The Acts and Proceedings of the 211th Regular Session of the GENERAL SYNOD

Convened on the campus of
Hope College
Holland, MI
June 8-13, 2017

2017 Acts & Proceedings
Vol. XCVII
RECENT OFFICERS OF GENERAL SYNOD

A list of presidents, from the first in 1794 to 1955, can be found on pages 308-311 of the 1956 Minutes of General Synod. The list of presidents from 1956-1978 can be found on page i of the 2002 Minutes of General Synod. The list of presidents from 1979-2010 can be found on page i of the 2010 Minutes of General Synod.

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The Rev. John A. Ingham..........................................................1932-1942
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PERMANENT COMMISSIONS, BOARDS, AND AGENCIES
2016-2017

*Indicates serving a final term

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

Paul Archer (ELCA ecumenical, non-voting)................................. 2017*  RSFW
Ned Beadel.............................................................................. 2018
Bruce Cornwell........................................................................ 2017*
Thomas De Vries (general secretary)........................................... Ex officio
Gary De Witt ............................................................................ 2018* RSA
Lee DeYoung ........................................................................... 2019* P, GS
Andrea DiPace ......................................................................... 2018*
Daniel Gillett........................................................................... 2018*
Thomas Goodhart................................................................. 2017*
Christopher Jacobsen............................................................ 2017* RSA
James Kuplic ............................................................................ 2020*
Benjamin Lin ........................................................................... 2020*
Eric Moreno ............................................................................ 2018
Arlan Moss ............................................................................. 2017*
Sharon Palms .......................................................................... 2018* AABC
Barbara Pimentel................................................................. 2020*
Erma Rolle ............................................................................... 2020* CHM
Andres Serrano................................................................. 2019* RSNY
Kenneth Shepard................................................................. 2020* RSNY
Willie Si .................................................................................. 2019* RSC
Jimmie Stevenson ............................................................... 2017* RSMAm
Cora Taitt.............................................................................. 2019* CPAAM
Wai Choon Tan........................................................................ 2018* CPAAM
Lisa Tice .................................................................................. 2017* CPAAM
Michael Van Buren........................................................... 2019* RSGL
Clare VanDis ................................................................. 2020* RSGL
Nancy Van Heerde............................................................... 2019* RSH
Cynthia Veldheer DeYoung.................................................. 2019* PP, GS
Evan Vermeer, moderator ..................................................... 2017* PP, GS

RACIAL/ETHNIC COUNCILS

AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Deidre Dodson
Hellen Harvey
Jo Anna Lougin
Regina Reid
James Steward, chairperson

COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Noemi Carvajal
Carlos Corro
Luis Perez
Barbara Pimentel
Alberto Salazar
Andres Serrano, president
COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Jong Kug Kim
Timothy Kim
Paul Lee, ex officio
Lynn Min
Chanthala Sythavongsa
David Theonugraha, president

COMMISSIONS

CHRISTIAN ACTION

Lindsay Bona ................................................................. 2017
Scott DeLeeuw ............................................................... 2019
William Hertlein ......................................................... 2017*
Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell .................................. 2017
Carlinda Peoples ............................................................ 2018
Seung-Ryee (Salome) Ryew ........................................... 2018*
Patricia Sealy, moderator ............................................. 2019*
Emra Seawood .............................................................. 2018*
Robin Suydam ............................................................... 2019
Peter Vander Meulen (Reformed ecumenical observer) .... 2017*
Vacancy (ELCA ecumenical observer) .......................... 2017*
(to be named by the Commission on Christian Action)

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION

John Chen ........................................................................ 2018
Dennis Colton, moderator ............................................. 2017
Lindsey De Kruif ............................................................. 2018
Kent McHeard .............................................................. 2019*
Bethany Popkes ............................................................ 2018
Jane Schuyler ............................................................... 2019*
Jacqueline Smallbones ................................................ 2017

CHRISTIAN UNITY

Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew ................................................. 2018
Kathryn Davelaar Guthrie .............................................. 2018
Thomas De Vries (general secretary) .......................... Ex officio
Michael Hardeman ....................................................... 2017
Sun Jong Ju ................................................................. 2019
James Payton (ecumenical) ........................................... 2017
Dena Robins ............................................................... 2018
Thomas Hung Yong Song ........................................... 2017*
Lisa Vander Wal, moderator ....................................... 2019*
Jodie Wu ................................................................. 2017
CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Katherine Baker ..............................................................2019*
Robert Fretz ..................................................................2019
Nancy Hoerner, moderator ...........................................2017*
Sarah Palsma .................................................................2017
Drew Poppleton ..............................................................2018
Dennis TeBeest ...............................................................2019
Vacancy ........................................................................2018

CHURCH ORDER

Philip De Koster .............................................................2018
Linda Gold ......................................................................2018
Allan Janssen .................................................................2017*
Bruce Neckers ...............................................................2017*
Larry Schuyler, moderator ............................................2019*

HISTORY

James Brumm, moderator ...............................................2018*
Lynn Japinga .................................................................2019
David Tripold .................................................................2017*
Douglas Van Aartsen .....................................................2019*
Matthew van Maastricht ...............................................2018*
Linda Walvoord de Velder .............................................2017*

JUDICIAL BUSINESS

Arthur Casey ..................................................................2019* RSA
Paul Janssen ..................................................................2018 RSMAt
Russell Paarlberg ..........................................................2018 RSMAm
John Terpstra, moderator ..............................................2017* RSH
Thomas Terpstra ...........................................................2019 RSFW
Daniel Turis ...................................................................2017 RSNY
John (Jack) Van Slambrouck .........................................2019* RSGL
Barry Wynveen .............................................................2018 RSC

NOMINATIONS

Gregory Alderman ........................................................2019 RSFW
Kathy Jo Blaske .............................................................2017* RSMAt
Carl Boersma, moderator ..............................................2018 RSH
Israel Camacho .............................................................2019* CHM
June Denny .....................................................................2017*
Lee DeYoung ..................................................................2019* RSGL
Micheal Edwards ..........................................................2018 RSNY
Robert Montgomery ....................................................2018 RSC
Annie Lee Phillips ..........................................................2017* AABC
Evan Vermeer .................................................................2017* PP, GS
Cary Winn .......................................................................2017 RSMAm
Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu ......................................................2018* CPAAM
Vacancy ..........................................................................2019 RSA
RACE AND ETHNICITY

Karla Camacho ................................................................. 2018
Richard DeBruyne, moderator ........................................ 2017
Jo Anna Lougin ............................................................... 2018 AABC
Kyunghoon Suh ............................................................... 2019 CPAAM
Alfonso Surrrett Jr. ......................................................... 2017*
Gerri Yoshida ................................................................. 2017*
Vacancy ............................................................................ 2018 CHM
Vacancy ............................................................................ 2019

THEOLOGY

Jill Carattini........................................................................ 2018*
Jaeseung Cha ................................................................. 2019*
Tony Chapman ............................................................... 2019*
Laird Edman, moderator .................................................. 2017
Mark Husbands ............................................................... 2017
Kristen Johnson ............................................................... 2018
John Paarlberg ............................................................... 2017*
Stephen Shaffer ............................................................. 2019
Roger Willer (ELCA ecumenical observer) ....................... 2017*
John Young .................................................................... 2018*
Vacancy (Reformed ecumenical observer) ......................... 2017
Vacancy ............................................................................ 2019

WOMEN

Blaine Crawford ............................................................. 2018*
Susan Hetrick ................................................................. 2017
Dwayne Jackson ............................................................ 2019
Dierdre Johnston ............................................................ 2019*
San-Yi (Shirley) Lin, moderator ....................................... 2018*
Barbara Pimentel ........................................................... 2017
Kristin Tremper ............................................................. 2018
Maudelin Willock ........................................................... 2019*

AGENCIES

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES

Norma Coleman-James ..................................................... 2018* Ex officio
Thomas De Vries (general secretary) ............................... 2018* VP, GS
Lee DeYoung .................................................................... 2018*
Karen Feeney ................................................................ 2018*
Pamela Foster .................................................................. 2018*
Daniel Gillett ................................................................ 2017*
P, GS
Mark Kamper .................................................................. 2019*
Nelson Murphy .............................................................. 2017
Robert Nykamp .............................................................. 2019*
Denise Ratcliffe, president ............................................. 2017*
Jason Schnelker ............................................................. 2017
Evan Vermeer .................................................................. 2017* GSC moderator
CHURCH GROWTH FUND

Joel Bouwens, President ......................................................... 2016*
Thomas De Vries (general secretary) ....................................... Ex officio
Rod Douma ........................................................................ 2018
Mary Linge ........................................................................... 2017
Gregory Robinson ............................................................... 2016
Diane Smith Faubion ............................................................ 2018
Anthony Vis ........................................................................... 2017

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY

Miriam Barnes, moderator ..................................................... 2017*
Thomas De Vries (general secretary) .................................... Ex officio
Vladimir Diaz-Ochoa ........................................................... 2019
Renée House ........................................................................ 2018*
Carol Jones ........................................................................... 2019*
Bradley Lewis ...................................................................... 2019
Jacob Marvel ......................................................................... 2019
Frances Nelson ...................................................................... 2017
Felix Theonugraha ............................................................... 2018*
Nancy Van Heerde ............................................................... 2019* GSC
David Wulkan ........................................................................ 2018
A GUIDE TO RCA ALPHABETESE

AABC ................................................................. African American Black Council
AAR ................................................................. Approved Alternate Route
BCO ................................................................. Book of Church Order
BOBS ............................................................... Board of Benefits Services
CCA ................................................................. Commission on Christian Action
CCDE ............................................................... Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
CCO ................................................................. Commission on Church Order
CCA ............................................................... Christian Churches Together in the USA
CCU ................................................................. Commission on Christian Unity
CCW ................................................................. Commission on Christian Worship
CFW ................................................................. Commission for Women
CGF ................................................................. The RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc.
CHM ................................................................. Council for Hispanic Ministries
CJB ................................................................. Commission on Judicial Business
COH ................................................................. Commission on History
CON ................................................................. Commission on Nominations
CORE ............................................................. Commission on Race and Ethnicity
COT ................................................................. Commission on Theology
CPAAM ........................................................... Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries
CRCNA ........................................................... Christian Reformed Church in North America
GSC ................................................................. General Synod Council
MFCA ............................................................. Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
MGS ................................................................. Minutes of General Synod
NBTS ............................................................. New Brunswick Theological Seminary
NCCC ............................................................. National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
PFCC ............................................................... Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee
RCSC ............................................................. Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care
RS ................................................................. Regional Synod
RSA ................................................................. Regional Synod of Albany
RSC ................................................................. Regional Synod of Canada
RSFW ............................................................ Regional Synod of the Far West
RSGL ............................................................... Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
RSH ............................................................... Regional Synod of the Heartland
RSMAm .......................................................... Regional Synod of Mid-America
RSMAt .......................................................... Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics
RSNY ............................................................. Regional Synod of New York
WCC ............................................................... World Council of Churches
WCRC ........................................................... World Communion of Reformed Churches
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ACTS AND PROCEEDINGS

The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America convened in its two hundred eleventh regular session on the campus of Hope College in Holland, Michigan, on Thursday, the eighth of June, A.D. two thousand seventeen, at 3:00 p.m., Eastern time.

FORMATION OF THE SYNOD

OPENING OF SYNOD

The General Synod was opened by president Daniel Gillett on Thursday afternoon, June 8, 2017. The president introduced the vice president, parliamentarian, general secretary, and meeting recorders, and recognized others in attendance as corresponding delegates or seminar attendees. The president presented a brief orientation regarding how the General Synod will conduct its business. The parliamentarian explained parliamentary procedures to the General Synod. The president explained how reports are presented to the General Synod. The general secretary explained certain procedural matters, including ways to access the General Synod workbook electronically and the method of reviewing the journal of actions. The mayor of Holland, Michigan, welcomed the delegates and other General Synod attendees.

WORSHIP

Thursday evening (June 8, 2017) the delegates gathered at 7:00 p.m. in Dimnent Memorial Chapel for an opening worship celebration. The service was led by a worship team composed of Kristin Baron, Steph Gillett, Lydia Nykamp, Amy VanderStoep, Rita Bojorquez, Ross Hoekstra, Louis Ford, Maxwell Nkansah, and a choir that included participants from Christ Memorial Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, and First Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, as well as General Synod delegates and friends.

The Word was preached by Pete Watts, pastor of The R.O.C.K. Church in Los Angeles, California. The sacrament of communion was shared, with general secretary Tom De Vries and president Daniel Gillett serving as co-celebrants. An offering was given for Casa delle Culture in Scicli, Italy.

In addition to the opening worship celebration:

• On Friday morning (June 9, 2017) the Word was preached by Tanner Smith, and the worship leaders included Max Blummer, Heather Flokstra, Jared Heddens, Moses Mares, Travis Radaz, Mackenzie Seagard, and Ben Snoek.
• On Saturday morning (June 10, 2017) the Word was preached by Jessica Shults, and the worship leaders included Jess Barz, Lauren Blunt, Tanner Huizenga, John Kalthoff, Mary Landrigan, Josh Rumery, and the summer staff of Camp Geneva.
• On Monday morning (June 12, 2017) the Word was preached by Stephanie Smith, and worship was led by a worship team from Western Theological Seminary.
• On Tuesday morning (June 13, 2017) worship was led by members of the Hope College Awakening Institute.
On Sunday morning (June 11, 2017) delegates worshipped in area churches.

Meetings of the General Synod were opened and closed with prayer by the following persons:

**Thursday, June 8**
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Daniel Gillett, General Synod president
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — Tara Woodward, Seminarian Seminar participant

**Friday, June 9**
- Morning Closing Prayer — Pam Otten, Regional Synod of Mid-America
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Rodrigo Cano, Commission on Race and Ethnicity
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — Olivia DuPont, Classis of Northern Michigan
- Evening Opening Prayer — Cindi Veldheer DeYoung, General Synod Council
- Evening Closing Prayer — Todd Norris, Classis of the Southwest

**Saturday, June 10**
- Morning Closing Prayer — Ricardo Gouvea, Regional Synod of Canada
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Young Aie Na, Classis of Queens
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — F. Peter Ford, Classis of Rochester
- Evening Closing Prayer — Ina Montoya, Classis of Rocky Mountains

**Sunday, June 11**
- Evening Closing Prayer — Eddy Alemán, RCA director of strategic leadership development and coordinator of Hispanic ministries

**Monday, June 12**
- Morning Closing Prayer — Kenneth Sampson, General Synod chaplain
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Cora Taitt, General Synod Council
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — Patricia Sealy, Commission on Christian Action
- Evening Opening Prayer — Carl Boersma, Commission on Nominations
- Evening Closing Prayer — Benjamin Lin, General Synod Council
REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY

Kent McHeard

Classis of Albany
MINISTERS
Dawn May Alpaugh
David Jones

ELDERS
Rebecca Hudak
Doris Neese

Classis of Columbia-Greene
MINISTER
Paige Convis

ELDERS
Andrea DiPace
Patricia Varga

Classis of Montgomery
MINISTERS
Matthew Draffen
Nancy Ryan

ELDERS
Debra Sanburn
Diane Reynolds

Classis of Rochester
MINISTERS
Bryant Brozik
Kyle Delhagen

ELDERS
Lois Fiegl
Sharon Hann

MISSIONARY*
Peter Ford

Classis of Schenectady
MINISTERS
Lindsey De Kruijf
Lisa Vander Wal

ELDERS
Clara Lasselle
Traute Lehner

*Missionary delegate appointed per BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5 (2016 edition, p. 67)
Classis of Schoharie
MINISTERS
Orville Hine
Rebecca Town

ELDERS
Geraldine Mattice
Donald Nadler

REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA

Ricardo Gouvea

Classis of British Columbia
MINISTERS
Jonathan Manlove
Murray Moerman

ELDERS
Alida Bouwman
Ralph Spyker

Classis of Canadian Prairies
MINISTERS
Albert Plat
John (Doug) Smith

ELDERS
Leanne Duiker
Jeffrey Pasche

Classis of Ontario
MINISTERS
Abram Blaak
John DeGiovanni

ELDERS
Nilton Barbosa
Anja Noordam

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST

John Alwood

Classis of California
MINISTERS
Richard DeBruyne
Mark Schwarz
Juno Smalley

ELDERS
Eric Moreno
James Nakakihara
Marvin Zwart
ROLL OF GENERAL SYNOD

Classis of Cascades
MINISTERS
Thomas Katsma
Matthew Waite

ELDERS
Mark Van Kommer
Kevin Whipple

Classis of Central California
MINISTERS
Daniel Teerman
Joshua Wierenga

ELDERS
Kenneth Shepard
Benjamin Sweet

Classis of the City
MINISTERS
Larry Barber
Fred Harrell

ELDERS
Michael Ehrenfried
John Yates

Classis of Rocky Mountains
MINISTERS
Bradley Kautz
Benjamin Byoung Eun Park

ELDERS
Ina Montoya
Harry Ness

Classis of Southwest
MINISTERS
Susan Hetrick
James Poit

ELDERS
James Noble
Todd Norris
REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE GREAT LAKES

Judith Nelson

**Classis of Great Lakes City**
MINISTERS
Chad Farrand
Bruce Osbeck
Steven Petroelje
Joshua Wall
Nathan Weller

ELDERS
Jim Frye
Rick Gossett
Daniel Hibma
Wayne Schipper
Betty Shuster

**Classis of Holland**
MINISTERS
Amy Avery
Denise Kingdom Grier
Ronald Rienstra
Dawn Vagle

ELDERS
Clarence Falstad
John Hoekstra
Daniel Kruihoff
Lois Maassen

**Classis of Muskegon**
MINISTERS
John Koedyker
Michael Van Kampen

ELDERS
Kenneth Kuzma
Donald Stressman

**Classis of Northern Michigan**
MINISTERS
Daniel DeVries
Adam Grill

ELDERS
Olivia DuPont
David Oosting
Classis of North Grand Rapids
MINISTERS
Mara Norden
Christopher Westerbeek

ELDERS
Patricia DeMoss
Jody Horton

Classis of Southwest Michigan
MINISTERS
Nate Bull
Mark Heijerman
Laura Osborne

ELDERS
Timothy Buis
Brian DeVries
David Mejeur

Classis of Zeeland
MINISTERS
Miriam Barnes
Steven DeVries
Jonathan Elgersma
Karsten Voskuil
Paul Wernlund

ELDERS
Mary Beth Gernaat
Sandra Houston
Gordon Kempkers
Marcia Kuipers
Brent Renkema

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND

Randy Blumer

Classis of Central Iowa
MINISTERS
Kevin Korver
Todd Rempe
Thomas VandeBerg
Craig Wagner

ELDERS
David Jansen
Paul Jones
Jeff Kruger
Gary Van Genderen
Classis of Central Plains
MINISTERS
Amy Jo Hawley
Darrin Kimpson

ELDERS
Nathan Doorlag
Wallace Walcher

Classis of Dakota
MINISTERS
David Landegent
Dean Ulmer
Ronald Van Peursem

ELDERS
Gene Juffer
Eugene Poelstra
Jerry Schilling

Classis of East Sioux
MINISTERS
Scott Bonestroo
John Hubers
David Powers

ELDERS
Vernell Buyert
Terry Johnson
Muryl Korver

Classis of Minnesota
MINISTERS
Roger Lokker
Glenn Shoup
Timothy Sluiter

ELDERS
Tim Beseman
Elaine Noel

Classis of Pleasant Prairie
MINISTERS
Philip Arnold
Jack Ritsema

ELDERS
Iris Shaffer
Joel Sult
Classis of West Sioux
MINISTERS
Jamie Dykstra
Matthew Miller
David Poppen
Calvin Ver Mulm

ELDERS
Sharla Boone
Ronald Boote
Nancy Franken
David Reinke

REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA

Ken Hoogstra

Classis of Chicago
MINISTERS
William Crowder
Christopher Poest

ELDERS
Richard Schuler
Dennis Suda

Classis of Illiana-Florida
MINISTERS
Dale Buettner
Alan Salwei

ELDERS
Sid Geers
William Nyeholt

Classis of Illinois
MINISTERS
Edith Lenz
Shannon Parrish

ELDERS
Gloria Busman
Randall Stenback

Classis of New Thing
MINISTERS
Dennis Colton
Jason De Vries
David Izenbart

ELDERS
Dennis Peters
Jerry Singer
Glenn Sterrett
**Classis of Wisconsin**  
MINISTERS  
Philip Rose  
Brian Taylor  
William Te Winkle

ELDERS  
Lucinda Heinen  
Robin Holzinger  
Thomas Laur

**REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS**  
Ursula Cargill

**Classis of Delaware-Raritan**  
MINISTERS  
Christopher Heitkamp  
Mark Swart

ELDERS  
Daniel Smith  
Diana Weiss

**Classis of Greater Palisades**  
MINISTERS  
Jay Kim  
Kirsten Shepler-Ross

ELDERS  
Ron Romaine  
Arlene Romaine

**Classis of New Brunswick**  
MINISTERS  
Susan Kramer-Mills  
George Montanari

ELDER  
Mark Poyner

**Classis of Passaic Valley**  
MINISTERS  
Karyn Ratchiffe  
Eugene Voss

ELDERS  
Nancy Cooper  
Bruce Holland
REGIONAL SYNOD OF NEW YORK

James Steward

Classis of Brooklyn
MINISTERS
De’Lafayette Awkward
Douglas Banks

ELDERS
Sheila Friend
Deborah King

Classis of Mid-Hudson
MINISTERS
Paul Ruter
Eric Titus

ELDERS
Janice Melichar-Utter
Ruth Ellen Nielson

Classis of Nassau-Suffolk
MINISTERS
Donna Field
Joshua Scheid

ELDERS
Anna Bishop
Kim Pavlovich

Classis of New York
MINISTER
Kirsty DePree

ELDERS
Joseph Panetta
Irma Williams
Gerri Yoshida

Classis of Orange
MINISTER
James O’Connell

ELDERS
Thomas Kaiser
Peter Newman

MILITARY CHAPLAIN**
Kim Donahue

**Military chaplain delegate appointed per BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 6 (2016 edition, p. 67)
Classis of Queens
MINISTERS
Eric Hodges
Young Aie Na

ELDERS
Nancy Gessner
Lorraine Parker

Classis of Rockland-Westchester
MINISTERS
Donald Heringa
John Vanden Oever

ELDERS
William Hertlein
David Walker

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSORS
Carol Bechtel
Timothy Brown
Renée House
Allan Janssen
Gregg Mast
CORRESPONDING DELEGATES

GENERAL SECRETARY
Thomas R. De Vries

GENERAL SECRETARIES EMERITUS
Wesley Granberg-Michaelson
Edwin Mulder

COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE
  Ned Beadel
  Bruce Cornwell
  Gary De Witt
  Lee DeYoung
  Andrea DiPace
  Daniel Gillett
  Thomas Goodhart
  Christopher Jacobsen
  James Kuplic
  Benjamin Lin
  Eric Moreno
  Arlan Moss
  Sharon Palms
  Barbara Pimentel
  Erma Rolle
  Andres Serrano
  Kenneth Shepard
  Willie Si
  Cora Taitt
  Wai Choon Tan
  Lisa Tice
  Michael Van Buren
  Clare VanDis
  Nancy Van Heerde
  Cynthia Veldheer DeYoung
  Evan Vermeer

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Commission on Christian Action
  Patricia Sealy
Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
  Kent McHeard
Commission on Christian Unity
  Lisa Vander Wal
Commission on Christian Worship
  Katherine Baker
Commission on Church Order
  Larry Schuyler
Commission on History
  James Brumm
Commission on Nominations
  Carl Boersma
Commission on Race and Ethnicity
  Richard DeBruyne
Commission on Theology
  Mark Husbands
Commission for Women
  San-Yi (Shirley) Lin

ADDITIONAL COMMISSION DELEGATES
  Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
    Jared Duimstra
  Commission on Race and Ethnicity
    Rodrigo Cano
  Commission for Women
    Kristin Gray

REGIONAL SYNOD WOMEN
  Regional Synod of Albany
    Marilyn Paarlberg
  Regional Synod of Canada
    Gail DeGiovanni
    Margaret Richie
  Regional Synod of the Far West
    Carol Alwood
    Lauralyn Vasquez
  Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
    Jennifer Jackson Nkansah
    Laurel Kempkers
  Regional Synod of the Heartland
    Missy Dokter
    Marla Rotman
  Regional Synod of Mid-America
    Pam Otten
    Mary Strawsma
  Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics
    Tricia Sheffield
  Regional Synod of New York
    Anna Jackson
    Patricia Singletary

YOUTH
  Regional Synod of Canada
    Emily Smith
  Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
    Justin Keating
  Regional Synod of New York
    Bianca Williams

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSOR
  Cornelis Kors
ECUMENICAL DELEGATES
Peter Borgdorff (Christian Reformed Church in North America)
Kathryn Lohre (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Campbell Lovett (United Church of Christ)
J. Herbert Nelson II (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.])

