunderstanding the ontology of human personhood. The Reformers rightly understood “righteousness” as that which is imputed to the sinner—an alien gift that sets the person in an entirely new relation to God by virtue of that which is *nos extra nos* (outside of ourselves).

In the end, the ecumenical witness of the church is very important and wherever possible, *rapprochement* between Roman Catholic and Protestant communions must be sought. We honor the efforts of those involved in the Joint Declaration and the proposed “Association” even though we maintain that insufficient attention has been paid to crucial features of a Lutheran and Reformed understanding of *solus Christus*, *sola fide*, and the forensic nature of justification. Finally, neither the Joint Declaration nor the “Association” demonstrate a sufficiently clear grasp of the ontology of human persons alongside the fundamentally alien nature of righteousness.

**Makeup of the Commission on Theology**

The current membership on the COT as dictated by the *BCO* consists of ten members (three RCA seminary faculty members, two RCA college faculty members, three pastors, and two laypersons) plus two ecumenical observers. Because many of the topics and issues considered by the COT overlap with issues and topics brought before the professorate (those serving as General Synod professors), the COT requested that the CCO suggest a revision to the *BCO* to insure that a member of the professorate is always serving on the COT. In order not to increase the number of members on the COT, the member of the professorate would replace one of the RCA seminary faculty slots. The CCO provided suggested wording for the following proposed amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod.

R 17-57

To approve the following amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod in the *Book of Church Order* for submission to the 2018 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 9

a. The commission shall have ten members. The membership shall include two persons from among the Reformed Church seminary faculties, one General Synod professor, two persons from among the faculties of the Reformed Church colleges, three pastors, and two laypersons. There shall also be two ecumenical observers named by the Commission on Theology, subject to the approval of the General Synod: one from other reformed bodies and one from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The term of office for ecumenical appointees shall be three years. They shall be subject to re-election for one additional term. Competence in theology is required of all members. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-57.
Ongoing work

The COT continued discussion of items assigned to the commission as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and January meetings, the commission discussed (among other topics): the work of the task force on diaconal assemblies, a curriculum for becoming a multiracial, multiethnic denomination, understanding the current apostolic movement based on Ephesians 4:11 and its impact on the RCA, and the accessibility and quality of theological education for those who are called to leadership in the church.

The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the RCA and specifically the General Synod and brings glory to the Triune God.

Acknowledgments

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Dawn Boelkins, faculty member at Western Theological Seminary; John Paarlberg, pastor in Albany, New York; and Roger Willer, director for theological ethics for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the COT is deeply grateful for their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Respectfully submitted,
Laird Edman, moderator
Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women seeks to understand the life of women within the RCA and to support and encourage the full inclusion and participation of women within all contexts of church life. In the RCA, our diversity is our strength; thus, the participation of women will only enhance the life and the ministry of the church and elevate the work that we can accomplish together. Within Transformed & Transforming, the Commission for Women hopes to assist the denomination in providing equal opportunities to women in mission, discipleship, and leadership and to bring visibility to areas where support for women can be improved.

The Commission for Women met twice this year: once in Chicago with the rest of the commissions in October, and again in February at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. We met with women NBTS seminarians over dinner on both the St. John's and New Brunswick campuses to better understand their experience and to learn how we can support their learning and call to ministry.

At the February meeting, the commission also received a letter regarding the Rocky Mountain High youth event and the lack of women in leadership roles at this event. The Commission for Women agreed that it would be helpful to model women’s leadership at such events, as this is a critical time in young people’s lives.

Thus, the Commission for Women would like to submit the following recommendations:

R 17-58
To recommend that classes assign mentors to their students under care, both men and women, to better guide and equip them through the process of seminary, ordination, job searching, and ministry. (ADOPTED)

R 17-59
To encourage classes to send women elders, ministers of Word and sacrament, and specialized ministers as voting delegates to both regional and General Synod meetings and other gatherings, and to encourage classes to be more intentional about presenting women in leadership roles in RCA churches and camps. (ADOPTED)

R 17-60
To request that the president of General Synod 2018 assign women to worship leadership roles for the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Clergy Survey

It is only by speaking with clergy that we can fully understand their experience. While the Commission for Women focuses on supporting women, we felt it was important to understand the experience of all clergy within the denomination. Thus, our clergy survey included both men and women. We are proud to announce that we have received very positive responses regarding job satisfaction among women clergy serving in their various ministry settings. There was no statistical difference between men and women when it came to their own perceived wellbeing and flourishing.

However, because women are a minority in the ranks of RCA clergy, women do have
greater challenges in the ministry placement search. The Commission for Women believes that if we assist gifted women to be more visible, it will normalize their participation in ministries and missions in the church. To this end, the Commission for Women offers the following recommendation:

R 17-61
To instruct the GSC to develop a list of women pastors, elders, and leaders who can be mentors and/or coaches for women throughout the RCA who would like access to such an opportunity. (ADOPTED)

Another opportunity for improvement revealed by the survey is that both men and women surveyed noted that there is a discrepancy between RCA’s official stated policy regarding women’s ordination and leadership and actual practice. One way this has manifested itself is that the conscience clause remains within certain documents and on websites. The conscience clause was removed from the BCO in 2012. Thus, the Commission for Women makes the following recommendation:

R 17-62
To urge classes and regional synods to review their bylaws, literature, and electronic media to ensure they are in alignment with the Book of Church Order, especially with regard to the removal of the conscience clause. (ADOPTED)

The Commission for Women is committed to continuing to understand the experience of women clergy and other leaders, young and old, so that we can encourage the full inclusion and participation of women in all areas of the RCA. Further results of the clergy survey will be disseminated to the RCA later this year.

We are currently working with the Commission on History to create a celebration of 40 years of women’s ordination; this will commence in 2018.

And finally, we thank Barbara Pimentel for faithfully serving on the commission for the last three years and wish her all the best as she embarks on a term of service on the GSC!

Respectfully submitted,
Shirley Lin, moderator