ECUMENICAL GUESTS
Whayne Hougland (The Episcopal Church)
Betsy Miller (Moravian Church in North America)
Carlos Malavé (Christian Churches Together)
Sharon Rader (United Methodist Church)
Sue Rozeboom (Christian Reformed Church in North America)
Elijah Mueller (Orthodox Church in America)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE
General Synod Council Mission Observers
Adrián Bobb and Bernardeth Kelly Bent
David Ford
F. Peter and Patty Ford
Olivia Holt
Abraham and Sayuri Kist-Okazaki
Jennifer Lucking
John Paul Sundararajan
Tim and JJ TenClay

Global Mission Guests
Gilberto Aguirre (CEPAD, Nicaragua)
Dámaris Albuquerque (CEPAD, Nicaragua)

Parliamentarian
Bruce Neckers

Call Waiting Leader
Matthew van Maastricht

Seminarian Seminar Leader
Tim TenClay

SEMINARIAN SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Vivian Campbell
Jeffrey Chu
Sharon Gross
Cheryl Miller
Kimberley Trinidad

Western Theological Seminary
Marcia Bosma
Rosalyn De Koster
Stacey Duensing
Tara Woodward

Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
Sara Gregory
Susan Mulholland
Ciro Romero
Nicole Contreras Romero
PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR

So the parliamentarian, speakers who have received official invitations from the General Synod Council, and General Synod Council executive staff may respond to questions for clarification and participate as requested by the General Synod president in presentations to the General Synod and in other activities that appear on the agenda, the General Synod:

VOTED: To grant privilege of the floor to the parliamentarian, speakers who have received official invitations from the General Synod Council, and General Synod Council executive staff.

SEATING OF DELEGATES/DECLARATION REGARDING QUORUM

The general secretary informed the synod that there were no irregularities and all delegates could be seated. The possible membership of General Synod was 235, with enrolled membership at 229; therefore, a quorum was declared present.

MINUTES AND JOURNAL/TELLERS

The Acts and Proceedings of the 210th regular session of the General Synod were read by title.

VOTED: To approve the minutes of the meeting of June 9-14, 2016, the procedure for approving the journal of actions, and the membership of the advisory committees.

The Rules of Order were read by title, and copies were placed on the secretary’s table.

Sharon Palms and Willie Si (Committee of Reference members), Carl Boersma (corresponding delegate from the Commission on Nominations), and all Seminarian Seminar participants were appointed as tellers.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND SCHEDULE


In addition to the prescribed agenda, the schedule provided for the following presentations, forums, programs, or activities:

- On the evening of Friday, June 9, the General Synod heard a presentation by Rev. Dr. Richard Mouw entitled “Can Reformed Christians Be Civil—with Each Other?”
- On the evening of Saturday, June 11, the General Synod heard a presentation regarding Transformed and Transforming, the denomination’s fifteen-year goal. Leaders, presenters, and musicians included Ben Aguilera, Bruce Benedict, Sarah Carpenter, Stacy Duensing, Lane Ellens, Jack Miller, Courtney Myers, Ken Neeval, Jon Sherrill, Krystal Sherrill, Lauren Sweers, Liz Testa, and Bianca Williams.
- On the evening of Sunday, June 12, the General Synod participated in a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Leaders in the commemoration included James Brumm (Commission on History), Kathryn Lohre
(Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), Carlos Malavé (Christian Churches Together), Sue Rozeboom (Christian Reformed Church in North America), and Lisa Vander Wal (Commission on Christian Unity).

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The following delegates were designated by the president to serve on advisory committees that considered specific business on church order and governance and overtures and new business.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHURCH ORDER AND GOVERNANCE
Moderator: James Poit (Southwest)
Vice Moderator: Mara Joy Norden (North Grand Rapids)
Ministers:
Carol Bechtel (General Synod Professor)
Abram Blaak (Ontario)
Nate Bull (Southwest Michigan)
Lindsey De Kruijf (Schenectady)
Elders:
Paul Jones (Central Iowa)
James Nakakihara (California)
Wallace Walcher (Central Plains)

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS
Moderator: Kevin Korver (Central Iowa)
Vice Moderator: Gerri Yoshida (New York)
Ministers:
Bradley Kautz (Rocky Mountains)
Edith Lenz (Illinois)
Gregg Mast (General Synod Professor)
Mark Schwarz (California)
Matthew Waite (Cascades)
Elders:
Gordon Kempkers (Zeeland)
Irma Williams (New York)

MODERATORS OF THE ALL-SYNOD ADVISORY COMMITTEES
Katherine Baker
Amy Jo Hawley
David Izenbart
Laurel Kempkers
Muryl Korver
Shirley Lin
Kent McHeard
George Montanari
Ina Montoya
Laura Osborne
Christopher Poest
Karyn Ratcliffe
Philip Rose
Marla Rotman
Patricia Singletary
Lauralyn Vasquez
Karsten Voskuil
Eugene Voss
DISPOSITION OF COMMUNICATIONS

The Office of the General Synod received no communications that were directed to or intended for the General Synod.

PRESENTATION AND REFERRAL OF NEW BUSINESS

Two items of new business were presented to and received by the General Synod, and then referred to the Committee of Reference for further referral or disposition as appropriate. The first item of new business was as follows:

To urge regional synods to observe a season of restraint over the next two years in the formation of new classes, and to direct the Commission on Church Order to prepare a study for the General Synod on the significance of geography for the formation of classes and regional synods, to be submitted to the 2018 General Synod.

Reasons given for submission of the foregoing as new business were:

1. Despite the fact that the overall numbers in the RCA are diminishing, we have seen an increase in the number of classes in recent years.
2. The temptation will be, in our present climate of disagreement and division, to form new classes so that different sides can increase their votes at General Synod. This is a poor reason to form new classes, and should be resisted.
3. Already many classes are overloaded with the work required of them by our order, and increasing the number of classes will only exacerbate this problem.
4. Beginning with the formation of the City Classis, and now with the addition of the New Thing Classis, geographical boundaries of classes have become very unclear, overlapping with other classes, and extending in some cases even across different regional synods. The RCA needs to clarify the role and meaning of “regions” and “bounds” for classes in its order, before these problems multiply exponentially.
5. At stake for the RCA is the unity and integrity of its witness to the larger world in specific geographic contexts.
6. The formation of the second non-geographically defined “New Thing” classis became public too late for these issues to be addressed through normal processes over this past year.
7. The significance of our divisions, and the temptation to multiply classes to address them, has only clearly emerged recently.

The Committee of Reference recommended that the first item not be accepted as new business.

VOTED: To not accept the first item as new business.

The second item of new business was as follows:

To urge classes to refrain from approving the requests of churches to transfer to another denomination prior to the conclusion of General Synod 2018.

The Committee of Reference recommended that the second item be accepted as new business and referred to the General Synod’s Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

VOTED: To accept the second item as new business, and refer it to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

For additional information regarding the second item of business, see R 17-34 and R 17-35 on p. 165.

All of these possibilities went through my mind as I reflected on this last address to the General Synod as your general secretary.

All are options that flow from the deepest places of my heart. All are emotions that battle for supremacy in my thoughts, feelings, and actions standing before you this morning.

We stand at a critical time in our existence as the Reformed Church in America. I do not mean to be overly dramatic. I do not desire to create a false sense of urgency. I do want us to comprehend the gravity and importance of the moment. I do want us to understand the responsibilities we have before God and on behalf of our church as we gather in assembly to discern the Holy Spirit’s leading for our future and submit ourselves to it.

We come as individual followers of Jesus Christ. We come from multiple countries, multiple regions, multiple congregations, with vast differences in our stories, our experiences, our perspectives, and our convictions. If we were not united by our faith in Jesus Christ, it would be easy to allow our differences to define and divide us.

As we stand together on the precipice of the unknown, invited to journey into the 2017 General Synod of the RCA, some have come with anticipated outcomes. Some have brought clear expectations. Some have laid out a predictable pathway. Others have offered openness to a spiritual direction that is mysterious and unidentified. All are true until the conversation and deliberation begins.

Leading up to this year’s General Synod, we have searched for solace by grasping at places of assurance and comfort. Some have searched in our history, recognizing points of contention in our past and identifying them as greater or more difficult than today so that we can push forward with certainty and minimal challenge in our present state. We have searched in our polity, recognizing that our order has allowed us to function rightly for centuries and will provide the continued guidance necessary to navigate our current contentiousness. We have searched in our theology, recognizing that our identity as Reformed places a greater burden on God than on us, and we can trust in God’s providential action on our behalf.

Others have achieved a sense of equilibrium through lament for what was. They are identifying the pain and discomfort of our world today, both inside and outside the church, and hoping for a change that would make the future more like the past—a place of simpler times, simpler decisions, and less complicated interactions and issues.

We cannot look backward, making an assumption that “what was” and “what is” will easily become “what will be.” We cannot accept “what is” as the way things will always be, either. We must recognize our own placement and responsibility in submitting to and serving Jesus Christ. We must recognize the obligation we have been given as the people of God to be the church—to ensure this church goes forward as a light to the world and as a communicator of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On March 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln stood before a divided nation and gave what many believe was his greatest speech: his second inaugural address.
The Civil War was in full swing, though many could see its inevitable conclusion. Years of tumult and war and the burden of leadership in the midst of this conflict brought President Lincoln to the root of what was important in moving forward as a United States of America.

He did not communicate a spirit of vindication or triumphalism but laid out hope founded upon humility.

In the brevity of only 701 words, President Lincoln initiated a future peace that would come through reconciliation. Rather than rally the troops to support the war, Lincoln called for all to imitate the ways of God. His final words from this address were simply:

> With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

It was not a rationale to be used as the hand of God in a situation of right and wrong or good and evil. It was a call to rightness, a deeper righteousness. It recognized that knowing right or being right was truly acting right.

It is at this crossroads we stand today, my RCA sisters and brothers. In our own recognition that we stand at reconciliation and division.

Another of Abraham Lincoln’s speeches, given prior to the conflict and contention of the Civil War, better reflects this time and this metaphor. On June 16, 1858, upon becoming the Republican senatorial candidate for the state of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln gave an acceptance Speech in which he said:

> “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.

Lincoln took the words of Jesus from Matthew 12:25 (NIV): “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.”

We stand at a place where we might audaciously believe that we can divide and endure. That we can achieve something that Jesus says is incapable of being accomplished: division without destruction.

The weight of the Office of the General Secretary is carrying the burden of understanding that you live and lead not out of a personal preference or perspective but out of a historical one. You make decisions that encompass the good of the whole, rather than what might be for your own benefit or for the good of only a few. You recognize that responsibility is both affliction and liability, and you have said “yes” to carrying it with integrity and humility.

Many of us by birth have been born into this house called the RCA. Others have been adopted into it. All of us have recognized our holy covenant with God—that he is our God, and we are his people—and have committed ourselves to life in the family.

As Reformed Christians, we acknowledge the foreordination of God in our salvation but also in our living as part of a connected body of Christ, the church, and the church that God
has placed us in, called the Reformed Church in America. You are not here by accident but by God’s ordained purpose—for his purposes, not your own, and for his glory.

Yet today is a different day. And the words of Jesus are still true: a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Christianity is not lived in a vacuum; it is lived in relationship. It is lived with others, and it is incapable of existing without community. In standing in this different day, some see the unity of the body of Christ as an idol that is only unity for the sake of unity. Others see unity as a preferred place that is greater than purity and peace.

As you read Scripture with a bent toward covenant, relationship, and unity, you recognize God’s heart for all God’s children to not just exist together and not just live together, but to love one another deeply, and out of that relationship to engage in a redemptive mission that is a witness to the whole world.

An unwillingness to be the church—the called-out ones together—is not God’s design for his family, and our choices and decisions to break up the body of Christ and not live united are sinful. Our humanity and our sinfulness get in the way of God’s redemption story.

The apostle Paul rebukes the church at Corinth because of their divisive and schismatic relationships and actions while trying to be a witness to the world for Jesus Christ and to bring transformation into the lives of the broken, the helpless, and the hurting.

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (TLB):

But, dear brothers, I beg you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so that there won’t be splits in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. For some of those who live at Chloe’s house have told me of your arguments and quarrels, dear brothers. Some of you are saying, “I am a follower of Paul”; and others say that they are for Apollos or for Peter; and some that they alone are the true followers of Christ. And so, in effect, you have broken Christ into many pieces.

Are we any different today? Future generations will view the sin of our disunity and recognize how we are dishonoring God—just like the church at Corinth. Even if we do it in defense of the marginalized or in advocating for truth, rationalizing the reason for behavior does not excuse the behavior itself. We still stand on the brink of breaking Christ into many pieces. How can we say that is God glorifying and God’s desire for the Reformed Church in America? We are trying to perpetuate a new narrative—out of our anxiety and fear—that division is the call God has laid before us as a denomination. This is not the gospel. To believe division is the way forward is to believe that a tattered relic of Christ is the same as experiencing the true fullness and reconciliation of Jesus.

For this reason, I bring a proposal before you, the 2017 General Synod. It is a simple proposal and recommendation, and it is the only recommendation of my tenure as general secretary. It is with the hope of deepening our relationships and of defining what is most important and how we move forward together as a church, unified for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To request that each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light
of our current state of contention and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and a church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for his people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in conjunction with regional executives and a small group of pastors and elders, and should include the following questions:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of this conversation should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world.

The movement that we are a part of began in 1628. It is a movement of God’s people who have been called by God to be the church and to share the gospel in our world. It has been our calling for centuries and has been passed down to us with great fervor and great responsibility.

Pastoral and church leaders have willingly accepted the baton of leadership and have cultivated a next generation to receive it and run with perseverance and endurance the race that has been set before us. Each generation makes its own choice, but it is one that has been influenced by the Holy Spirit’s presence and power. Each generation identifies its place in history and acknowledges the historical significance of the time and place to which they have been assigned—the part of the harvest in which they toil.

As we minister in a different day, I see many who no longer see the spiritual and historical weight of their ministry assignment but instead embrace a personal perspective. From this position, we tend to overestimate our accomplishment and contribution, and underestimate the sacrifice, commitment, value, and contribution of those who came before us. We think we are self made, when in reality, we all stand on the shoulders of somebody—usually multiple somebodies. Our gifts, skills, and passions are God-given blessings, and we have been tasked with using them to bless others as we live out God’s call on our lives and on our leadership.

When I stand on the steps of a church in Xiamen, China, and read a plaque that says, “The first Protestant Church in China,” knowing that church was started by David Abeel, an RCA missionary, I think of the tens of millions of Christians worshiping today as followers of Jesus Christ in China and recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I sit in the palace of the King of Bahrain or in the royal court of the Sultan of Oman and know I am there because of the sacrifice of Samuel Zwemer, who moved into the souk
in Bahrain in 1890 and began dispensing medicine as an opening to dispense the truth of the gospel, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I stand in the commons of a school in Madanapalle, India, or the emergency room of a hospital in Vellore named after Ida Scudder—an RCA missionary who devoted her life to improving the quality of life of women and children and to sharing Christ’s love in tangible ways in India—I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I worship in a church in South Korea, knowing that the spiritual lineage of these Korean Christians is traced to Horace Underwood, a graduate of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I gather under a tree on the African plain in Kenya and see dozens of Maasai people who have water because of a well provided by RCA churches and missionaries, a school, and a weekly gathering of a new church that is impacting people for eternity, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I see a church in the Hudson Valley that had a vision for church planting—not in the 21st century but in the 17th century—I am able to see church after church that owes its birth to that visionary congregation. And from that lineage, I see a new church focused especially on people who have disabilities, welcoming all people with open arms in the name of Jesus, and I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

It is a legacy we continue to carry through Transformed & Transforming. Six years ago, we didn’t know what would happen to the Reformed Church in America as we transitioned from one call—Our Call—to the new direction that the Holy Spirit was leading us. Transformed & Transforming was a bold initiative that required the upheaval of an already existing institution.

When we first started the process of transition, we began to wonder how to best listen, learn, love, and lead. In our first year of discernment together, we recognized that God was leading the RCA toward three strategic priority areas:

- Cultivating transformation in Christ
- Equipping emerging leaders of today and tomorrow
- Engaging in Christ’s kingdom mission

Following two years of discernment—with thousands of participants and multiple gatherings for conversations, prayer, and reflection—we began laying out a strategic plan to help us realize this God-given vision. It required staff and team transitions, establishing church commitment and support, moving from an institutional to a missional mindset, creating space for leadership development, and working together to more clearly see the vision God had set before us. For is it not God who has sent us?

In this recent chapter of our journey, we have worked to become a denomination that seeks to live and love like Jesus in a world that is entirely different than the one the RCA began in 389 years ago.

Throughout the short period of launching Transformed & Transforming, one thing has been especially clear: The mission of God is our priority, and the vision God has laid before us is still about living and loving like Jesus.

Since we first began Transformed & Transforming:
• 417 churches have been involved in connection events.
• 177 churches have engaged in learning communities.
• 46 churches have participated in leadership communities.
• 187 individuals have engaged in leadership collaboratives.
• 498 churches have been involved in Transforming & Transforming overall.

That adds up to transformation that is starting and growing in almost 500 RCA churches. It is transformation that is taking root in the lives of our congregations and community members. It is transformation in our leadership teams and in our discipleship relationships. It is transformation around gender, disability, and racial reconciliation. It is transformation in the lives of our global partners and those we serve together. It is transformation in the lives of the next generation. It is transformation toward increasingly living and loving like Jesus as the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into ministry together.

And it is not transformation for transformation’s sake. Rather, this vision of transformation is one that has been historically sown in our DNA as the Reformed Church in America, and it is the leadership legacy with which we have been entrusted.

On the RCA website, www.rca.org, you’ll find an “about” section. In that section, you’ll read:

In this constantly changing world, we like to say we’re “reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God.” We embrace fresh ideas and hold on to what’s best about our deep, rich past. (We need almost 400 candles to light our birthday cake!)

We seek transformation because it’s who we’ve always been. We understand transformation as our vision because Jesus gathered his disciples together, saying: Go to the ends of the earth, baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we seek transformation, still in our world today, because we proclaim the relevancy of the gospel that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. We believe that this is still just as current today as it was thousands of years ago. And we believe it because Scripture, the Word of God, claims it to be true.

Today, as the Reformed Church in America, we carry with us a vision that has become sharp and clear from the moment Christ ascended to the throne, sending the Holy Spirit upon us. Our vision is to continue engaging in transformation as Christ continues to transform lives in our world today. Our vision is to live and love like Jesus to the greatest extent we are able, as we invest all of ourselves and all of our resources in this effort that God has called and entrusted to us.

What is God doing as we take the first steps into this new chapter?

Let me share a few glimpses of God at work in the RCA …

In the priority area of discipleship, led by Jill Ver Steeg:

• 13 RCA congregations in places like Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Okoboji, Iowa; and Edmonds, Washington, have participated in 3DM learning communities.
• Eight Faithwalking retreats, held in conjunction with Western Theological Seminary and Ridder Church Renewal, have included 25 RCA congregations in the classes of Canadian Prairies, Albany, Wisconsin, and New York.
In the priority area of leadership, led by Eddy Alemán:

- Four African American RCA congregations in New York are participating in a two-year leadership community.
- Six churches in Detroit and five Hispanic congregations in West Michigan are also engaged in two leadership development learning communities.
- Andy Bossardet is helping lead the efforts of Ridder Church Renewal, in partnership with Western Theological Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). We have 112 pastors from 96 congregations involved in ten learning communities so far.
- The Women’s Transformation and Leadership initiative, led by Liz Testa, launched six 18-month leadership collaboratives in February, cultivating the leadership gifts and contributions of women who are leaders in the RCA.

Our mission priority area is led by Tony Campbell and is also engaging in some awesome ways:

- Local Missional Engagement, led by Eliza Cortés Bast, is taking RCA churches through a learning lab process to discover how to build a bridge from a congregation to a community. It is focused on education in Chicago, affordable housing in Holland, Michigan, and math tutoring in Wyoming, Michigan. In partnership with church plants and church planters, this initiative is thinking outside the box about new ways for missional engagement locally.
- Global Missional Engagement, led by Megan Hodgin, has held five connection events that have engaged 20 congregations across the United States and Canada. 140 individuals are participating in an online network to focus on our strategic impact area of Nicaragua.
- Volunteer Engagement, led by Stephanie Soderstrom, helped 1,117 volunteers serve with RCA missionaries and mission partners in the past year. 332 young leaders were awarded scholarships toward their volunteer experiences through the gracious generosity of the Church Growth Fund.
- Terry DeYoung is providing leadership to our Disabilities Concerns initiative. We are seeing an ever-increasing community of disability advocates, with 25 trained in the past year and an expectation of adding even more advocates who can help train churches in dismantling physical and communication barriers so that they can become inclusive and welcome all God’s people.
- The Church Multiplication initiative, led by Randy Weener, Mike Hayes, and Tim Vink, has seen 61 new church starts organize since the beginning of Transformed & Transforming.
- Missional Mosaic, led by Earl James, has started two learning communities to help equip congregations in the area of cultural agility. In March, 55 people participated in a summit on mass incarceration in Chicago that is giving birth to a new learning community to help churches minister to this marginalized population.

And in the area of Next Generation Engagement, led by Rick Zomer, I’m especially encouraged. We are passionate about passing on faith and mission to millennials and emerging adults and desire for this area to permeate all three of our strategic priorities:

- 18 churches participated in two connection events in Wisconsin, seven churches were part of a connection event in Des Moines, Iowa, and eight churches attended a connection event in Sioux Center, Iowa.
- Six RCA churches in Canada are involved in a learning circle utilizing Fuller Youth Institute resources.
• Additional RCA churches are working to understand the emerging adults’ context and what next steps look like for their church to reach out and minister to the next generation.

This is the impact of God’s vision and our mission: to seek out transformation through living and loving like Jesus. And as we seek to do this, we hope to take the most people along with us. You’ll hear more of the stories tomorrow night as we provide a greater update of Transformed & Transforming. Seeing up close and personal how God is at work in and through the RCA is wonderful and amazing. Today, you can find our Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders in their black or gray shirts. Ask them about their amazing stories of transformation. I am grateful for our RCA staff who have worked so hard to make words on a page come alive and to imagine, conceive, strategize, and plan processes that are equipping congregations for mission. We have an awesome team—operationally and missionally—who are giving all of themselves for the mission God has called us to together. And I am proud of all they have accomplished for God’s glory.

I am especially grateful to Ken Neevel and the entire development team for fully raising the resource goal of Called: The Campaign for Transformed & Transforming. We have contributions and commitments of more than $6.5 million! Reaching this goal means that we as a denomination can continue to learn, lead, and explore the vision of God, living and loving like Jesus through discipleship, leadership, mission, and next generation engagement. This is the impact of the vision, and we are grateful to the many who have believed in this vision and who have committed to this vision not for their own gain but for the sake of others.

I believe this must continue to be a priority for the RCA. It’s why we’ve invested so much into the future of our ministry and the equipping of future leaders. And there are other mile markers on the RCA journey into the future, indicators and guides for where the RCA could and should go moving forward. Here are some things I hope to see as I continue to serve as a minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA:

• Never stop living and loving like Jesus—let the light of Christ shine in your hearts; make his love real, authentic, and tangible.
• In a changing world, remain on course to be a denomination that is moving missionally, not institutionally.
• Equip churches to start with a ministry orientation that is toward the outsider, not the insider.
• Let the center of transformational mission be focused on discipleship, leadership, and mission that are motivated toward the next generation.
• Recognize that the future of the RCA is one that moves beyond history and heritage and provides value-added equipping that helps churches to realize God’s call for their congregation within their context.
• Transition to an assessment system that is based on giving shared by all and for all, and envision how, together, all of us can do more than any single church is capable of alone.
• Train seminary students for today’s reality; in a world that has questions and doubts and is seeking the mystery and power of a resurrected Jesus Christ, raise up a generation of missionaries who can translate the gospel for today’s culture.
• Provide large entryways for the diverse student body of NBTS to become a part of a diverse RCA that reflects the new world around us. Recruit them and welcome them openly—they are already being trained in our seminary; we must include them in our pulpits and communities to help us become the multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic denomination God is moving us toward.
• Support generously the work of Global Mission—this is a place of significant influence for the kingdom—personally investing in mission that is making a difference globally.
• Use our confessions to interpret Scripture. This is where our history serves us—our commitment to creeds and confessions and the theological understanding of those who have come before us will provide guidance through the illumination of the Holy Spirit to the grace and truth of God’s Word.
• Continue to have a transformational vision for the least and the lost—the uniqueness of the RCA has been an understanding of the gospel that is holistic, bringing restoration and reconciliation to all.
• Elders, challenge your pastor to have a weekly spiritual conversation with someone who is far from God; pay for them to hang out at a local coffee shop so that they might strike up a spiritual conversation with a seeker. See how the Holy Spirit draws people who need transformation to experience it through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ; it is the first step in living and loving like Jesus.
• Lean in to our relationship with the CRCNA. See it for what it can be: two denominations who separated and who are closer together than ever before and can provide more than cooperation and collaboration in envisioning a new creation that is a greater Reformed witness in our world.
• Commit to reconciliation.

In the midst of this supernatural working of God in and through us, a shadow hangs over us, darkening the light of Christ that is so bright and expansive. It is a shadow that comes from the powers and principalities that battle against our transformational mission and efforts. And it comes from our own lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. It comes as we impose our own personal preferences and perspectives on God’s leading for us as a church on mission and in mission.

Reconciliation is at the heart of transformation.

When we read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and experience the transformation of becoming a new creation, it is in the context of reconciliation. God is the initiator of reconciliation through Jesus Christ and gives to us the ministry of reconciliation.

How do we think we can reconcile a lost world to God, when we cannot even be reconciled to each other? We are a true house divided.

The message of the gospel is a message of reconciliation. The ministry of the gospel is a ministry of reconciliation. The preaching of the gospel is a word of reconciliation.

The design of the gospel is so that those who receive it are reconciled to God. The basic meaning of the word reconcile is to remove enmity between two enemy parties or to change thoroughly. If we are a denomination that has experienced transformation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ—if we are a denomination that seeks to bring transformation into our world through the gospel, if we are a denomination that desires to share a reconciling gospel that invites people into a life-giving relationship with God—and we cannot be reconciled one to another, where is the power of our gospel?

If we preach a message on the power of God to change lives and see reconciliation as the changing of our relationship with God—from enmity to favored relationship—and we cannot experience a reconciled relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ, part of God’s covenant people in the Reformed Church in America—what testimony and hope do we give to a searching and hopeless world?
In Greek, the meaning of reconciliation at its root is change. This is the meaning of the word we read in the New Testament. It is a word, according to Greek scholars, that means primarily to exchange—to change the relation of hostile parties into a relation of peace.

This is my final word as general secretary. Live the truth of God’s Word. Live the grace of God’s Word. Be transformed. Be changed. Be reconciled. Show how Christians live differently. Do not accept the polarization that is multiplying and expanding in our world. Do not allow it to influence our relationships with one another. We are called to be different, to act different, and to live different—to live and love like Jesus.

Living and loving like Jesus isn’t asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” in our interactions with one another this week. It is asking, “What did Jesus do?” He brought reconciliation and transformation into our world, and how can we live and love like Jesus? How does this impact what we say, how we interact, how we treat one another, and how we testify to the power of the gospel? The impact is directed toward each other first and then spreads into our communities and into our world.

Jim Poit is a good friend and pastor from Gilbert, Arizona. Our lives and ministries have intersected and crossed paths for almost 20 years—since he was pastoring an RCA church in Princeton, New Jersey. Last month, we were together serving on the board of trustees for Western Theological Seminary. He updated me on his daughter Elisabeth, who had just graduated from college. Last year, she was part of the Call Waiting experience for young leaders at General Synod.

Jim told me at the end of General Synod last year that Elisabeth had no desire to return this year. Her description of synod was of people bickering and quarreling and fighting to break apart. This year, at graduation, Jim shared that he would be at synod this year and wondered how Elisabeth felt about it a year later. She said, “After reflecting on it throughout the year, I realize that General Synod was not an experience of people fighting to break apart, but now I see it as people who were fighting to stay together.”

Friends, that is the challenge before us. It is a position and disposition we take before we ever walk into the room to meet together. Do we have the will to be reconciled together? Will we contest the adversary, who wills to tear us apart? Or do we see this as a contest of winners and losers? Are we willing to change and be reconciled to one another? Will we grow together and go together in mission, or will we abandon our covenantal commitments and go our own way? If we live and love like Jesus this week, we cannot help but be reconcilers—to God, with each other, and in our world.

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-1 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See pp. 136-137 for the resulting recommendation, R 17-18.
The Ridder Church Renewal process has a foundational tenet that we are called to be communities of grace and truth. The charge from the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to the officers is to listen to the church, and I have spent 24 months doing so, rooms right and rooms left, rooms mixed, moderate, divided, and sometimes angry. And I have some difficult truths to report. I hope earnestly that they are shared with grace, and I’m convinced that the only way to go forward is to deal candidly with “what is.” And it is only fair to you as delegates to give you as clear a lay of the land as possible because you will be making crucial decisions. An officer’s job is to preside; the delegate’s job is to decide. And you have some weighty and possibly historic decisions before you—many overtures and proposals—and most of them revolve around the human sexuality debate. I hope the insight brought from more than 195 meetings will help you gain perspective. And I apologize for the next few minutes because you may feel like a ping-pong ball at an Olympic table tennis match.

My second day in office as vice president of General Synod, I was at Western Theological Seminary, and I ran into an old colleague. We chatted for a time about General Synod. His concluding statement was, “Well, it’s simple. Let each classis or church decide, and the problem is solved.” I was new, really new, but had already learned enough to know that the progressives view that idea as a compromise while the traditionalists view it as capitulation. This can sometimes lead to counter charges of “purist” on the one hand and “nonbiblical” on the other. I believe this is a central issue of our divide and has become tied to our polity debate—but more on the polity later.

This divide has many other breaches and fissures. Progressives say that we must love members of the LGBTQ community, and if you unpack the subtext of the meaning, what is being brought forward is the belief that the only way to truly love this community is to be fully affirming of their lifestyle. Traditionalists contend that love can mean accepting the person but not the lifestyle. The traditionalists emphasize biblical authority while the progressives talk of the Word of God with the motto of reformed and always reforming. And subsequent rebuttals include biblical legalism vs. playing too loose with the authority of Scripture. I could go on, but you’ve probably heard variations of this scenario. Here is what I’ve concluded: our conflict is like two people talking past each other, with one speaking Italian and the other speaking Greek, and expecting to understand each other.

I have heard very few voices from the middle. Some don’t want to engage for fear of what it will do to their congregation. Some are just keeping their heads down and plugging away at ministry. Some serve divided congregations and therefore can’t say much. Some are aware that millennials as a group tend towards the progressive side. And some, in this middle, aren’t sure where they stand on the issue itself. But even in the middle ground, there is still a blue line, like in hockey, that defines the sides so that you operate on one side or the other. Either homosexual activity is a sin or it is not. Even the moderate voices also defined themselves as on one side or the other of this divide.

The human sexuality debate is also lodged in a polity struggle. There are two things that are so.

The General Synod has certain responsibilities and authorities. These include general superintendence over the whole church, doctrine and denominational polity at our seminaries, and oversight of standards and preparation of ministers. This is directly from the *Book of Church Order.*
The classes have certain responsibilities and authorities. These include general supervision over students of theology, examination of students for licensure and ordination, ordination itself, and all other undelegated ecclesial functions.

Our denomination has spent several years adjudicating how these powers interacted. Then the focus shifted to constitutional changes, with progressives asserting that only the *BCO* can tell us what to do and the traditionalists working to pass *BCO* amendments. And you know the result, which leaves us in an undefined place, with progressives blocking the two-thirds vote but not having a majority position, and the traditionalists having a significant majority but not the two-thirds needed to enforce. To add to the irony of the situation, the heavier-handed of the amendments (every congregation shall assure) received the higher number of classes’ approval, while the lighter amendment (the marriage liturgy) received fewer classes’ affirmation. When we add the present reality that we will in a few days have a vacancy in our general secretary chair, we are in a tenuous situation. I am worried that into our leadership vacuum much mischief may come. I am also very worried that if the progressives push this issue in practice, without obtaining at least a majority consensus, it will fracture the denomination. I am also worried that the traditionalists will leave, which would decimate the denomination.

And we lack some binding ties. Lutherans have gone through these waters and have suffered significant losses, but they had their liturgy, which is very consonant throughout their denomination, to bind them together. The Presbyterians have had a similar experience, and they have the tie of a very thick book of church order. We might think our Dutch heritage would help, but we are diverse now, and the Dutch have come in very different waves of immigration, anyway. In our history, we have found ways to live through differences and have a wider tent. But if part of our identity, or DNA, or glue, is our ability to accommodate differing points of view, what happens when we can’t accommodate our differences and therefore violate a foundational aspect of our identity? I am truly worried that we will not just split but fragment. Dr. Lynn Japinga, who wrote the book on RCA conflict, recently said, “I don’t know—this just feels different from other conflicts.”

It would be a poignant spiritual irony if this General Synod moves us toward fracture. As a young pastor serving the First Reformed Church of Holland, I realized that our 150th celebration would occur in 1997. So I gathered a committee to begin to think about the impending anniversary and during a brainstorming session suggested we might want to celebrate with our sister church, Pillar Christian Reformed Church (CRC). I was met with stony silence, and then a member stridently said, “We can’t celebrate with them; they aren’t 150 years old because they split from us!” I thought she was joking but was stunned to realize she was serious. Can pain really last generationally that long? Two years ago, I was waiting for worship to start at Graafschaap Christian Reformed Church, just miles from here, when a member of my congregation came up to me and said, “I grew up just a few blocks from here as a kid but have never been inside this church.” I waited for the rest of the story. And he obliged, “Most of the kids in my neighborhood were CRC, and as we walked to school on opposite sides of the street, they’d throw rocks at us RCA kids and tell us we were going to hell.” He paused to gauge my reaction and then said, “Of course, we threw stones back.” First Church spent almost a decade working with Rev. Chris DeVos of Pillar CRC. Pillar got involved in the Ridder initiative and is now an RCA/CRC union church, and it stands as a shining example of what might be in the future denominationally. Do we want to endanger our current RCA and CRCNA mutual ministries, which are too many to enumerate? Do we want to add another split that will be felt for generations to come?

Another spiritual irony: we have some great mission partners in Italy called the Waldensians. Tim and JJ TenClay are RCA missionaries partnering with them in Sicily.
In connecting with this mission in Italy, I also had the honor of being in the front row during the weekly audience of Pope Francis. When I was introduced, I said to His Holiness that I’d been asked by several commissions of our General Synod to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and that I had refused. At that point, I had the curious attention of the pontiff. I continued, “Instead, I will suggest to our commissions that instead of celebrating we would commemorate the anniversary—use this occasion to apologize to our Catholic brothers and sisters for how we have sometimes treated them, use this time to learn from each other and to grow together and to serve together.” Pope Francis was obviously moved, asked me to pray for him, and then embraced me. In North America, we males tend to hug and then get out of it quickly. I started to pull back and realized that he had me in a true embrace and wasn’t letting go. At that point, I was a little overwhelmed. There was something so right about that embrace, and as I’ve had the opportunity to relate this experience to others, they too have been deeply moved. Missiologists estimate that there are 38,000 protestant denominations in our world. Do we want to make it 38,001?

So how do we move forward?

Ross Douthat has an insightful book called *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. He documents in great detail the recent history of the church in North America. His main hypothesis is that the church loses ground and even disintegrates as it accommodates the culture and gains ground and transforms culture when it maintains its biblical grounding. I’ve heard some say that the age of denominations was passed, to be replaced by networks and affiliations. *Hesed* is a Hebrew word, and it is stunning how often it appears in the Old Testament. We don’t catch its import in the English translations because *hesed* is translated in various ways—as mercy, love, faithfulness, etc. It is the concept of covenant love that permeates the Old Testament, God’s covenant love toward us and our call to live in covenant with each other. And the New Testament trumpets the same message throughout. Jesus proclaims in the shadow of the cross, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” For me, a network or an affiliation is an accommodation to culture. Our theology is covenant, we make vows that are covenant, and this covenant community called the Reformed Church in America has blessed the world. There is nothing sacred per se about the Reformed Church in America or any denomination, and Christ’s kingdom would still advance without the RCA, but …

We are like the tribe of Judah, one of the least of the denominations, but have impacted our world for Christ in stunning ways, disproportionate to our size. When China descended into Communism, most missiologists agreed that the newly planted infant church in China was not strong enough to survive. A few years ago, I did a funeral for Jeane Walvoord, who was a mission nurse and fled for her life out of China. When we did get a chance, decades later, to look back into China, we discovered millions of Christians. The Presbyterian Church of South Korea was founded by New Brunswick Theological Seminary graduate H. G. Underwood and now has almost 3 million members. More than 80 years ago, John and Mabel Kempers left to do mission work in the southernmost state of Mexico. Now there are more than 1 million Christians in the National Presbyterian Church in Chiapas, and they are a sister denomination to us, no longer our mission. It would be hard to calculate how many people came to Christ through the work of the Scudder family in India, and Dr. Ida Scudder is the third most famous and respected name in India. And if you are saying numbers aren’t everything, I agree and say it is also hard to calculate the impact of our medical mission in the Middle East. Doug Leonard, now our head of missions, heard about Secretary of State John Kerry’s meeting with the King of Bahrain. Mr. Kerry greeted the king and gave thanks that the United States–Bahrain friendship has blossomed over the 45-year history between the U.S. government and Bahrain. (The U.S. opened its embassy in Bahrain in 1971.) But the king corrected Secretary Kerry and said that Bahrain’s relationship with America started more than 100 years ago in 1890, when missionaries from the Reformed
Church in America came to Bahrain and established the American Mission Hospital. The RCA and their medical mission were the reason Bahrain was friends with the United States. The RCA missionaries came before there was oil and before there was anything and cared for us, said the king.

How precious is trust and respect in the Middle East? And the RCA has both in amazing measure. I know you heard this from our general secretary, but it was worth repeating.

There is something in our corporate DNA, this sharing of the gospel in word and deed that has profoundly impacted our world. Do we really want to give up this heritage, which I believe is an ongoing call from our God? There is an addendum to this address, a report from Doug Leonard that outlines the ongoing mission and evangelism work of the RCA. Hundreds of thousands of people came to Christ just this past year through the RCA and its global mission partners. Do we really want to turn our back on this vital mission movement?

I propose that we move toward mission and engage our emerging leaders in mission.

Millennials:

- Tend to have a global perspective and often have had opportunities to do short-term mission work or study abroad.
- Tend to view faith not so much as a content transfer but as chance to make a difference.
- Are looking for opportunities to serve abroad.

And I propose we challenge ourselves as a denomination to change the norm concerning the frequency of gap-year mission service among RCA young adults. Gap years can be post–high school, post-college, pre–graduate school, or before starting a career.

P-2

1. This falls within the current Transformed & Transforming initiatives and will be run by General Synod staff, specifically under the direction of the Global Mission team.
2. RCA missionaries and mission personnel have already developed and will continue to develop job descriptions and ministry opportunities across the globe.
3. It is requested that RCA churches and classes help recruit young adults for these opportunities.
4. RCA churches and classes are invited to think creatively about ways of sending, funding, and supporting the change of this corporate norm for the sake of the kingdom.

I have committed to raising $50,000 towards this goal, with $34,000 committed already. I propose that we add assessment monies of 53 cents per member.

It will take creative work to change the norm. And it will take more than this program and funding, which are only meant to jumpstart our efforts. But our God is a creative God. My own daughter, Stephanie, would have been a potential candidate for one of these gap-year positions. She has just graduated from college with a major in English and a minor
in Italian. And in God’s providence, she has received an internship and will be teaching English as a second language in Milan, Italy, next year. She will be connected with our mission partners at the Evangelical Waldensian Church, and she is already connected with Tim and JJ TenClay. I trust she will serve well; I trust she will come home transformed. It will take other creative ways for consistories, churches, and individuals to help change this norm and send increasing numbers into mission. In Steph’s case, the internship is paid by another agency, but the Waldensians will get a mission volunteer, she will come home promoting missions, and my wife and I get to pay for the plane tickets. Did I mention the RCA gets a free missions volunteer?

Elisha Nykamp is a Hope College senior, grandson of the Revs. Bob Nykamp and Cecil Martens. He wants to go into the Peace Corps after he graduates. There is nothing wrong with the Peace Corps, but this kid is dripping with RCA DNA. We need to send him into mission. We need to get ahead of this wave of young people desiring to serve abroad and enlist the talents, energy, and abilities of our young people in mission.

And when our young people return, they will:

- Be avid supporters and promoters of global mission.
- Understand the gospel in a richer way by seeing it from the perspective of another culture.
- View their communities as a mission field.
- Return transformed.

This proposal engages the three prongs of Transformed & Transforming: discipleship, leadership, and mission.

Not everyone can go abroad, but the mission field is coming to us. We can love the stranger and alien in our midst. The Arizona Republic featured an article this fall that came to the surprising conclusion that Sioux Center, Iowa, was a place that warmly welcomed immigrants and did so out of conservative religious values. This is not taking a political side but showing Christian hospitality. I will be baptizing a man brought up Muslim who, with his family, spent seven years in a refugee camp and now lives in Holland, where he was resettled by our church and community.

I concur with the Commission on Christian Action recommendation concerning refugee resettlement and urge an affirmative vote.

If we can cross cultures so well, we can do better bridging across our differences. Talking, discussing, and communicating is simply a part of being a covenant people. Therefore, I also propose the following.

P-3
To urge every church in the RCA to use the three-part video series and discussion guide on the RCA website entitled, “A Light to My Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians.”

General Synod 2016 asked that a resource be developed by the General Synod Council (GSC) for the use of the wider church in reading Scripture. Last fall, the GSC and the commissions beta tested this resource and gave input; Rev. Dr. Todd Billings has given us an excellent tool. It is a three-part video series with a study guide, is available online, and is free. I fully support, concur with, and urge approval of our general secretary’s proposal that
we talk together over this next year. And I suggest this resource can be used as part of this
crucial discussion. I note this resource has been delivered a year early, and did I mention
that it is free?

I also present another proposal that might get me in hot water but integrity of leadership
compels me to add.

P-4
To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two
additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating
Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify
the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry
to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018.

The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry has functioned as a keystone of our ordination process.
This potential redefinition as certificate of academic readiness is already being discussed
by all three of our certifying agents. This has ramifications for our human sexuality conflict
and the subsequent polity conflict between General Synod oversight and classis ordination
authority. Beyond our conflict, this possible change has a significant impact on our entire
leadership development system. Let’s name this as an important area of discernment and
get the right people at the table to have this important discussion. I suggest that the Pastoral
Formation Coordinating Committee would be the right table for this discussion. President
of New Brunswick Theological Seminary Gregg Mast, president of Western Theological
Seminary Tim Brown, executive director of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
Cornelis Kors, and chair of the PFCC Chad Pierce welcome this wider discussion and
agree that it is timely and important. They are open to guests coming to their stated PFCC
meeting after the first of the year. Adding guests to a stated meeting makes this cost neutral.

I delineated the complex conflict that is before us. I do not believe that having tough
discussions means that we are failing. Sometimes it means we care enough to be upset.
The opposite of love is not anger but apathy. In doing marriage counseling, I don’t worry
when voices are raised; I worry when they are very quiet or seem resigned. I’ve heard
anger throughout the RCA, and that’s okay. Families need to fight in ways that are fair. We
have judicatories and checks and balances within our polity, and this is wise. They take
time and are often cumbersome, even tiring. This is also wise. And in this coming year,
especially with our vacancy and interim while it is filled, I propose we make the following
commitment.

P-5
To urge all RCA assemblies and other bodies and all RCA members to maintain
our covenant bonds with each other, especially with regard to the conflict over
human sexuality, and further, to refrain from pushing the boundaries around the
human sexuality conflict and to not leave the denomination, instead focusing on
our God-given mission.

Transformed & Transforming has gained incredible traction. We are just four years into this
15-year goal, and 498 of our congregations are in some way involved. That is wonderfully
crazy and stunning news. We are being transformed, and emerging leaders are being trained,
utilized, and engaged. Congregations are engaging in community outreach. Leaders are
learning from each other in networks and community. The Ridder Church Renewal process
is transforming congregational leaders. We have an incredibly talented, gifted, and hard-
working staff that will continue this momentum. Tom De Vries gave you the metrics and
specifics. I will affirm that he is not exaggerating; I’ve seen it out in the church in real life.
Last year, the GSC received a report that 48 percent of our congregations had attendance increases in either worship or membership. Most mainline denominations would be thrilled to have their percentage of membership loss only be in single digits. And here we stand on the verge of a turnaround, the first mainline since 1968 to come close to an increase. The Council for Hispanic Ministries alone wants to plant 50 churches in the next five years. I’ve met with them, and seeing their passion and their prayer resolve, I know they will by God’s grace.

I do not want to pass on a split with its consequent pain that my children and grandchildren will bear the scars of for another 150 years. I do not want stones thrown at them, nor for them to throw stones. I do know that Jesus shares his heart in John 17 and prays that we “all may be one.” I know that there were hundreds of thousands of people who came to know our Jesus last year through the missions and ministries of the RCA. So I speak to you, the Reverend General Synod of 2017: we can be just another denomination in North America that has fractured over the human sexuality issue—or we might be the denomination that leads the way in change, transformation, mission, and revitalization in North America. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). I believe our mission is greater than our conflict.

Soli Deo gloria.

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-2, P-3, P-4 and P-5 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See p. 164 for the resulting recommendation regarding P-2, R 17-32. See p. 164 for the resulting recommendation regarding P-3, R 17-33. See p. 146 for the resulting recommendation regarding P-4, R 17-22. See p. 165 for the resulting recommendations regarding P-5, R 17-34 and R 17-35.

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1 Describing the “sides” is a challenge. I have picked progressive/traditional and realize that some progressives will say they have deep traditions and vice versa. But this still seems less pejorative than conservative/liberal or left/right, terms are more commonly used in political divides, from which I hope we can keep distance.

2 A member of Room for All (RfA) asked that the term “human sexuality issue” not be used. This person’s comment was “I am not an issue,” so I have chosen to call this a debate or conflict.

3 Book of Church Order (BCO) Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1 (2016 edition, p. 65). “The General Synod shall exercise a general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the whole church.”

4 BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7 (2016 edition, p. 66). “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.”

5 BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 8 (2016 edition, p. 66). “The General Synod shall exercise responsibility in the oversight of standards for the preparation of candidates for the ministry of Word and sacrament.”

6 BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 7 (2016 edition, p. 30). “The classis shall exercise a general supervision over all students of theology subject to its jurisdiction.”

7 BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 8 (2016 edition, p. 30). “The classis shall examine students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination.”

8 BCO Chapter 1, Part II Article 2, Section 9 (2016 edition, p. 30). “The classis shall ordain, install, commission, transfer, suspend, depose, declare demitted; declare inactive, and declare retired ministers.”
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 11 (2016 edition, p. 30). “The classis shall exercise all ecclesiastical functions in accord with the Government of the Reformed Church in America which are not specifically delegated to other assemblies.”


The Waldensians are a pre-Reformation group that wanted to read Scripture and got in trouble with the pope. They have suffered much through their history. When the Reformation happened they decided to join in the Reformation. They have a vibrant ministry to those who are on the margins of society because they easily relate.

I later learned the commissions were planning on commemorating rather than celebrating, which was wonderful news. The Holland 500th committee and the Classis of Southwest Michigan are both engaged in commemoration planning with the Catholic Church, a wonderful, ecumenical, grassroots groundswell. I’m sure there are other similar efforts.


Special thanks to Ken Neevel and the development staff for their great work.


Specific information is being masked as the man’s relatives back home are currently in danger from a terrorist group.

PFCC membership: Chad Pierce (moderator), Tim Brown, Miriam Barnes, Jaeseung Cha, Cornelis Kors, Ken Eriks (staff), Eun Jae Joo, Gregg Mast, Carmen Means, Alvin Padilla, and Cora Taitt.

ADDENDUM: YOUNG ADULT MISSION PRESIDENTIAL PROPOSAL

Goal: To change the norm concerning frequency of young adult significant (longer-term) mission service in the RCA.

Rationale: Young adults are not connecting or staying connected with the church. At the same time, our young people of faith tend to view faith not as a content dump but as a chance to make a difference. Young people tend to be more global in their thinking and tend to have experienced study abroad or international short-term mission trips.

Transformed & Transforming (the RCA’s 15-year goal) has three initiatives:

1. To be transformed so that we can be transforming agents
2. To be engaged in mission, locally and globally
3. To develop emerging leaders (read: young people)

Sending our young people abroad for a significant period of mission service advances all three initiatives.

Proposal: Send 20 young adults abroad in this next year, during a “break” season in their lives, to connect and serve with our missionaries and mission partners.

Vision: Imagine 20 students sent into mission this year. Imagine 40 the next and 80 the next. Imagine churches sending their young people into mission and receiving them back as fired-up agents of local mission and champions of global mission. Imagine the fishing pond for long-term RCA mission, with young people who have “been there” and understand the
blessings and challenges of service. Imagine churches, missionaries, and mission partners across the globe creatively discovering new ways to support these young missionaries through tent-making, internships, and corporate partnerships. Imagine hundreds of young people sent annually into mission service. Imagine the vitality for the church at home and abroad.

**Narrative:** RCA Volunteer Engagement already engages in this process and is equipped to run this program as an initiative of Transformed & Transforming. With some extra funding, this program can launch with significant momentum.

We cannot afford to miss this opportunity. Many of our young people are already signing up to serve abroad with parachurch organizations and various NGOs. We would be remiss not to be in front of this wave of service and offer significant opportunities through the RCA. Our mission history is significant and rich. Now is the time to seek God and paint a new chapter of mission history and service.

**Need:** There are three opportunities for contribution:

1. Pray. This proposal grows out of prayer and will avail little unless we seek God’s face in our desire to serve him.
2. Seek young people to serve. Churches know their young people and the seasons of their lives and inclinations of their hearts. Please speak with, encourage, and nominate young people for service.
3. Help raise $50,000 over the next two years. Churches and individuals will be asked to help raise $50,000 to be given during the next two years to help jumpstart this new norm of mission service.

To change a norm is an audacious goal. We may not be like Mormons and mandate two years of mission service. But we can change this norm, help change our young people from spectators into owners, and continue to be the little denomination that makes a lion’s share contribution in global missions. After all, we do follow the Lion of Judah.

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**ADDENDUM: LETTER FROM DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL MISSION**

June 9, 2017

Dear friends,

We are living through the greatest coming to Christ in the history of Christianity. Throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America about 100,000 people come to Christ every day. That means that every two days the number of people coming to Christ in the world exceeds the whole membership of the RCA. This global movement of growth in the body of Christ urgently needs trained leaders, pastors, church planting support, Bible translation, and Bible and theological training.

Through RCA Global Mission, we in the Reformed Church in America get to be a part of this. RCA Global Mission is all of us in every church in the RCA equipping local evangelism and church planting movements and enabling the work of compassion and justice in more than 35 countries.

It’s impossible to count the exact number of people who have given their lives to Christ this year as a result of our work and that of our partners, but we estimate it is hundreds of
thousands of people. The Reformed Church in America is small, but we don’t have to be big to have a big impact.

Consider this: the RCA has about 1,000 churches. Over the next three years RCA Global Mission is committing to planting another 1,000 churches globally, doubling our kingdom impact. With partners around the world, we will support local church planting movements in Brazil, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Peru, India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Mozambique, Tanzania, the Netherlands, Hungary, Turkey, Myanmar, Thailand, China, Japan, Cambodia, and other countries.

Bringing the gospel to the nations goes hand in hand with projects of compassion. We are helping refugees to resettle, giving food aid to families who are living in camps, and counseling refugees in need of trauma healing. We are contributing to the empowerment of women in India, working with partners to provide literacy education, entrepreneurship training, and protection from domestic abuse. We are translating the Bible into many languages and distributing audio Scripture.

This is an exciting and wonderful record. It is a blessed record. And let me tell you, we have all accomplished this together. Stay with us for the rest of this journey!

Thank you for your support! You make this all possible.

Bless you,
Doug Leonard, director of RCA Global Mission
Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, preserves, and protects the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ’s mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church. (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1; 2016 edition, p. 69)

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a; 2016 edition, p. 106).


The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to this General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod’s 15-year goal, and which is reported by the
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL SYNOD

GSC in its role as the General Synod’s program agency. Referrals addressed to the GSC from previous General Synods are dealt with throughout this report.

Review of Regional Synod Minutes

The General Synod Office has received and read the 2016 minutes of the Regional Synods of Albany, Canada, the Far West, the Great Lakes, the Heartland, Mid-America, the Mid-Atlantics, and New York.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business

The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

R 17-1
To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook. (ADOPTED)

General Synod Offering

The General Synod received offerings at the opening worship on Thursday and at closing worship on Tuesday. The offerings have been designated by General Synod president Dan Gillett to support the ministry of Casa delle Culture in Scicli, Italy. Casa delle Culture, a project of Mediterranean Hope, provides vulnerable children who have been orphaned or separated from their families with a place to stay, schooling, and cultural orientation to help them adapt and integrate into life in Italy. Mediterranean Hope is a project of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, born out of a growing awareness of the critical situation of migrants from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East who try to reach the coast of Italy by sea.

The Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a; 2016 edition, p. 103). The general secretary reported on classes’ payments of General Synod assessments and reported that there were no delegates who would not be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the Book of Church Order

The General Synod of 2016 adopted and referred to the classes for approval seven amendments to the Book of Church Order. The amendments are recorded in the 2016 Minutes of the General Synod as noted.

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<th>Book of Church Order Amendments</th>
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<th>Approved</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>1. Adoption of “Order for Christian Marriage” as Part of Liturgy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(MGS 2016, R 16-14, p. 84 and pp. 87-102)</td>
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2. Supervision of Candidates for Ministry Who Are Not Members of a Local Church
(MGS 2016, R 16-30, pp. 157-158)
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11 (2016 edition, p. 44)

3. Marriages Solemnized in a Church or Congregation
(MGS 2016, R 16-32, pp. 164-165)
BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Sec. 11 (2016 edition, p. 16)

4. Regional Synod Responsibilities
(MGS 2016, R 16-49, p. 259)
BCO Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Sec. 3 (2016 edition, p. 61)

5. Appointment of Candidates to Churches without Installed Minister or Minister under Contract
(MGS 2016, R 16-50, p. 262)
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7 (2016 edition, p. 34)

6. Church Membership
(MGS 2016, R 16-52, pp. 263-264)
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Sec. 2 (2016 edition, pp. 39-40)

7. Appendix, Formulary No. 5, and Related Constitutional Provisions Applicable to Consistories and Classes
(MGS 2016, R 16-53, pp. 264-266)
BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Sec. 7 (2016 edition, p. 15)
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Sec. 3 (2016 edition, p. 53)

Amendments 1, 2, and 3 did not receive the required approval from two-thirds of the classes, and accordingly are not presented for a final declarative vote.

R 17-2
To declare Amendment 4 to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

R 17-3
To declare Amendment 5 to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

R 17-4
To declare Amendment 6 to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

R 17-5
To declare Amendment 7 to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

The 2016 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the 2017 General Synod three amendments to the Bylaws of the General Synod:
8. **Regional Synod Executives as Corresponding Delegates to General Synod**—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Sec. 11; 2016 edition, p. 121 (MGS 2016, R 16-36, p. 173)

9. **General Synod Advisory Committees**—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 8, Sec. 3; 2016 edition, p. 119 (MGS 2016, R 16-38, p. 175)

10. **Method of Calculating GSC Membership**—BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Sec. 2; 2016 edition, p. 105 (MGS 2016, R 16-51, p. 263)

R 17-6
To declare Amendment 8 to the Bylaws of the General Synod adopted by the 2016 General Synod to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Bylaws of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

R 17-7
To declare Amendment 9 to the Bylaws of the General Synod adopted by the 2016 General Synod to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Bylaws of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

R 17-8
To declare Amendment 10 to the Bylaws of the General Synod adopted by the 2016 General Synod to be approved for incorporation into the 2017 Bylaws of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)

**Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer and Assistant Secretary**

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

R 17-9
To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod may elect or appoint such other officers as the needs of the corporation may from time to time require (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V). In order for Paul Boice, chief operating officer, to have authority to sign legal documents for the corporation of the General Synod, General Synod therefore approved the following recommendation:

R 17-10
To appoint Paul Boice assistant secretary of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

**General Synod Planning**

Responsibility for planning the agenda and schedule for the annual meeting of the General Synod is assigned to the General Synod Council (GSC) in its capacity as the General Synod Executive Committee. Planning for the annual meeting begins shortly after the conclusion of the current meeting and involves the General Synod officers, the general secretary, staff from the General Synod Office, and numerous others. At the fall meeting of the General Synod’s commissions and the GSC, moderators of the commissions, the moderator of the GSC, some GSC staff, the general secretary, and officers meet to consider anticipated
business from all of these entities for the next year’s meeting. Initial plans for the annual meeting are discussed at the fall meeting of the GSC. Prior to the start of the General Synod meeting, the GSC reviews and approves the schedule and agenda.

The selection of General Synod worship leadership and the preacher is a prerogative of the General Synod president. A worship planning team works with the president and the selected preacher to develop all of the worship liturgies for the synod. This year’s worship leadership had an emphasis on emerging leaders, in keeping with the Transformed & Transforming focus on next generation ministries.

In 2011, the General Synod moved away from providing a printed agenda and reports except by special request. The equipment supporting the 2017 meeting was purchased in 2011 jointly by the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America to support meetings of both denominations. Technology staff support was present to assist delegates throughout the meeting. The transition to electronic reporting has reduced synod’s expenses for paper and shipping and lessened the environmental impact of the meeting.

Simultaneous translation and enhancements to support people with various disabilities were provided based on the needs expressed by delegates and guests when they registered. Hope College’s Richard and Helen DeVos Fieldhouse, Dimnent Memorial Chapel, and the Jack H. Miller Center for Musical Arts were equipped with hearing loops for people who have hearing disabilities. The synod leadership and staff take this opportunity to thank RCA Disability Concerns for its continued advocacy for these enhancements. Thanks are also expressed to those delegates who volunteered to assist people with disabilities.

**General Synod Meeting Location**

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2018 is Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The 2018 meeting of the General Synod will take place on June 7–12 in tandem with the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting. The dates for the 2019 General Synod, which will take place at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, are June 6–11.

**OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION**

The General Synod Council operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new goal adopted at General Synod 2013, Transformed & Transforming. Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through polices concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.
RCA Salary Structure for FY 2017

In 2006 the General Synod Council adopted policies to govern its work and to establish clear guidelines for oversight of its staff. The GSC policy pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market” (GSC Policy EL-8).

Upon the instruction of the general secretary, the human resources department completed a study of the compensation methodology of the GSC in the fall of 2006. The director consulted with The Employers’ Association, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to develop the current compensation system. Two key factors were considered in the development of the system. First, an evaluation system was utilized to ensure that internal equity was established for all positions based on their contribution to the RCA’s mission and vision. Secondly, positions were benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of salary compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors.

This system allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the manager, employee, and human resources department. As responsibilities change, the system allows for reevaluation of positions to ensure that they are classified in the correct range. The system incorporates geographical differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions.

This system incorporates a model that utilizes 14 ranges. The ranges span grades 10 to 23; Grade 10 represents the most entry-level positions and Grade 23 represents the highest range, held by the general secretary.

Staff are evaluated annually by their managers. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff reporting to the Board of Benefits Services, the Church Growth Fund, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following tables represent the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2017. The ranges are utilized to establish base wages and annual compensation and do not represent the actual salary of any individual employee.

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## Grand Rapids, Michigan 2016-2017

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## Chicago, Illinois 2016-2017

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### New Brunswick, New Jersey

**2016-2017 Annualized Salary Rate**

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<th>Mid</th>
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### New York, New York

**2016-2017 Annualized Salary Rate**

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COMMISSION REVIEW PROCESS

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years.

The proposed commission review process was presented to the GSC at its March 2017 meeting. After discussion and some adjustments to improve clarity, the GSC voted to adopt the following process.

The GSC is still developing the two surveys mentioned in points 2 and 3 of the process.

Commission Review Process

1. In order to encourage open channels of communication between the commissions and the GSC and to help the GSC support the commissions in their work, the GSC will send a representative to each commission’s winter meeting when there is a GSC member who is available and in close geographical proximity to the meeting place.

2. Each commission will be asked to fill out a two- or three-question survey each year for report to the GSC. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. The survey will be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod. Responses will be reviewed by the GSC at its fall meeting.

3. Every five years (on a rotating basis, two commissions per year), each member of a commission will be asked to complete a longer survey. Commission members will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. This survey will also be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and the two commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod.

The rotating schedule for commission review will begin as follows:

- Year one: Christian Discipleship and Education, Church Order
- Year two: Theology, Women
- Year three: Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity
- Year four: Christian Action, Christian Unity
- Year five: History, Nominations

4. At one of its meetings at General Synod, the GSC will assign three GSC members to each of the two commissions, and they will be given the compiled survey responses from that commission. Whenever possible, one of those assigned to the review team should be the GSC member who attended the commission’s last winter meeting. GSC members will also be asked to comment on that particular commission based on the work that the GSC knows the commission has done (based on General Synod reports, etc.) and reports from GSC members who have attended meetings of that commission. The three GSC members assigned to the commission will fill out the same survey that the commission members fill out.

5. The three GSC members will then meet with the commission being reviewed during the fall joint meeting of the GSC and the commissions.
6. The GSC members who meet with the commission will report back to the GSC either later in the fall meeting or at the spring meeting.

7. The GSC will decide whether to recommend to the General Synod a continuation, a reconstitution, or a discontinuation of the commission (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6g; 2016 edition, p. 107).
REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod, the General Synod Council, the Board of Benefits Services, and the Church Growth Fund. The Office of Finance strives to ensure financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods as together we strive to manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

2016 Annual Audits

The 2016 financial statements of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services Retirement Program and General Fund, and Church Growth Fund were audited by CapinCrouse LLP, certified public accountants. All corporations received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The audited statements are available at www.rca.org/finance. The General Synod Council’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity and the management comment letters from the auditors and reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. Financial highlights of each organization are presented below.

Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2016

General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC ended the year with an overall net surplus of $1.7 million. The GSC used over $100,000 of unrestricted reserves for Transformed & Transforming. Restricted and endowed funds increased by $1.8 million. This was due primarily to an increase in the value of investments. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated funds, is presented in the following chart:

![2016 Income Sources Chart]

The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—provided more than 50 percent of the costs of carrying out the work of General Synod.

Assessments provided 34 percent of income and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes. In 2016, $22,000 was granted in assessment relief by the General Synod Council for specific relief needs. In 2016, each dollar of the General Synod Council assessment was used in the following ways:
The funds provided to GSC are spent in three areas: Transformed & Transforming priorities, work of the General Synod, and ministry support services, as represented in this chart:

**Transformed & Transforming** includes the following ministry priorities and initiatives:

- Discipleship and Transformational Experiences
- Leadership
  - Emerging Leaders
  - Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches
  - Women’s Transformation and Leadership
- Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission
  - Global Missional Engagement (expenses relating to Global Mission made up 57 percent of Transformed & Transforming expenses and 27 percent of total expenses in 2016)
  - Church Multiplication
  - Local Missional Engagement
  - Missional Mosaic
  - Volunteer Engagement
  - Disability Concerns
- Next Generation Engagement

**Work of the General Synod** includes costs related to the annual General Synod meeting, commissions, task forces, the Office of the General Secretary, the General Synod Council, and communication and production services, including *RCA Today* magazine.

**Ministry support services** includes costs relating to the general and administrative support needed to carry out Transformed & Transforming and the work of the General Synod. This includes human resources, data management, information technology, financial services, and fundraising.
Board of Benefits Services—Retirement Programs

As of September 30, 2016, the date of our most recent audit, $409 million was set aside for participants in the 403(b) and retirement plans. Participant and employer contributions to the plan in fiscal year 2016 were $10 million. BOBS staff continues to work with pastors, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with Formulary No. 5 requirements, specifically the requirement to contribute 11 percent of eligible salary to the pastor’s retirement fund. As of September 30, 2016, it is estimated that $2.5 million was owed to the retirement accounts of RCA pastors by their local congregations. In fiscal year 2016, distributions to participants totaled $18 million. For additional information about the retirement plan, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.

Board of Benefits Services—General Fund to Administer Retirement Programs

The Board of Benefits Services General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, and assistance and retiree chaplains programs for active and retired RCA ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially strong, with $6.4 million in net assets as of September 30, 2016. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2016 with a net surplus of $600,000.

Administration costs for the retirement plans are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the 403(b) and retirement plan accounts and totaled $1 million in 2016. Effective January 1, 2017, the fee is 28 basis points (0.28 percent), a reduction of one basis point over the previous year. Since 2012, this fee has been reduced by 30 percent.

Support for the assistance programs came from a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, a portion of the administrative fees charged to retirement plan participants’ accounts, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance program expenses, including assistance grants and the retiree chaplains program, were $539,000 in 2016.

Church Growth Fund

The Church Growth Fund makes affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return. In fiscal year 2016, the CGF continued its plan to grow and service more RCA congregations, reaching $79 million in total assets.

As of September 30, 2016, the CGF had $27 million in cash and short-term investments and $53 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by $35 million in savings certificates and $43 million in net assets (capital). Net income was strong due to gains on investments; it totaled $1.5 million after contributing $400,000 to the GSC to be used for grants to church plants and scholarships to fund youth mission experiences.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association.

Investments

The investments of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Church Growth Fund are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the
Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise.

*Excess Operating Cash*

The operating cash of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Church Growth Fund is invested with Standish in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. The benchmark for investment returns is the Barclays 1-5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Standish is $46 million.

*RCA Endowment Fund*

The General Synod Council manages $16.8 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the General Synod Council date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. These investments are managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 1-10 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. These investments were in compliance with the benchmark as of December 31, 2016.

In addition to the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Church Growth Fund, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2016, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed $539,000 to the General Synod Council, $20,000 to the Church Growth Fund, $1,000 to the Board of Benefits Services, and $96,000 to RCA-affiliated organizations. If you are interested in setting up an endowment, please contact the development office.

*RCA Retirement Plans*

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for the Board of Benefits Services retirement programs. Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant’s retirement age as well as 20 diversified mutual funds, with socially responsible options. As of September 30, 2016, 90 percent of RCA participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds.

Fidelity has made changes in the active investment strategy of its target-date retirement funds. These changes have had positive results, with Fidelity outperforming peer funds in the overall market. The Investment Advisory Committee meets twice annually and continues to monitor the performance and overall investment offering from Fidelity, thus meeting its fiduciary responsibility for the benefits of RCA ministers and lay staff invested in the RCA retirement program.

As a result of the Request for Proposal conducted in 2015, Fidelity Investments has partnered more closely with the Board of Benefits Services to offer additional services and guidance to better prepare our ministers for retirement. Personalized investment advisory services, referred to as Portfolio Advisory Services at Work (PASW), are now available to participants in the RCA retirement program.

For the second year in a row, the Board of Benefits Services completed a reallocation project that allows eligible participants in the retirement program to reallocate funds from the RCA retirement plan, resulting in greater flexibility at retirement.
Together as a denomination we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute 11 percent of the eligible salaries of ministers of Word and sacrament to their retirement accounts each year. Currently, an estimated $2.5 million has not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2016. RCA ministers of Word and sacrament should review their quarterly statements to verify that 11 percent of their eligible salary is being contributed. Elder delegates to synod should ask questions in their local congregation to ensure that their congregation is providing this important benefit for their pastor(s).

*Planned Giving Programs*

The General Synod Council manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling $1.4 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and recordkeeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts.

*Church Growth Fund Investments*

The Church Growth Fund invests a portion of excess operating cash in one equity account and one fixed-income account. Both accounts are managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd.

*Socially Responsible Investments*

All investment policy statements for each pool of investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, or the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol. General Synod 2016 approved R 16-25, which directed GSC to add screening language to the RCA's investment policies, particularly as it relates to for-profit prisons. All RCA investment policy statements were updated to restrict investments in for-profit prisons. This change to the policies did not affect any of our investment holdings.

Retirement funds may be invested, at the discretion of the participant, in socially responsible funds screened for the above restrictions.

The Board of Benefits Services participates with and pays dues to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR). Celebrating its 45th year, ICCR is the pioneer coalition of shareholder advocates who view the management of their investments as a catalyst for social change. Its 300 member organizations comprise faith communities, socially responsible asset managers, unions, pensions, NGOs, and other socially responsible investors with combined assets of over $200 billion. ICCR members engage hundreds of corporations annually in an effort to foster greater corporate accountability on questions such as climate change, corporate water stewardship, sustainable food production, human trafficking and slavery in global supply chains, and increased access to financial and healthcare services for communities in need.

The General Synod Council also invests a portion of excess operating cash with Oikocredit, one of the world’s largest sources of private funding to the microfinance sector.
2017 Budget Process and Assessment Proposal for GSC, BOBS Assistance Grants, and Theological Education

Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming

Delegates to the 2013 General Synod addressed the direction of the RCA as the final step in a three-year discernment process that had broad and significant input from across the denomination. A 15-year goal called Transformed & Transforming was adopted by those delegates. This year, synod delegates will read and hear about progress that has been made and ways that individuals and congregations can connect with this communal goal.

In August 2013, the General Synod officers, regional synod leaders, and General Synod Council staff, as well as several non-staff, gathered to define how to carry out Transformed & Transforming’s three priorities: Cultivating Transformation in Christ (discipleship), Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow (leadership), and Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission (mission). Ten projects were identified, along with specific goals, timelines, and potential staff and budget resources.

GSC staff focuses on equipping churches and church leaders in the three Transformed & Transforming priority areas—discipleship, leadership, and mission—so they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. Initiative plans for each priority and initiative leader were originally determined in 2013 and 2014 with the launch of Transformed & Transforming. These plans defined a purpose statement; what will be accomplished over the course of the 15-year goal, including how much will be accomplished by certain points in time; five-, ten-, and 15-year check-in points, along with one-year and 90-day markers of progress; and definitions of the metrics to be used along the way.

Portions of each initiative were included in the capital campaign that began in calendar year 2015. Priority leaders developed 2017 budgets based on goals for measurable outcomes. These goals are primarily achieved by equipping churches and leaders through opportunities like connection events, learning communities, leadership communities, and leadership collaboratives. The 2017 budget includes funding for the initiatives from both current-year operating income and from campaign funds as they are available. For 2017, enough funds were raised by the beginning of the fiscal year to spend almost $540,000 from campaign funds.

General Synod Council Operating Budget Process

The General Synod Council operating budget is primarily funded by assessment income and contributions. Assessment income includes only the General Synod assessment and is 47 percent of all operating income. Contributions provided from donors and congregations for supporting missionaries and for the RCA Ministry Fund make up 38 percent of available financial resources. Other income includes services provided to the Board of Benefits Services and the Church Growth Fund and investment and endowment earnings.

The 2017 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from assessments, contributions, investments, and other income. Assessment revenue for 2017 is budgeted to be $120,000 less than 2016 due to a flat assessment of $44 per member and a decrease in confessing membership.

Contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund are general, unrestricted contributions to the RCA. 2017 contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund were budgeted at $100,000 less than in 2016 based on actual contributions received to the RCA Ministry Fund in 2016. We believe the decline in contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund is attributable to donors also
giving to the capital campaign. Global Mission expects to see a decrease in contributions of about $300,000 due to retiring missionaries and an overall decline in general mission contributions. In response to these expected decreases in revenue for 2017, the RCA’s executive leadership team chose not replace two vacant staff positions. Global Mission chose not to replace two missionary supervisor positions when those staff persons retired in 2017. Travel- and office-related budgets were also reduced. In terms of full-time equivalents (FTEs), support staff decreased by 0.5 FTE and program staff decreased by 2.75 FTEs, for a net overall decrease of 3.25 FTEs from 2016 to 2017.

The 2017 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about $100,000 for costs related to moving forward the initiatives of Transformed & Transforming.

Budgeted operating expenses are shown by ministry and support areas below. Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 69 percent of the total budget. The remaining 31 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.
Almost 500 churches are engaged in Transformed & Transforming so far. The assessment amount provided this year enabled the General Synod Council and staff to come alongside those churches in many ways, including:

**Transformational Experiences**

- One leadership community and two learning communities focused on discipleship pathways in congregations
- One leadership community and three learning communities focused on congregational cultures of generosity

**Emerging Leaders**

- One leadership community and three learning communities focused on emerging leader development
- 15 connection events focused on equipping emerging leaders

**Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches**

- 62 RCA churches engaged in Ridder Church Renewal
- One learning community focused on first-call pastors

**Women’s Transformation and Leadership**

- Seven connection events focused on women’s transformation and leadership
- Six leadership collaboratives for women from across the RCA

**Local Missional Engagement**

- One learning community focused on local missional engagement
- Three local mission impact areas with churches collaborating for collective community impact

**Global Missional Engagement**

- Two learning communities focused on global missional engagement
- One church network focused on the RCA Global Mission strategic impact area in Nicaragua

**Church Multiplication**

- Five new congregation plans approved and four churches organized
- Three learning communities focused on parenting new churches

**Volunteer Engagement**

- Engaged 1,155 volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners
- Supported 82 congregations through equipping processes and mission trips

**Missional Mosaic**

- Two learning communities launched that are focused on cultural agility
- One learning community launched that is focused on mass incarceration
Disability Concerns

• 77 disability advocates
• Accessibility survey provided to RCA congregations

Next Generation Engagement

• One Growing Young learning community in partnership with Fuller Youth Institute and one learning community focused on next generation engagement
• Seven connection events focused on next generation engagement

In addition to the operating budget, generous gifts from donors and foundations will provide funding for specific, designated projects, including disaster relief, Global Mission projects, an initiative to address the financial health of pastors, and a joint leadership initiative with the CRC. Funds raised through the Called Campaign are available in addition to the operating budget and are being used to fulfill the three priorities of Transformed & Transforming.

Formulating the 2018 budget will begin in midsummer and will include direction from 2017 General Synod delegates. The focus will continue to be on aligning staff, support services, and programs to fulfill the priorities of Transformed & Transforming in impactful and measurable ways.

2018 General Synod Assessment Amount

The proposed GSC assessment includes an increase of $1.64 per member. For three years, 2015, 2016 and 2017, the GSC assessment has remained $44 per member. The flat assessment, along with a decrease in confessing membership, caused the GSC assessment revenue to decrease each of those three years. In 2017, the GSC staff took measures to reduce expenses to make up for this loss of revenue. These reductions included not replacing retiring or vacant positions, which reduced the GSC staff by 3.25 FTEs. The reductions also included cutbacks to travel, professional development, and general office costs. And yet, as the budget decreased, engagement in Transformed & Transforming continued to increase. Recognizing the need to equip congregations and continue this growth and engagement with Transformed & Transforming, the GSC is recommending an assessment increase of 3.5 percent or $1.64 per member.

In 2016, General Synod passed R 16-27, instructing the GSC to ensure adequate staffing and funding for the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team. In response, the GSC is recommending a $0.10 increase for the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team to provide ongoing funding to the team. This $0.10 increase is included in the GSC increase of $1.64.

The 2018 assessment proposal removes the additional amounts added during the 2016 General Synod, as they were one-year funding commitments.

An increase in the per-member assessment allows the GSC to continue the impactful work of Transformed & Transforming. However, we understand General Synod’s concerns about the impact on local congregations of increasing the per-member assessment amount. The general secretary and executive leadership team realize the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations.
Alternate Funding Plan Update

Since 1993, several reports have come to General Synod relating to the current assessment structure. A recommendation was passed in 2008 to start the exploration of alternative funding strategies. From 2008 to 2014, the General Synod studied this issue through all-synod advisory committees, a task force for future funding, and by observing the Regional Synod of the Far West’s percentage of income model. The most recent report related to this topic was made in 2014. At that time, no recommendation was made due to the transition to the new goals of Transformed & Transforming. In 2017, the RCA staff will resume efforts on researching and developing an alternative model to the current per-member assessment model and will bring its findings to the GSC.

2018 Board of Benefits Services Assistance Grant Assessment

In 2016, the Board of Benefits Services’ assistance program for retired participants, spouses, and dependents provided $378,000 to retirees and active participants experiencing financial distress. Assistance may be granted for housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, higher education for children of deceased ministers, funeral grants to surviving spouses, and retirement contributions for ministers who are disabled. Matching grants are available for emergency needs of active RCA ministers and for the medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church plant.

The BOBS assistance program also provides for 27 retiree chaplains who connect with more than 1,000 retired RCA ministers of Word and sacrament to tend to the spiritual, financial, and relational needs of those who have served the church. Many retired ministers no longer live near an RCA congregation or are not able to connect with their classis.

The assessment to support the assistance program was approved at $2.00 per member at General Synod 2016. The remainder of the funds required to sustain this program are provided through annual contributions, a portion of the administrative fees charged to retirement plan participants’ accounts, and annual investment income from the Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Endowment Fund as well as other endowment funds. The Board of Benefits Services is requesting no increase for 2018, leaving the assessment at $2.00.

2018 Theological Education Assessment

The formula for allotment of the assessment for theological education approved by the 2013 General Synod (MGS 2013, R-23, p. 128) was adjusted slightly this year in order to align with actual spending needs on collaborative projects. This adjustment gives a slightly higher percentage of the assessment to the seminaries and MFCA, and a slightly lower percentage to the collaborative projects. The percentage to be divided equally among the seminaries and MFCA was raised to 76.5 percent from 75 percent, and the percentage allocated for collaborative projects such as meetings of the General Synod professors was lowered accordingly, to 3.5 percent. The overall amount of the assessment ($840,000) remains the same. The formula for 2018 is as follows:

To allocate an assessment for theological education to the RCA seminaries and to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) at the level of $840,000 for a period of three years, with this amount not to decrease but to increase at a percentage equal to potential GSC assessment increases during this period; and further, to allocate the proposed funding in the following manner: an initial $55,000 to be allocated to the MFCA to cover their unique costs, with
the remaining funding to be divided among the seminaries and the MFCA in the following manner:

- **a)** 76.5 percent of the funding to be divided equally among the seminaries and the MFCA to recognize and fund the cost each agency bears in oversight of the certificate of ministry process.

- **b)** 20 percent of the funding to be divided among the seminaries and the MFCA based upon the number of students enrolled in each agency who are under care of a classis and pursuing ordination in the RCA as of December 31 of the previous calendar year.

- **iii)** 3.5 percent of the funding to be used in collaborative projects, including the meeting of the General Synod professors, the meeting of the future collaborative group for theological education, and other collaborative projects.

The 2018 per-member assessment for theological education includes an increase of $0.02 to maintain the funding at $840,000. The increase of $0.02 is based on an estimated decrease in membership. In 2017, funds will be allocated to the MFCA and the seminaries as follows: $313,000 to the MFCA; $283,000 to Western Theological Seminary; $208,000 to New Brunswick Theological Seminary; and $39,000 for the General Synod professorate and collaborative work.

**R 17-11**
To approve the General Synod Council 2017 assessment of $45.64 per confessing member. (ADOPTED)

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt R 17-11.

**R 17-12**
To approve the assessment of $2.00 per confessing member for the Board of Benefits Services to provide assistance funding for retired pastors who have a demonstrated need. (ADOPTED)

**R 17-13**
To approve the assessment of $5.97 per confessing member for theological education. (ADOPTED)

To fulfill the request from the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business in response to Overtures 23 and 24:

**R 17-14**
To approve the $0.14 per member assessment to fulfill R 17-24 to create a task force to review the Formula of Agreement. (ADOPTED)
Change in Assessment from 2017 to 2018

The chart below summarizes the General Synod assessment amounts for 2017 and the General Synod Council proposed amount for 2018.

**General Synod Council**  
**Proposed Per-Member Assessment Amount**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Assessment</th>
<th>MGS reference</th>
<th>Proposed Amount</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amounts brought from GSC</strong></td>
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<td>$44.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Synod Council</td>
<td>R 16-8</td>
<td>$45.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOBS</td>
<td>R 16-9</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological education</td>
<td>R 16-10</td>
<td>5.95</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$51.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amounts added during Synod 2016:</strong></td>
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<td>$1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Meeting re Commissioned Pastors</td>
<td>R 16-11</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting re Study of Mass Incarceration</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey on Worship Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Synod Executives as Delegates</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amounts added during Synod 2017:</strong></td>
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<td>$52.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R 17-14</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.14</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$52.23</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Change:**

- General Synod Council: $1.64
- BOBS: $0.00
- Theological education: $0.02
- Total: $1.52
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENT

The RCA development team’s purpose statement says: “Our purpose is to develop relationships that make the mission of the RCA known, inspiring financial partnerships that make the ministry of the RCA possible.”

The development team encourages churches and individuals to generously give of the financial resources God has entrusted to them to support the ministry and witness of the Reformed Church in America. Development coordinates all GSC fundraising efforts, including but not limited to: support for RCA Global Mission, Transformed & Transforming, and the Church Growth Fund.

Development team members raise financial support through outright gifts, bequests, life income plans, and grants. Gifts may be designated for a specific ministry area or left undesignated so that they can be used to fill the greatest need. Undesignated gifts are typically assigned to the RCA Ministry Fund, a fund that supports the specific areas of Transformed & Transforming. The development team also assists with raising resources through Church Growth Fund savings certificates, Partner-in-Mission (PIM) shares, estate planning, and special project funding. Gifts to the RCA enable and empower ministry throughout the church, transforming lives both at home and around the world.

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God’s people. In fiscal year 2016, 51 percent of the RCA’s total income came from voluntary support. Only 34 percent was from assessments. Other income, such as investment earnings and fees paid for services rendered, accounted for the remaining 15 percent of the RCA’s income in 2016.

The funding structure of the RCA relies heavily on gifts received from individual donors and from churches that give above and beyond assessments. We are truly grateful for those who have chosen to invest in the ministry of the RCA. A copy of the 2016 Annual Report to Donors is available on the RCA website (www.rca.org/give); hard copies were available at General Synod.

The development team represents the GSC throughout the RCA, but individual staff members work primarily in these regions:

Amanda Bruehl (abruehl@rca.org): Colorado, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Amanda also works to build the RCA Ministry Fund.

Larryl Humme (lhumme@rca.org): Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Ken Neevel (kneevel@rca.org): California, Florida, Michigan, Washington, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Dann Stouten (dstouten@rca.org): Canada, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio.

Troy Van Beek (tvanbeek@rca.org): Arizona, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.

Scott Engelsman identifies, communicates, and guides fundraising for the needs of RCA missionaries and mission projects. Michele Quick oversees development operations and donor research.
Called: The RCA’s Campaign for Transformed & Transforming was launched in the summer of 2015 with a goal of raising $6.5 million. As of February 1, 2017, $6.1 million had been raised or committed toward the goal. We are grateful for the many people throughout the RCA who have responded to the vision of Transformed & Transforming through financial commitment to the Called campaign. We anticipate celebrating a successful conclusion to the campaign in mid-2017.

The RCA continues to partner with the Barnabas Foundation for resources about estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift resource management. To learn about how you can include the RCA in your estate plans, or how you can both receive annual income for life and benefit the RCA through a planned gift, please contact Michele Quick at mquick@rca.org.

To make an outright gift in support of the RCA’s ministry and mission, please visit www.rca.org/give or contact the development staff member for your region.

REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

Introduction

The bylaws of the General Synod state that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2016 edition, p. 105).

This is a task and assignment that we as a council take very seriously. Being an advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion is indeed a difficult task but one that the African American Black Council (AABC) has been committed to historically within the church. In the past several years, the AABC has received many disheartening and egregious stories from RCA ministers of color, seminarians, students under care, and several white colleagues about racial injustices within the RCA and its structures. These acts of injustice have come from our white colleagues, some overt and others less so.

After hearing countless stories, some of which have even been published throughout the denomination, the AABC developed a subcommittee to look at ways to combat the perpetual instances of racism that are still pervasive within our denomination. During Our Call, we pledged as a denomination to live into a “future freed from racism.” While there were some efforts toward this goal, it was not nearly enough. After Our Call ended for us as a denomination, the AABC took the opportunity to reflect on what was and was not effective in Our Call regarding being a denomination with a future freed from racism. Consequently, the AABC concluded that in order to really be a denomination freed from racism, it was necessary to propose to the General Synod a constitutional RCA antiracism policy to be implemented in our polity in the Book of Church Order and, most importantly, lived out in the church so that the RCA would truly move toward being a denomination with a future freed from racism.

After a long and intense study, the AABC began its work on a proposed RCA antiracism policy. While there are many issues within our denomination that we must address, the AABC realizes that we need to be audacious on this issue of antiracism at this time. The
RCA has long held strong convictions regarding the sinfulness of racism and the need to defeat it. Furthermore, and most importantly, we are required as the church of Jesus to proclaim the gospel. Finally, the AABC is proposing policy recommendations. The RCA has undergone many changes in the past decade, including a new general secretary. New strategies are needed to be faithful to our antiracism commitments now. Therefore, the AABC will set forth a number of recommendations to put our theological convictions into practice in the denomination as a whole.

**Vision Statement**

The Bible insistently reveals that God loves diversity and justice. This is seen in the wide variety of creation in which God delights. It is heard in the words of the prophets, who reject oppression and commend justice as true worship. It is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who resists the power of empire and values all persons, regardless of race, as children of God. Jesus gathered a community of people around him that crossed over every racial, social, and cultural boundary.

Racism is the antithesis of what God intends for us. It is the rejection of the other, which is contrary to the Word of God. Racism is the continuing lie that says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation.

Because of our role defined in the Bylaws of the General Synod, the AABC must stand against, speak against, and work against racism. Antiracism efforts are not optional for us as Christians. It is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship, without which we fail to proclaim the gospel. While recognizing that racism victimizes many different racial and ethnic groups, we acknowledge its unique impact on the African American community. Too many have denied this basic truth for too long. Our choice to align ourselves with love and not hate requires both a rejection of racism and a positive proclamation that black lives matter.

Reformed theology offers a nuanced understanding of sin. Calvin did not understand sin to be simply an individual belief, action, or moral failing. Rather, he viewed sin as the corporate state of all humanity. It is an infection that taints each of us and all of us. No part of us—not our perception, intelligence, nor conscience—is unclouded by sin. This does not mean that human beings are awful. Rather, it means that we must have humility about our own righteousness, and that we must cling to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The second valuable resource we have in our tradition is the importance of confession and repentance. Acknowledging our sinfulness ought not to produce self-hatred or paralyzing guilt. Rather, the appropriate response is to confess our sin before God and one another, confident in the grace and love of God. The grace that enables us to confess also empowers us to repent toward the eschatological vision of God’s new creation. By grace we are forgiven, and we respond to this grace with gratitude, humility, and renewed zeal for the gospel.

Finally, as a council we are urging the church to commit ourselves to doing the work of countering racism in the church as our witness to the gospel. In our affirmation that God loves difference, we will honor diversity as that in which God delights. In our conviction that God desires justice, we will learn from others to broaden our understanding of equality. In our humility as sinners saved by grace, we will listen openly to diverse voices regarding how racism still exists in our church and our need to finally eradicate that evil. In our gratitude for God’s grace, we will work toward the kingdom of God evident in the Bible. In our joyous response to God’s love, we will love one another.
Biblical and Theological Foundation

The Christian response to racism must have a clear biblical and theological understanding of humanity. The Reformed perspective on the meaning of humanness is informed by John Calvin’s assertion that proper knowledge of ourselves as humans is achievable only through a knowledge of God and God’s will for humans. Calvin used the notion of the image of God to capture the essence of the biblical understanding of what it means to be human: human beings were made by God, in the image of God. Therefore, Scripture portrays God as the being who recognizes the value and worth of human life, and affirms the inherent dignity of human beings. Understanding the image of God is crucial. We must appreciate the sacredness and sanctity of all human life; establish relationships based on the rule of love, respect, and dignity; assume moral responsibility for nurturing the bonds of mutual affection; render supportive aid to those in need; avoid hurtful attitudes and harmful actions; and make justice the basis of our treatment of others. Thus, Calvin and other reformers established a critical linkage between the image of God in humans and the divine mandate to make justice, love, and peace the fundamental basis of human relationships.

The Bible calls us to show love, justice, and peace, especially to one another. In the Old Testament, God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt is a paradigm of justice. The New Testament embraces and expands the perspective of God’s commitment to love through Scripture, which mandates us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Furthermore, that love of God and love of neighbor are not mutually exclusive.

Challenge to the Church: What Is God Calling Us to Be and Do?

What is the moral-ethical imperative for the RCA? Are there grounds for hope that can inform us about what can and ought to be done despite the serious levels of brokenness we have experienced and continue to experience in the area of racism? While we are made in God’s image, we recognize that all have fallen short of the glory of God. But we are reminded that as a covenantal church, we live into a covenant offered by God, sealed in Jesus Christ, and mediated through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our call to a covenantal relationship with God is both descriptive and prescriptive. The call is descriptive in that it defines who we are and whose we are. It is prescriptive in that it informs what we must do. Our call to stand against racism once and for all emerges out of our identity as disciples of Christ. Our identity compels us to oppose at every level and in every way the injustice of racism. Antiracism, therefore, is prescriptive for what a faithful community must do in the quest to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The church must actively oppose the forces of racism in concrete and strategic ways. This cannot be determined or achieved in the abstract. If racism is to be eliminated in our church, it must be defined contextually and concretely so that its personal, institutional expressions and structures can be seen, understood, and countered. An antiracism church is one whose institutional behavior and commitment are informed by God’s covenant to establish justice, love, and peace in relationships, and whose identity is visibly expressed in the context of active antiracism engagement.

The RCA is operating today in a culture of brokenness for many reasons but particularly on this historic sin of racism. We must speak clearly about what it means to embrace antiracism as a major part of our corporate identity. The Belhar Confession, one of the confessional standards of the church, is a clear and unequivocal mandate for the church to live out its call to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

The possibility now exists for the RCA, in light of our call, tradition, heritage, theology,
ethics, and spiritual commitment, to truly become a denomination with a future freed from racism. The African American Black Council is tasked in part to challenge policies, actions, and structures that promote and perpetuate racism within the church. We can honor the divine will of God for each other by demonstrating a serious commitment to our confession for unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Understanding Racism

A starting point for understanding racism is clarifying the distinction between racism and prejudice, a common and costly point of misunderstanding two distinct phenomena. This will help us better understand how to eliminate racism. Prejudice is understood to be judgments made in the absence of due examination and consideration of facts; these judgments are held even when contradicted by facts. In the absence of a factual basis, prejudices are driven primarily by emotional responses such as fear. When prejudice is based on racial consideration, it is race prejudice. However, race prejudice alone is not racism.

When prejudice is combined with power, it becomes racism. Power is the capacity to command, control, and dominate social reality for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome. Those who control power have the capacity to transform prejudice into racism by establishing and maintaining institutions and structures that embody group biases. Thus, it is the combination of power and prejudice that is so destructive. Racism is, therefore, the marriage of power and prejudice. Simply stated, racial prejudice plus power equals racism. Power transforms prejudice into racism. Racism gives direction to the use of power.

An understanding of racism must include these facts: no one is born a racist; no one is born oppressed. Racism is a consequence of learned values and behaviors. It is possible, therefore, to learn values and behaviors that do not result in racism. Some people benefit from racism while others are victimized by it. As we learn different values, we must unlearn and undo existing racist values and structures. That process is twofold and involves dismantling institutional racism as well as rooting racism out of our personal lives and communities. It is a long-term struggle that is achievable through prayer, commitment, and persistence.

Systemic Racism

Racism is nurtured and sustained by systemic power. Power must be understood in institutional and not just individual terms. An institution is an organized way of meeting basic needs. Our classes are a primary institution within our church. Institutions, especially the church, do not function as isolated entities, although sometimes it feels that way in our church. They are integrally related and interconnected. A group of related institutions constitutes a system such as the church. Power resides in the institutions and systems we create.

Societies establish and structure their common lives by exercising power to create and perpetuate institutions that reflect common values to meet their basic needs as well as determine their goals and aspirations. The power to access and participate in the institutional life of a community is essential to affirming our humanity. Those who control power have the capacity to limit the rights of others to participate fully. To deny others such rights is to deny their humanity.

Historically, institutions—especially the church—have tended to be preferential to some group or groups in comparison to others. Racist institutions are not accidents of history. They are created and maintained intentionally. For the most part, they serve the needs of those who control power and access. In most contexts, racist institutions preserve power and privilege for certain groups of people. Rewards are based on group membership, not
personal attitude. Consequently, some groups of people benefit from racism whether or not they have ever committed a racist act, uttered a racist word, or had a racist thought.

Our Strategy

The proposed antiracism policy has to be accepted and lived into within the General Synod, regional synods, classes, consistories, congregations, RCA colleges and seminaries, mission partners, ecumenical partners, and every other area in our church. The task of dismantling racism must be a partnership effort that involves all levels of the church. Since context is essential within an institution, we contend that the approach to dismantling racism may be carried out differently in different situations. Nevertheless, the objective and goal must still be to become an antiracism church so that the church will live out its call and mission.

The proposed antiracism policy must not only have a permanent place in our polity but must be woven into our culture. It must begin in the context in which we find ourselves, in all of our brokenness. Therefore, ongoing dialogue must be designed for use in places where people ordinarily gather for work and worship. There must be ground rules that preserve the integrity of people engaging in dialogue. The dialogue is a starting point but must move beyond the dynamics of interaction to grapple with and clarify the foundations of racism and its structural manifestations that have polarized our church. Merely talking about racist incidents without addressing root causes is to miss the point of this proposed RCA antiracism policy. We must move to where the discussion itself does not result in further polarization. Thus, we must first be honest with ourselves and then with each other. We must name the problem so we can claim it and then change it. Our journey begins with confession, forgiveness, redemption, and then transformation. This kind of engagement will help prevent extraneous conversation that masquerades as dialogue.

While dialogue is a necessary starting point, we must move beyond that to a common assessment of the problem. We must articulate a common vision of what can and ought to be. The shared vision will engender strategies for engagement that result in the transformation of personal lives, institutions, structures, and practices. Dialogue must lead to the identification of measurable and attainable goals that can be benchmarks of progress. Once benchmarks are established, the more challenging task of identifying obstacles that stand in the way of realizing the vision can begin. Only then can specific strategies be designed that will help us overcome racism. Finally, the process of dialogue involves returning to the vision and assessing our progress on a regular basis, perhaps annually.

The RCA has long recognized that eradicating the sin of racism from our church is a high priority. But it cannot be done without sacrifice. Experience has taught us that people cannot leap from centuries of racism into a new vision. It is a long journey that will require discernment, prayer, and worship-based action. Therefore, we are proposing the following RCA antiracism policy that will govern our lives and hold us all accountable.

WHEREAS, racism is rooted in a belief of the superiority of whiteness and bestows benefits, unearned rights, rewards, opportunities, advantages, access, and privilege on Europeans and European descendants; and

WHEREAS, the reactions of people of color to racism are internalized through destructive patterns of feelings and behaviors impacting their physical, emotional, and mental health and their spiritual and familial relationships; and

WHEREAS, through institutionalized racism, laws, customs, traditions, and practices systemically foster inequalities; and
WHEREAS, although the denomination has shown leadership among some Reformed Church in America synods, classes, local congregations, and theological institutions by initiating innovative antiracism programs, by developing antiracism facilitators, and in general making dismantling racism a priority, there is still much to be done. As we continue in this effort, the work we do must reflect the historical and present experiences and stories of all peoples impacted by racism. We must work from a paradigm reflective of the historical relationships of racial and ethnic groups and racial oppression within the Reformed Church in America and society; and

WHEREAS, continued institutional racism within the church emphasizes the need for an antiracism policy as we seek to do justice; and

WHEREAS, previous General Synods of the RCA have voted for resolutions, statements, and goals denouncing racism, and it is time to honor mandates and expectations of the church;

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED, that the African American Black Council, within its role as defined in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b of the Book of Church Order (2016 edition, p. 105), is proposing the following antiracism policy to the Reformed Church in America, to be adopted and implemented into the Book of Church Order and lived out at every level of the church.

PROPOSED RCA ANTIRACISM POLICY

It is against the RCA antiracism policy to engage in verbal or physical conduct that denigrates or shows hostility or aversion toward an individual because of his or her race, color, gender, age, ministerial status (student under care, licensed candidate), national origin, disability, or other category that: (1) has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile, humiliating, or offensive church and/or assembly or institutional environment; (2) has the purpose or effect of interfering with, slowing down, or terminating a person’s church membership, matriculation toward ordination, or ability to serve within the church; or (3) otherwise adversely affects a person’s ability to gain employment opportunities within the RCA.

Depending on the circumstances, the following conduct may constitute racial discrimination: epithets, slurs, negative stereotyping, jokes, or threatening, intimidating, or hostile acts that relate to race, color, gender, religion, age, national origin, or disability; and (2) written or graphic material that denigrates or shows hostility toward an individual or group because of race, color, gender, religion, age, national origin, or disability and that is circulated anywhere within the RCA, its assemblies, churches, institutions, or ecumenical settings. Other conduct may also constitute racial harassment and discrimination if it falls within the definition of racial discrimination or harassment.

Reporting under the Proposed RCA Antiracism Policy

If a student under care of a classis believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way, the student shall report it immediately to his or her classis without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the classis will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely address these concerns, as outlined in the Book of Church Order.

If a minister of classis believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way within his or her church or classis, the minister shall report it immediately to his or her classis without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the
classis will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely investigate these concerns according to the judicial procedures of classis outlined in the *Book of Church Order*.

If a member of an RCA church believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way within his or her own church, the member shall report it to the board of elders without fear of retribution or retaliation. Furthermore, the board of elders will immediately, thoroughly, and genuinely address these concerns, as outlined in the *Book of Church Order*.

If anyone of the regional synod believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role in the regional synod, the person shall report it to the officers of the regional synod without fear of retribution or retaliation. The regional synod representatives will determine the best way to go forward in addressing these concerns.

If anyone of the General Synod (staff, delegate, guest, etc.) believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role for the General Synod, the person shall report it to the general secretary and/or officers of the General Synod without fear of retribution or retaliation. The Committee of Reference during General Synod shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

If any student within an RCA academic institution believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role at the institution, the person shall report it to the appropriate board or committee of that institution without fear of retribution or retaliation. The institution shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

If anyone within any area of the RCA at any time believes that he or she has experienced or witnessed the antiracism policy violated in any way while serving in his or her role in the church, the person shall report it to the appropriate person and/or committee without fear of retribution or retaliation. The committee shall determine the best way to address these concerns.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that this proposed RCA antiracism policy shall never lead to retaliation or retribution if someone experiences or witnesses this proposed policy being violated in any way.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that this proposed RCA antiracism policy is not intended in any way to be used as a weapon, fear tactic, or personal attack, or to be misused or overused by anyone at any time.

LET IT BE FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Reformed Church in America must work in concert with each other at every level of the church to dismantle racism.

LET IT BE FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Reformed Church in America, through adopting this antiracism policy, implementing it into our polity, and living it out within the whole church, declare that the RCA is finally a denomination with a future freed from racism.

**Recommendations**

The AABC recommends the following to the General Synod Council:
1. To authorize the African American Black Council to work with the Commission on Church Order over the next year to determine how and where the proposed RCA antiracism policy could be incorporated into the Book of Church Order, and to bring specific proposed changes to the BCO to the General Synod Council at its March 2018 meeting, which General Synod Council may then bring to the 2018 General Synod.

2. To direct the general secretary to challenge RCA congregations, assemblies, institutions, and agencies, through a direct communication, to eradicate all structures and/or systems that support and maintain racism.

3. To direct the general secretary, in consultation with the African American Black Council, to collect and distribute stories of congregations and assemblies dismantling racism throughout the church.

4. To direct the general secretary, in consultation with the African American Black Council, to jointly formulate a communication plan to share antiracism resources, and to create an electronic campaign to send information on antiracism resources and trainings to RCA assemblies and seminaries.

5. To encourage the general secretary to include antiracism training in the existing leadership development initiatives of Transformed & Transforming.

The AABC recommends to the General Synod Council that it make the following recommendations to the 2017 General Synod on behalf of the African American Black Council:

6. To urge RCA assemblies to provide an annual one-day event dedicated to antiracism.

7. To urge RCA assemblies and institutions to provide regular antiracism training for students, faculty, and staff, to integrate racially and culturally diverse voices in the curriculum, and to revisit hiring policies to ensure that faculty and staff are racially diverse.

8. To urge General Synod delegates to consider African Americans and people of color for General Synod officer positions.

9. To commend the African American Black Council for its historical and ongoing commitment to holding up antiracism to the church and holding the RCA accountable for deficiencies.

Respectfully submitted,
James Steward, chairperson

At its meeting on June 8, 2017, the General Synod Council received the AABC report and affirmed the council’s work around antiracism and the importance of that work. GSC has decided not to bring the above recommendations to this year’s General Synod, but rather to appoint a small task force of GSC members to work directly with the AABC over the next year to more fully develop these recommendations and bring them to General Synod 2018. GSC commends the AABC for its work and looks forward to working with the council on this important issue.
REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

2016 marks the culmination of 37 years of ministry for the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) in the RCA. Since CPAAM was formally recognized as one of the minority councils in June 1980 by the General Synod, it has grown and continues its work of advocating for the needs, gifts, and concerns of Pacific and Asian Americans within the RCA, and advising the various governing bodies of the RCA on how Pacific and Asian Americans can be fully integrated and included in the life of the church, its mission, and its ministry. As CPAAM enters into its 38th year of ministry in 2017, it is grateful to continue to engage in the RCA’s ministry vision and goal, Transformed & Transforming, which is focused on three priority areas—discipleship, leadership, and mission—to which God has called all CPAAM churches and leaders.

2016 Annual Consultation

CPAAM successfully held its annual consultation meeting on May 16–18, 2016, in Suwanee, Georgia, a suburban area 40 minutes from downtown Atlanta. There are three Korean churches in the Suwanee area, where there is a fast-growing population of both Korean immigrants and Koreans moving from other parts of United States. During the three days, Disciples Church allowed CPAAM to use its facility as a meeting place for our annual consultation. The council was so grateful for the three Korean church leaders who provided services such as local transportation, guidance of the area, and all other needs for the participants. The purpose of the annual consultation was to discuss needs and concerns and to support and encourage one another with a time of worship, fellowship, and networking. The people who participated in the meeting appreciated the opportunity to retreat from ministry, to be refreshed and renewed, and to return to ministry with new insights and resources.

Next Generation Engagement

During the annual consultation, CPAAM leaders had an opportunity to explore ministry and the next generation with Rick Zomer, RCA coordinator for Next Generation Engagement. His presentation about the next generation provided helpful information to a senior leader struggling with the generation gap and losing young members, and a young leader who felt isolated and was looking for ministry resources. CPAAM can play an important role in supporting immigrant churches as they struggle to nurture next generation leaders because of linguistic and cultural barriers. The CPAAM language group leaders decided to invite emerging leaders in their churches to participate in various learning opportunities hosted by the RCA’s Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders.

RCA Leadership Collaborative

Eddy Alemán, director of strategic leadership development, was one of the keynote speakers during the consultation meeting. His session provided a great chance for all the participants to consider RCA leadership collaboratives and learning communities. Pastors of local churches were more interested in learning communities. The young leaders, who are mostly in college, part of English ministries, and are ministry candidates in the MFCA, were more interested in leadership collaboratives. After Eddy’s presentation, all the participants were divided into three groups, where they engaged the topic of personal leadership experience in relation to spiritual growth, time management, gifts, emotions, struggles, and life focus. Taiwanese pastors decided to create a learning community in which they could grow together by sharing their unique ministry contexts in their own language. The next-generation leaders, including ministry candidates in the RCA, would like to have a chance to be part of the leadership development process.
Jesus Youth Retreat 2016

Jesus Retreat 2016 was successfully completed with more than 100 participants. There was wonderful feedback regarding the overall program. Most of the participants came from youth groups of Korean churches, although several non-Korean and non-RCA youth groups in New York and New Jersey participated as well, celebrating God’s love and grace in their lives and faith. The Jesus Retreat staff team is looking forward to expanding this great opportunity to churches outside the Korean community. It’s gratifying to see many staff members who were once participants in the retreat now providing leadership to the next generation of students.

CPAAM’s Ongoing Issues

CPAAM has several ongoing issues: developing young leaders across a generation gap, encouraging women’s leadership, supporting immigration, and contextualizing denominational resources for ethnic churches. CPAAM is working hard to be aware and to raise these issues whenever the council gathers together. The council has been encouraged to see the Transformed & Transforming initiatives provide helpful resources to support the needs of each local church in these ongoing issues and problems. It is particularly wonderful for the young leaders and the women, who are overlooked by the local church in the Asian community, to have these benefits and assistance from the denomination.

Most CPAAM churches are immigrant churches, and certain members of each congregation are impacted by immigration policy. President Trump’s executive order on immigration creates fear and discomfort within the immigrant communities and churches. As an ethnic council, we would like to advocate to the larger denomination on behalf of these vulnerable groups of people for the issues of immigration and refugees. CPAAM can’t solve the problem itself, nor can members of the council directly participate in politics as church leaders, but we can join together in God’s healing work through prayer, education, and church activity.

Conclusion

There is a uniqueness to CPAAM ministries, as members of CPAAM are in one group with one faith, but CPAAM is also a big mosaic. Members of CPAAM have different languages: Korean, Taiwanese, Mandarin, Lao, Thai, Japanese, Indian, and English. CPAAM understands that different languages bring different cultures, backgrounds, practices, and perspectives. CPAAM has confirmed that pluralism should not obstruct its ministry but rather be transformed into an asset, a power to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

The council thanks all the executive committee members of CPAAM for their time and the work that they have put into CPAAM’s precious ministries. The council also appreciates GSC staff: En Young Kim, coordinator for CPAAM, and Wanlin Chang, administrative assistant for CPAAM, for their hard work to ensure that CPAAM runs smoothly.

Respectfully submitted,
David Theonugraha, chairperson
REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

There are many great things that are going on right now through the Council for Hispanic Ministries, but in this brief report, the council would like to highlight three of them.

1. New Vision to Plant 50 Hispanic Churches in the Next Five Years (2017–2021)

The Council for Hispanic Ministries had its 42nd annual assembly in Corona, California, on August 25–27, 2016. In that meeting, the assembly voted unanimously to embrace the vision of planting 50 new churches in the next five years, starting on January 1, 2017, and ending on December 31, 2021. Although this is a huge task, we believe we can achieve it with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Based on the realities of the Hispanic population growth in America, we will be focusing on planting:

- 15 Spanish-speaking Hispanic churches (first-generation Latinos)
- 15 bilingual Hispanic churches (first- and second-generation)
- 20 English-speaking, multiethnic, Hispanic-led congregations (second-, third-, and fourth-generation)

Locations Where We Are Currently Working

- Bogota, New Jersey
- Chicago, Illinois
- Esparto, California
- Grandville, Michigan
- Houston, Texas
- Miami, Florida
- Orlando, Florida
- Portland, Oregon
- Tampa, Florida
- Turlock, California
- Visalia, California
- Yakima, Washington

Training and Equipping

The council is working with Multiplication Network to train and equip Hispanic church planters. This is a ministry that has done great work all over the world, particularly in Latin American countries. They have developed great resources for Hispanic church planters, and the council is collaborating with them to train and equip Hispanic planters.

Church Planting Process

The council has also developed a process for the church planters to follow that includes identification, assessments, and equipping from the beginning of the process until the church is organized as an RCA congregation. The RCA Office of Church Multiplication has been very helpful in adapting to the needs of the Hispanic church planters. Please see the depiction of the process included with this report.
Hispanic Summit

The second Hispanic Summit was held on April 24, 2017, in the lead-up to Exponential East. The Council for Hispanic Ministries gathered in Orlando with potential Hispanic church planters, classis leaders, regional synod leaders, and potential parent churches for a day of equipping and vision casting for Hispanic Ministries in the RCA.

2. Transformed & Transforming

The Council for Hispanic Ministries is happy to report that it has reorganized its leadership according to the three main priorities of Transformed & Transforming: discipleship, leadership, and mission. As Latinos in the RCA, we have fully embraced the vision of Transformed & Transforming because this is a vision coming from God and given to a group of people to live and love like Jesus, following him in mission.

- Alberto Salazar from Toronto, Ontario, is serving as the discipleship person.
- Luis Perez is serving as the leadership development person.
- Barbara Pimentel is serving as the mission person.

Along with the rest of the RCA Hispanic Ministries leadership team, they are in charge of helping Hispanic leaders and congregations in the RCA participate in Transformed & Transforming.

3. New Bylaws That Will Help the Council for Hispanic Ministries Accomplish Its Vision

The assembly also approved new bylaws that are less complicated and that will help the council to accomplish the vision that it has embraced. The General Synod Council needs to approve these bylaws so that they become the official document.

The General Synod Council approved the new bylaws submitted by the Council for Hispanic Ministries at its March 14–16 meeting in Orlando, Florida.

Respectfully submitted,
Andres Serrano, president
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind” (1 Corinthians 1:4-5).

Since its origins in 1628, the RCA has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Now, as we live into Transformed & Transforming, we continue to share stories of how God is at work in our midst. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, using tried-and-true communication channels alongside new ones.

Supporting Transformed & Transforming

Over the last year, GSC staff have worked to raise awareness of Transformed & Transforming, the denomination’s vision to engage in discipleship, leadership, and mission. Stories of transformation have taken the form of magazine and website features. They’ve also been told through tweets, Facebook posts, and video testimonies.

Transformed & Transforming initiatives were designed in response to needs expressed by churches and leaders. As those initiatives took shape, congregations and leaders were invited to take their next step toward better fulfilling God’s call for them. A plethora of learning and equipping opportunities are available through the initiatives. The RCA communication team has supported each initiative in sharing these opportunities and in developing related resources where needed.

Over the past year, communication staff have also worked to share a clear vision of what Transformed & Transforming is and the opportunities it holds for RCA congregations and members.
Coordinating Communication

Communication trends are in constant flux, reflecting changes in our world, our homes, and our churches. GSC staff strategically provide communication tools that align with the needs of RCA members. To best serve the diversity in the RCA, communication happens both in print and electronically through social media, email, the RCA website, and other websites.

With the blessings of a more ethnically diverse denomination, there is also the need and opportunity to communicate in a number of languages.

Communication efforts are coordinated across these various channels and languages to connect with RCA members most effectively.

Changing Electronic Communication Meets the Needs of Leaders, Members, and Seekers

The RCA digital communication team manages an array of websites and social media interactions online. A growing number of people have seen, shared, and interacted with the RCA on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vimeo in the last year.

The digital communication team continues to use a Google AdWords grant of $10,000 per month in free advertising. Ad campaigns have included helping searchers find an RCA church nearby, highlighting seasonal worship resources, and promoting the Gift of Hope Christmas campaign for RCA Global Mission. The RCA website has seen more than 80,000 visits as a result of this grant since it was awarded in 2015.

More and more people are accessing the RCA’s digital communications from smartphones and tablets rather than computers. Emails, social media content, and the RCA website are optimized for mobile use, and a mobile-friendly online donation system was introduced two years ago. Online giving is up 400 percent since 2013 due to improvements in usability, easier options for giving, and mobile-friendly forms.

Print Pieces Continue to Serve the Church

While technology allows communication to take place in a number of ways, there is still a need for print communication. Within the RCA, this includes RCA Today magazine, which is produced three times a year for each RCA household. RCA Today continues to support Transformed & Transforming by communicating stories of church and individual discipleship, leadership development, and mission. A bulletin insert, also called RCA Today, shares RCA ministry stories and increases connection with RCA mission work around the world.

To better marry new technology with print communication, a new app-based electronic edition of RCA Today magazine debuted in spring 2016. The app includes the full content of the magazine, formatted for easy reading on a phone or tablet, plus additional interactive features such as videos, photos, music, and more. The app is available on the App Store and Google Play.

Translation Efforts Increase

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2016 Book of Church Order in Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin, the RCA Today bulletin is produced in Spanish and Korean each month. Select Transformed &
Transforming resources have also been translated, including a multiyear leadership development curriculum. Several church multiplication resources are being translated into Spanish for the growing number of Spanish-speaking church planters in the RCA. A Korean translation of *Worship the Lord*, the RCA’s liturgy, was completed this spring.

In order to make these resources available to the largest audience, the majority of the translated material is posted on the web in lieu of printing. This is cost effective and allows translated material to be made available more quickly, at no cost to churches. This momentum will continue as we look to bring RCA communications into the languages in which our members worship the Lord.

**Report on the Faith Alive Christian Resources Partnership**

The RCA continues to work with Faith Alive Christian Resources as a partner in distributing resources. RCA staff meet with Faith Alive leadership to ensure the partnership is working well and supporting the resource needs of both the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Staff cooperation between Faith Alive and the RCA is strong. The RCA receives revenue from the Reformed Church Press materials sold through Faith Alive, and that revenue is then used to produce additional resources to support the RCA and other Reformed congregations throughout the United States and Canada.

**The Office of Historical Services**

The conception of archives is a musty room with piles of paper, but it’s more than that—it’s also photographs, videotapes, CDs, cassette tapes, hard drives, floppy discs, and LP records—and it’s not musty. The RCA Archives maintains the long-term memory of the RCA. On its shelves and on its hard drives are stored the stories of all those who have engaged in the ministry of the church and built a strong foundation for where we are today. The archives looks forward as it gathers, preserves, and makes available the stories of a past generation so that tomorrow has a yesterday.

The Office of Historical Services assists in the proclamation of the gospel over time. The acts of remembering allow today’s people to be inspired and encouraged by yesterday’s mission. The RCA has left a significant historical footprint in its more than 385 years of life and ministry. That footprint is found in the missionary correspondence and represents many stories of transformation.

The office preserves records from congregations, classes, regional synods, the General Synod, our mission fields, and staff offices in order to assure that a strong future is built upon a solid understanding of the past. The primary goal of the archives in this process is to offer stability and relevance to the long-term mission of the church.

**Records Storage**

The main storage area for the archives is at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, where the office rents space. More than 1,000 cubic feet of records are also stored in an underground storage area in Grand Rapids, and all the records relating to the RCA in Canada are stored in the offices of the Regional Synod of Canada. Many records valuable for family history research have been digitized and are available on ancestry.com, with which we continue to partner. This partnership both makes records accessible to a worldwide audience and allows for less expensive off-site storage.
Historical Series

The archivist also assists with the publication of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America and serves as its production editor. The archivist works closely with the general editor and the Commission on History in the promotion and production of the volumes in the series by designing and typesetting the books and assisting in photo research and fact checking. A full list of the nearly 90 volumes can be found at www.rca.org/series.

The Growth and Development of the Archives

Last year, New Brunswick Theological Seminary offered the RCA a challenge grant to help grow and develop the archives. That challenge was matched by the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. In the last half of 2016, the archives began moving forward, aggressively increasing efforts at digitization and moving through the backlog of records, radically upgrading the technology of the office for more efficient and increased digitization. It increased promotion of the Historical Series at several events, enabled more efficient movement of records to underground storage and the transfer of large groups of records from older congregations, and provided several displays in Sage Library and “on the road.” Records continue to come into the archives from disbanded churches, and an increasing number of active congregations are taking advantage of the services that the archives offers.

The RCA Archives assists many congregations as they celebrate their anniversaries and seek to challenge the present with their rich heritage. The archivist advises on retention of records and facilitates transfer to the denominational archives. The archives also has an experimental site to provide resources as needed at rcaarchives.omeka.net, which features an increasing variety of documents and images.

The archivist continues to serve the professional archival community through active involvement, participation, and presentation of papers at the Society of American Archivists and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archivists Conference. He serves as the secretary for the Archivists of Religious Collections section and continues as a member of the Academy of Certified Archivists.

This office recognizes its important position in the ministry of memory as it continues in its stewardship of our shared heritage. Preserving our memory is an important task, and our historical footprint continues to increase as we travel the path from yesterday to tomorrow.
Resources around Reformed Understanding of Scripture

Western Theological Seminary professor Todd Billings was asked to record a teaching video with discussion questions on this topic, which was piloted at the fall joint meeting of the GSC and the commissions in October 2016. After feedback from participants as well as the GSC, the video was rerecorded as a three-segment video series called “A Light to My Path,” a discussion and facilitator’s guide was developed, and the resource was posted on the RCA website at www.rca.org/resources/alighttomypath. The resource was sent to all classis clerks and all congregations inviting them to use it in their context.

Response to MGS 2016, R 16-29, pp. 154-155, Create Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee

INTERIM REPORT OF THE PASTORAL FORMATION COORDINATING COMMITTEE

At the direction of the General Synod, the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group (CCSC) met for six years, engaging the church in the process, standards, and funding of theological education in the RCA. The CCSC made the following recommendation, which was approved by the 2016 General Synod:

R 16-29
Reconstitute the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group under the new name of Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC). The PFCC will meet for a period of two years, and its funding will come from the General Synod assessment for theological education. At the completion of this two-year period, the PFCC will propose to the General Synod a permanent committee, along with appropriate staffing and budget. The PFCC’s responsibilities will include:

1. In consultation with the professorate, coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod. In conjunction with this process, coordinate the evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the certification processes in assisting candidates to meet the standards established by the RCA.
2. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among congregations and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.
3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation as it relates to RCA church order and the mission of the church.
4. Assist the GSC in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

While its final report is not due until the 2018 General Synod, the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) offers this interim report to give an account of what we have accomplished and our plans for the upcoming year.

The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry

The PFCC has been engaged in a discussion regarding the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) by the three agents of the RCA (Western Theological Seminary,
New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency). It has been noted that the three agents grant the certificate in unique ways. While uniformity in granting the CFM is not desired, the PFCC does think it prudent to develop guidelines for each agent to follow in granting a certificate.

One of the difficulties regarding the process of granting a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry is the lack of clarity given in the BCO regarding what actually makes a candidate “fit” for ministry. Additionally, primary responsibility for examining a candidate’s readiness for ministry and examination lies with the classis, not with the agents who grant the CFM. Therefore, the PFCC has had preliminary discussions regarding identifying the future role of the agents in granting students their certificates as well as the role of the certificate in the ordination process.

Currently, the PFCC is in the process of suggesting that the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry be renamed the Certificate of Readiness for Examination. First, the PFCC thinks that this title more accurately reflects the role of the certificate given by the agents, as currently defined in the BCO. Second, while the agents are supposed to determine whether candidates are “fit” for ministry as ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA, there is no definition as to what defines a candidate’s “fitness.” The PFCC is currently discussing the possibility of connecting a candidate’s readiness for examination by the classis to the Eight Standards for Theological Education. Third, this reflects the reality that the classis, not the agent, has the primary responsibility in determining a candidate’s fitness for ministry.

While the PFCC has discussed these issues regarding the CFM, we also feel it is vital to engage the church in this discussion. Therefore, before the PFCC presents recommendations to the 2018 General Synod, we intend to engage the church for ideas regarding the ordination process. The PFCC intends to engage the church through its classis stated clerks, the chairs of each classis’s candidate care committee, and the boards of the three theological agents, as well as through various councils of the RCA.

Standards for Theological Education

Both related and in addition to the above discussion regarding the CFM, the PFCC is also in the process of discussing the current standards for theological education (personal faith and evangelism, call, Scripture, history and theology, Reformed tradition, leadership, pastoral care, and worship and preaching). The PFCC has reviewed the effectiveness of the eight standards, examined the results of a forum held at the 2015 General Synod on the standards, as well as evaluated our agents’ role in helping our candidates meet those standards. Furthermore, the PFCC is discussing whether and/or where these standards for theological education should be located in the Book of Church Order.

Long-Term PFCC

As part of our mandate, the PFCC has been instructed to develop a recommendation to the 2018 General Synod regarding a long-term body that will fulfill the same role the PFCC currently does. The PFCC has begun discussions regarding the makeup of the committee as well as its primary mandates and accountability structure. The PFCC will be ready to provide a formal recommendation by the 2018 General Synod.

Other Business

Finally, the PFCC discussed additional items stated in our mandate. We reviewed the amount and division of the General Synod assessment for theological education. We will continue to monitor this. We also discussed classis best practices regarding candidate care
in a candidate’s formation for ministry. We will continue to develop the candidate care website, which has been effective for candidate care committees across the denomination. The PFCC has also had productive conversations regarding the development and growth of theological courses, programs, and degrees taught in Spanish and Korean as well as collaborative possibilities for education among the three agents of the RCA.

The PFCC looks forward to our upcoming meetings, in which we will continue to discuss these items for our final report.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce, moderator
Miriam Barnes
Tim Brown
Jaeseung Cha
Cornelis Kors
Ken Eriks (staff)
Eun Jae Joo
Gregg Mast
Carmen Means
Alvin Padilla
Cora Taitt

Response to MGS 2016, R 16-45, p. 234, Mass Incarceration Event

REPORT ON THE MASS INCARCERATION EVENT

R 16-45 directed the General Synod Council “to host a meeting of people interested in the study and work of mass incarceration as the beginning of a learning community.”

Three events were held in response to R 16-45, two local events and one denominational event. The local events were held in Chicago and New York City. Eleven people attended the event in Chicago and 36 attended the event in New York City. The target groups for these local events were:

- People and congregations that have been impacted by mass incarceration.
- People and congregations that realize the importance of getting involved but lack the experience to do so.
- People needing to increase their basic understanding of mass incarceration.

Mass Incarceration: Increasing Awareness, Determining Next Steps—a Denominational Meeting of the Reformed Church in America took place in Chicago, Illinois, on March 10 and 11, 2017. Fifty-five people from around the United States attended this event. General secretary Tom De Vries framed the time by reminding the group of Jesus’ words and actions in Matthew 25:39-40 and John 8:1-11.

The meeting focused on:

- How the criminal justice system works, the history of mass incarceration, and how it is sustained.
- The effect of mass incarceration on families and children.
- Listening to the personal stories of formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Providing a faith framework for the church’s response.
- Discussing pathways to engage the topic.
- Connecting people on certain aspects of this issue.
This was a powerful event that was filled with the Holy Spirit’s work in each of the attendees’ lives.

A number of continued learning communities came out of this event. They will focus on:

- Youth leadership/mentorship/prevention
- Reentry issues
- Policies
- Coming home
- Replicating aspects of the organization 70x7 Life Recovery
- Angel Tree
- Filming

These groups covenanted to work together for six months and reevaluate after that time.

The Commission on Christian Action encourages the General Synod Council to continue to support these learning communities.

Response to *MGS 2016, R 16-37, p. 174, Formulate Structured Procedure of Church-to-Church Assistance*

R 16-37

To direct the General Synod Council to formulate a structured procedure to connect financially stable churches with those churches working in economically deprived areas that need both financial and human resources to meet the needs and grow the mission in those areas, facilitating these connections across classis and regional synod lines; and further,

To bring the first report on this procedure to the 2017 General Synod.

In response to this recommendation, a meeting was convened on November 18, 2016, in Grand Rapids, attended by Evan Vermeer (president of General Synod 2016), Mike Van Kampen, Micheal Edwards, Tom Smith, Jen Peterson, Dean Van Farowe, Andy Bossardet (staff, Emerging Leaders), Bob Carlson (staff, Church Growth Fund), and Stephanie Soderstrom (staff, Volunteer Engagement). This group represented people from larger churches with more resources, smaller churches with more limited resources, churches that have been through an assistance program and are growing, and staff of related ministry areas.

There were two topics to be addressed. The first was a follow-up to a proposal from former synod president Tom Smith to respond to the issue of aging structures in the denomination. It was learned that the Church Growth Fund was developing a program to address this issue at least partially.

The second topic concerned how to assist churches struggling due to either a lack of financial or human resources. It was agreed that the classis was the first line of help. It was also agreed that the classis needed to study the church and area in question to determine the future of mission in that area. In other words, it needed to be clear that there was a need for that church to continue. Limiting factors that needed to be analyzed were population base and the presence, number of, and health of other churches in that immediate area. It is possible, based on this analysis, that the decision might be made to close a church or have the classis supersede.

If the need for mission in that area was deemed to be great enough to support the long-term growth and health of that church, the classis should be prepared to help. This
led to the question of how to develop a plan of assistance for that church. After some discussion among the group and input from staff present, it was determined that both at the denominational level and in various classes and synods, there are already assistance programs being developed and piloted.

The group then focused on how to gather existing information and make it more visible and available throughout the denomination. The obvious method would be the RCA website.

Under the leadership of Andy Bossardet and Stephanie Soderstrom, the staff will gather available information and place it on the website and will seek to make it known to a wider audience in the RCA.

This group also addressed the possibility that the classis in question might not have the financial or personnel resources needed to assist a church in this way. It is the hope of the group that through the website, the ability to link churches that are not in the same classis might be developed.

The focus of this study is to enhance the work of the RCA through Transformed & Transforming, specifically addressing the topic of growing missional involvement.

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2015 REFERRALS

Response to MGS 2015, R-39, p. 181, Task Force on Interreligious Understanding

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Unity, to establish, for a period of three years, a General Synod task force on interreligious understanding and relations, in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of relationships and evangelism between Christians and people and groups of other religions, with the understanding that this task force should work closely with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work, both in North America and globally; and further,

to include in the mandate of this task force the need to make recommendations to the General Synod regarding where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing; and further, to ask the task force to report annually to the General Synod for the duration of its work.

A report from the Interreligious Task Force can be found immediately following the report of the Commission on Christian Unity on p. 236.

Response to MGS 2015, R-51, p. 242, Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies

To direct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to create a task force of no more than ten members—consisting of members of the Commission on Theology, the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Christian Action, diaconal leaders, and others as appropriate—to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels.
REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON DIACONAL MINISTRIES

Introduction

Following many years of denominational discussion, commission studies, and surveys, the Reformed Church in America continues to raise and discuss the question of the role deacons might fulfill within church assemblies (specifically classis, regional synod, and General Synod). There is, however, broad agreement on several relevant matters:

- Deacons provide a unique and valuable perspective within the consistory.
- There is a desire for greater diaconal involvement in both local church and denominational ministries.
- Very few deacons within the RCA are involved in any form of diaconal service or ministry that extends beyond the purview of their local church.
- The diaconal community may benefit from interaction and collaboration with the broader church community, perhaps through diaconal assemblies.
- Issues addressed by the assemblies of the church often fall within the purview of diaconal ministry.
- There is a solid theological basis within a Reformed and missional ecclesiology for including deacons as voting members in all assemblies of the RCA.

The Commission on Theology concurs with each of these matters and has, through its papers and surveys, added to the broader discussion.

History

In 2011, the Commission on Theology presented to General Synod its paper, “The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church” (MGS 2011, pp. 289-304). The commission recommended that the paper be distributed for discussion in the RCA in order to determine the mind of the church before making any recommendations about possible changes to the Book of Church Order (BCO). The first significant discussions took place in all-synod advisory groups at General Synod 2011, and that feedback was given to the Commission on Theology for review.

The same synod approved the distribution of the paper to the churches and requested that the commission produce a study guide to aid further discussion throughout the RCA (MGS 2011, R-51 and R-52, pp. 305-306). The study guide was produced and distributed with the paper with a request for feedback to the commission by January 31, 2013. Feedback was received through a simple, web-based survey and a number of fuller, more discursive responses from individuals, consistories, and classes.

The study guide is filled with invaluable information on the history of and biblical context for the discussion, the roles of the offices and the assemblies of the church, the significance of the judicatory, and questions for further consideration. It solicited both general and specific feedback on two questions that were included in the web survey:

1. Should deacons be included in all the assemblies of the church with voice and vote? If “yes,” why? If “no,” why not?
2. If you are convinced that deacons should be included in all assemblies, do you have additional ideas for how to implement this?

Survey responses were received from a total of 75 individuals: 39 respondents voted “yes” on including deacons with voice and vote in all the assemblies of the RCA and 36 voted “no.” Of the 39 who voted yes, 12 were deacons, 7 were elders, and 17 were ministers (3
did not indicate their office). Of the 36 who voted “no,” 6 were deacons, 4 were elders, and 25 were ministers (one respondent did not indicate an office). Responses to this survey question showed a nearly even split between those who favor the full inclusion of deacons and those who do not.

A compilation of responses from the majority of those in favor of including deacons in all the assemblies of the RCA highlights three reasons for their support of such a change:

1. The parity of the offices.
2. The fact that all of the offices working together enable the church to fulfill God’s mission.
3. As is evident through the deacons’ participation in consistories, they bring a unique perspective.

A compilation of responses from the majority of those who do not favor the inclusion of deacons in the broader assemblies highlights three reasons for not making a change:

1. The Bible and tradition make clear that only elders are responsible to “rule” or govern the church.
2. Including deacons in the “ruling” function will further confuse the role and purpose of the diaconal office and reinforce the sense that deacons are really simply junior elders.
3. It will distract deacons from their “real” calling.

In addition, a few expressed concern that deacons do not have the theological acumen required for broader governance in the church.

In addition to the survey results, the commission received 14 written responses from ministers, boards of deacons, consistories, and classes. Nine of these responses supported the inclusion of deacons in the broader assemblies, three did not support inclusion, and two expressed both support and reservations. The reasons given for and against the inclusion of deacons in these written responses echo those cited above. Some also expressed practical concerns about the human and financial cost of including deacons in the broader assemblies. In addition, one respondent suggested that the distinction the commission’s paper makes between assemblies and judicatories is misguided, and that, on the whole, we could be thinking much more creatively and radically about how to empower and receive the gifts of the deacons, for instance, through the establishment of a diaconate and the revision of denominational structures accordingly.

Consequently, the Commission on Theology submitted to the 2015 General Synod a recommendation that was subsequently recognized as R-51:

R-51 (MGS 2015, p. 242)
To direct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to create a task force of no more than ten members—consisting of members of the Commission on Theology, the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Christian Action, diaconal leaders, and others as appropriate—to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels.

This recommendation was adopted.
In its 2015 report to the General Synod, the Commission on Theology noted that it “recently conducted a denomination-wide survey of deacons. In reviewing the survey results, one finding was particularly noteworthy: very few deacons in the RCA are involved in any form of diaconal service or ministry that extends beyond the purview of their local church” (MGS 2015, p. 241). The Book of Church Order defines the office of deacon as “set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach” (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10; 2016 edition, p. 13). The text would seem to give permission for ministry beyond the local church, since “it is impossible to restrict ‘the ministry of mercy, service, and outreach’ to the work of the local church. There are, of necessity, aspects of the ministry of deacons that require deacons to work collaboratively with other deacons beyond their own congregation” (MGS 2015, p. 241). The commission stated that it believes it is a problem that collaboration apparently happens infrequently within the RCA. The report went on to say:

This problem has a structural component since RCA polity has no structures that encourage or provide a context for deacons to collaborate with other deacons beyond their own congregation. In other words, our polity does not assist deacons in exercising the full scope of the office to which they have been called by God—and in some cases even hinders them from this ministry. This needs to change.

The Commission on Theology believes that an implicit awareness of this problem underlies some of the recent interest in bringing deacons into a greater involvement with higher RCA assemblies, including classes, regional synods, and the General Synod. (See the timeline in “An Invitation to Study and Conversation: ‘The Office of Deacon and the Assemblies of the Church’,” Appendix II, pp. 26-29, http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/DeaconStudyGuide.pdf.) Moreover, the commission believes that repairing the structural problem is a necessary precursor to addressing the broader problem of how the contributions of deacons should be incorporated into the work of classes, regional synods, and the General Synod.

Specifically, the Commission on Theology believes that the RCA must begin to address these problems by creating a structure of diaconal assemblies at the classical level in ways that are informed by the work of other denominations. Such structures can create the opportunity for collaboration on diaconal concerns at a level beyond the local church, bringing congregations in a classis together to engage in diaconal ministry in their particular region. As these assemblies take shape and begin their work, there will probably be a need to create such assemblies at the level of regional synods as well, and eventually the General Synod.

This will raise a further set of issues, particularly focusing on how such diaconal assemblies should integrate their work with classes, regional synods, and the General Synod. Local churches do this all the time, delegating certain tasks to boards of elders and deacons, and reserving others for the work of the consistory. The commission believes that it would be profitable to explore how such structural solutions might be implemented in higher assemblies in the RCA. Such a strategy would also offer a more comprehensive solution to the challenge of integrating deacons into the work of higher assemblies than the RCA has considered thus far (MGS 2015, pp. 241-242).

Diaconal Assemblies Task Force

In February 2016, the Diaconal Assemblies Task Force, consisting of the members
prescribed by R-51 (2015), was convened. An early discussion focused on an earlier proposed amendment to the \textit{BCO (MGS 2002, R-54, p. 233)} that was adopted by General Synod 2002 and submitted to the classes for approval. The proposed addition to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2 of the \textit{BCO} set forth in R-51 read:

\textit{Sec. 3.} The classis shall form a diaconal conference to assist local boards of deacons and to express the diaconal ministry of the church in the geographical area described by the bounds of the classis. The conference shall consist of at least one representative from each local board of deacons. The classis shall delegate authority to the conference as the classis deems appropriate. The conference shall report to the classis.

Nearly identical in intent to R-51 (2015)—that is, to see the ministry of the diaconate extend beyond the local church into the broader community—this proposal was not ratified by the classes (it was defeated 30 classes to 16 classes) and thus was never put into action. In trying to determine why this has not passed previously, these causes were considered:

- Difficulty in enlisting deacons for another meeting when they already have many others.
- A number of organizations have already been born of diaconal collaboration; for example, Love INC.
- Classes simply were not interested in implementing the concept and didn’t see it as workable in their context.

Several questions were also considered:

1. How does the historical interpretation of roles of elder and deacon, with differing levels of significance ascribed to each, impact the formation and work of diaconal conferences?
2. How do geographical regions, each with different emphases for the office of deacon, impact the formation and work of diaconal conferences?
3. How can diaconal conferences impact the various cultural groups and generational groups throughout the RCA?
4. Could the proposal be more readily accepted by classes if the diaconal conference was optional rather than mandatory? Could having a choice in creating a diaconal conference help accommodate the various needs of individual classes?
5. How might a classis or a synod address the financial resources needed to accommodate classes that would incur travel costs for meetings? Technology helps minimize those costs to a degree, though it is recognized that in-person gatherings provide important benefits.
6. What role is best for these conferences? Are they adjunct to the classis or integrated within the classis?
7. How might a classis articulate the need for a diaconal conference?

These questions could help to shape the conversations of classes and synods in the formation of diaconal conferences.

The task force formed a preliminary set of conclusions, suggesting that there is a need for a vision of what a diaconal assembly might look like, appropriate language for the \textit{BCO} allowing the construction of such an assembly as well as defining its role, and additional work to consider the implications of possible assemblies at the regional and General Synod levels.

In May 2016, the task force met to discuss at length and in depth this broad array of past events, actions, and questions. These conclusions became readily apparent to the task force:
1. Significant work has been done in the RCA in the past to emphasize the importance of the ministry of deacons, particularly in the former Office of Diaconal Ministries. This work lives on in the lives of those deacons who were touched by this ministry, but the attention and resources of the RCA have been turned in other directions in recent years.

2. Deacons should be present and participating in all church assemblies. We believe the benefit that the church could receive is greater than any reason offered, biblical or otherwise, for excluding full participation of deacons in all church assemblies. We do not find a Scriptural injunction against deacons participating in church assemblies.

3. Efforts to establish separate assemblies as an alternative to diaconal participation in existing assemblies perpetuates the problems while offering few advantages to the greater church.

4. While diaconal conferences could provide value to the church, they should not be an alternative to diaconal participation within the denomination’s assemblies. That being said, diaconal conferences could be created to unite deacons beyond congregational and classical boundaries for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries. When these diaconal conferences are created alongside deacons’ participation in all the assemblies of the church, the office of deacon is elevated to its proper importance, and the ministry of deacons is appropriately honored.

With these conclusions in mind, the task force is recommending two distinct courses of action. The first is the formation of diaconal conferences throughout the RCA, with the hope that they will foster collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries.

R 17-15
To encourage classes and regional synods to form diaconal conferences in all the assemblies of the church, for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries; and further,

to instruct the general secretary to help facilitate the creation of at least one such diaconal conference utilizing Transformed & Transforming funding. (ADOPTED)

Proposal for Deacons Participating in Assemblies

The second course of action is the inclusion of deacons in the assemblies of the church. The task force offers the following proposal, which we believe not only resolves most, if not all, of the negative factors, but also allows the diaconate to grow into a more meaningful contributor to the full ministries of the assemblies. The proposal consists of these four points:

1. Deacons, both currently installed deacons and members of the great consistory, are eligible to serve as delegates to each of the denomination’s assemblies.

2. Selection of deacons as delegates does not change the allocation of delegates given to each church by assembly bylaws. Elders and deacons are equally eligible to serve as delegates to the assembly at the discretion of the local consistory.

3. The authority that a delegate possesses is the same whether elder or deacon.

4. Deacons will participate with elders and ministers on disciplinary and judicial matters in the classis and synods but not the local church, following procedures currently defined in the Book of Church Order.
Elaboration of the Points Stated Above

1. The role of an elder selected as a delegate to classis or another broader assembly does not conform precisely to the ordination vows taken within the local congregation. Upon being accepted as a delegate to a higher assembly, the elder is asked to abide by the rules and procedures described in the Book of Church Order (BCO) for an elder delegate and by the assembly’s bylaws. In essence, the elder in a broader assembly shifts from being a spiritual leader to a congregation, representing God’s Word to the people, to being a decision maker, arbiter, and advocate for a very wide blanket of denominational plans and concerns. In this transition, the elder does not give up any of the responsibilities to the local congregation but assumes additional responsibilities to the higher assembly and the larger church community.

In the same manner, a deacon nominated as a delegate to serve in a broader assembly would also be expected to continue to fulfill vows taken in ordination as a deacon within a specific congregation while assuming new responsibilities described in the BCO and the assembly’s bylaws.

The distinction between “ruling” elders and “serving” deacons, used by some to defend representation by elders alone, is a misleading distinction. In all matters of Christian living, Christ’s call is to be a “servant leader.” Christ’s call to each of us is to both rule over and to serve. We readily acknowledge this at the macro level within the church, but we are also called at the personal level to apply both principles, as Christ did throughout his life.

Within the bounds of the local congregation, both the elder and the deacon continue their ministries under their ordination vows. As delegates to the broader assemblies, their roles expand from solely the biblical representation of their positions and ministries to the added responsibility of being the broader church through the process of decision making. The offices of elder and deacon apply to the local congregation; the leadership provided by members of these offices applies to all levels of Christian living. The qualities of leadership and spirituality that led individuals to be ordained as elder or deacon are the qualities needed to guide within the higher assemblies.

2. Previous proposals have suggested that each church send an additional deacon as a delegate to the classis, which carries within it a concern that clergy representation would have less influence if diaconal delegates were added to the gathered assembly. This proposal offers the solution that the total number of delegates from any church need not change, and the distribution between elders/deacons and ministers of Word and sacrament need not change at all. Only the mix of elders and deacons will change.

Each consistory will be responsible for the selection of consistory members (drawn from the great consistory as well as the installed members). The number of delegates from each congregation does not change from the allocation determined by each classis and synod.

In their consistorial role, deacons’ authority and scope of responsibility are uniquely shaped by Scripture and differentiated from that of the elder. In the role of delegate to a higher assembly, deacons and elders become equal in authority and in the shepherding of the church’s ministry at broader levels.
3. The “parity of offices” argument has been brought forward to defend the addition of diaconal delegates to higher assemblies. Parity of office is not the deciding factor for selecting delegates to broader assemblies.

4. The task force is asserting that all delegates to broader assemblies serve the same function because together they are the assembly. An assembly becomes a judicatory by the vote of the assembly. All members of the assembly become members of the judicatory with this vote. On the other hand, in local churches, the board of elders is assigned responsibility for care and discipline of the church’s members and office bearers.

With these points in mind, the task force is recommending that assemblies of the RCA incorporate as delegates a church’s installed or great consistory member who is selected by that consistory to serve as a delegate, whether elder or deacon.

R 17-16
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 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body and the elder and deacon 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 and deacon delegates and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis.

Article 3. Elder and Deacon Delegates

Sec. 1.

a. A church shall not have more than four elder delegates. A church with three hundred or fewer confessing members shall have one elder delegate. A church with more than three hundred confessing members shall also have one elder delegate for each additional three hundred confessing members or fraction thereof, up to a maximum of three additional delegates.

b. A church without an installed minister shall have an elder delegate who shall not be counted as one of the above delegates allotted in subsection (a).

c. A collegiate church shall have at least one elder delegate for each of its constituent congregations.

Sec. 2. The congregation in a multiple parish may take turns
in sending to classis one or more additional elder delegates so that the number of minister and elder or deacon delegates from the multiple parish is at least twice the number of such congregations.

Sec. 3. The elder or deacon delegate to classis shall be chosen from the entire body of elders and deacons in a church, whether or not presently a member of the board of consistory.

Sec. 4. The elder or deacon delegate shall be a member of classis from the date of election or appointment and shall continue in that responsibility to classis until the effective date of election or appointment of a successor. If, however, confessing membership in the church represented shall be terminated during the period of appointment, the delegate shall cease to be a member of classis.

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 and deacon delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of 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 and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. ...

Chapter 1, Part III

Article 1. Regional Synod Defined

Sec. 1. The regional synod is an assembly and judicatory consisting of ministers and elders or deacons delegated by each of the classes within the bounds determined for it by the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to elder and deacon delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving under the jurisdiction or with the approval of the classis.

Article 3. Delegates

Sec. 2. The elder or deacon delegate to regional synod shall
be chosen from the entire body of elders in a church installed consistory or great consistory, whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders.

Article 4. Sessions of Regional Synod

Sec. 2. The president of the regional synod shall call a special session of the synod upon receipt of a written request of one minister and one elder or deacon delegate from each of the classes within its bounds. At least three weeks' notice of the meeting shall be given, such notice stating the purpose of the meeting.

Sec. 3. The presence of a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder and deacon delegates is required to constitute a quorum at any session of a regional synod.

Chapter 1, Part IV

Article 1. General Synod Defined

The General Synod is the highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. It consists of two minister delegates and two elder or deacon delegates from each of the classes having four thousand or fewer confessing members on the roll of its churches, and one minister delegate and one elder or deacon delegate for each two thousand confessing members, or fraction thereof, from each of the classes having more than four thousand confessing members on the roll of its churches as computed in accordance with the Bylaws of the General Synod; one elder, deacon, or minister delegate from each of the regional synods; five General Synod professor delegates, drawn from each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; a number of furloughing missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the Bylaws of the General Synod. Voting rights shall be limited to to elder and deacon delegates and those minister delegates who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction or with the approval of an assembly. The General Synod is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through the General Synod Council, commissions, and agencies.

Article 3. Delegates

Sec. 2. The elder or deacon delegate to the General Synod, or the elder or deacon who serves on committees, commissions, or boards of the General Synod, shall be chosen from the entire body of elders and deacons in a church, whether or not presently engaged as a member of the board of elders consistory.

Article 4. Sessions and Meetings of General Synod

Sec. 2. The president of the General Synod shall call a special session of the synod at a place determined by the president, vice
president and the general secretary of the synod upon the joint application of three ministers and three elders or deacons from each of the regional synods, all of them serving currently as accredited delegates to the General Synod. Three weeks’ notice of the session shall be given to the members of the synod, such notice to state the purpose of the session.

Sec. 3. The presence of a majority of the minister delegates and a majority of the elder and deacon delegates is required to constitute a quorum at any meeting of the General Synod.

Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3

Sec. 2. Composition

a. One-half of the membership of the General Synod Council (GSC) shall be elders and deacons and one-half shall be ministers and not less than one-third of the membership shall be women. The Commission on Nominations shall assure the composition of the council reflects the full diversity of the church. (REFERRED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-16.

A motion to refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology was made and supported.

VOTED: To refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology for review of the matter of office at assemblies and report back to General Synod 2018.

Respectfully submitted,
Chris Jacobsen, moderator

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2014

REFERRALS
Response to MGS 2014, R-14, pp. 101-102, Ad-Hoc Committee on Alternate Plan for General Synod

To instruct the General Synod Council to create an ad-hoc committee of no more than eight persons, half of whom are delegates to the 2014 General Synod, for the purpose of preparing a concrete plan for General Synod that incorporates clearly both a revised means for doing business and provisions for learning and visioning around mission and ministry, using the values and feedback expressed by the all-synod advisory committees of the 2014 General Synod to guide its work; and further;

To bring to the 2015 General Synod a specific plan, the costs and impact on the budget and assessment, and the changes needed in the Book of Church Order; and further,

To refer R-12 and R-13 to the ad-hoc committee.
REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON AN ALTERNATE PLAN FOR GENERAL SYNOD

This task force has previously made two detailed reports to General Synod Council: one in March 2016 and one in October 2016.

Three values guided our momentum in this conversation:

- Multiethnic participation
- Multigenerational participation, especially an increase in younger lay participation
- Accessible location, reducing hours of travel from airport

As we move forward, we ask the GSC to decide on the following actions and empower GSC staff to begin work for implementing changes to the annual General Synod gathering.

1. **Approve and communicate to staff, commissions, and institutions a change in the reporting structure at General Synod that includes video reporting.** Commissions, institutions, agencies, and councils will continue to submit written reports but will not speak from the platform unless they have recommendations to present. Instead, the standard will be an invitation to submit a brief video report that highlights the body’s work over the year and can be used beyond the synod setting. This will include training and resourcing for commission moderators and possibly new commission members at the fall joint GSC/commission meetings.

2. **Approve a shorter synod with the goal of moving to five days in 2018 and four days in 2019.** Arrange for a five-day synod in 2018 and a four-day synod for 2019 that includes the weekend. This may require renegotiating contracts with Hope College for 2019 or may be implemented in 2020. In preparing for joint sessions with the CRCNA synod in 2018, move away from business and mission conversation to a worship and discipleship event.

3. **Actively explore potential venues for General Synod 2020 that are in mid- to large-size cities.** As a denomination seeking to be multiethnic and expansive, move synod to larger metro areas, which may move synod to other colleges or hotel venues. If cost is the prohibitive factor, the GSC needs to wrestle with what drives Transformed & Transforming goals. Charge staff to make this happen for General Synod 2020. The image for General Synod can no longer be a “family reunion” but a Pentecost gathering for all. The General Synod is a fellowship event—a gathering of friendly strangers who are seeking fellowship with one another through the power of the Spirit and the bond of Christ.

4. **Approve a biennial, two-day (Friday to Saturday) worship, discipleship, and evangelism event adjacent to synod, starting in 2019.** Charge the general secretary with deploying two to three staff to work with us to organize a planning and implementation team. We encourage the GSC to invite members to this team who have experience with event planning.

5. **Approve the continuation of this team for the next two years (2017–2019) and add a few more people to the team, including at least one additional GSC member.** We are committed to consider and plan for changes to the structure and content of General Synod. We anticipate being able to work within the remaining budget from the Biennial Synod Task Force. Adding a few more people from
GSC and the RCA at large will help drive this preferred future for General Synod gatherings. It is crucial to have GSC representation on this team, and Dan’s term on the GSC will finish in June 2018.

*At its March 2017 meeting, General Synod Council voted to approve the above five recommendations of the task force (GSC 17-14).

Here is our updated proposed plan of action over the next three years:

2017

**Location:** Hope College

**Length of time:** Six days and five nights (stays the same)

**Changes we are proposing:**
- Lean into video reporting procedures.
- Sunday morning is spent worshiping together instead of going to area churches.

2018

**Location:** Calvin College—joint session with CRCNA

**Length of time:** Five days and four nights (one less day/night). However, the possibility of shortening synod by a day this year is something that needs to be explored since it is a joint synod and some things may already be set in place.

**Changes we are proposing:**
- Implement new video reporting procedures, offering training and resources to commission moderators at the joint meeting in October 2017.

2019

**Location:** Hope College

**Length of time:** Two-day life-giving event plus four-day General Synod. The life-giving event would cover Friday and Saturday. General Synod could begin with worship on Sunday morning with the business beginning in the afternoon. There is room in the *BCO* for this to occur without a change (Chapter 3, Part II, Article 1; 2016 edition, pp. 123-124).

**Changes we are proposing:**
- Continued trajectory of implementing new reporting procedures for General Synod.
- The organization of a design team for the life-giving event. This team would also work with denominational staff to make sure everything flows well with the start of General Synod.

We recognize that change is hard and that it will take a significant amount of work to see this change through.

Respectfully submitted,
Dan Gillett, moderator
Steven Germoso
Sarah Palsma
Don Poest
Kyle Small
Imos Wu
Response to MGS 2014, R-15, pp. 113-114, Task Force to Assess RCA Governance with Five-Fold Test

REPORT OF THE FIVE-FOLD TEST TASK FORCE

Task Force Mandate

R-15 (2014)
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.

About the Five-Fold Test

The Five-Fold Multi-Dimensional Test, or Five-Fold Test, is a planning and evaluation tool that was developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). The ECC is one of a very few denominations that has effectively and fruitfully made strides toward becoming a multicultural denomination freer from racism. The tool is designed both for planning and evaluating ministries, initiatives, processes, and operations that increase freedom from racism.

The five dimensions are as follows:

1. **Population**: Who is at the table in terms of racial/ethnic people? Where do we want to be regarding people at the table three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

2. **Participation**: Of the people at the table, how are they participating? Do they appear contributory or disengaged, and why? Where do we want to be regarding how people present will participate in three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

3. **Power**: Among the people at the table and participating, how is influence used? How are decisions really made and who really makes them? How are preparations for decision-making done, and are those preparations equitable across racial/ethnic lines? Where do we want to be regarding how influence is used three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

4. **Pace-setting**: Given the levels of presence, participation, and power, what new missional opportunities are we better prepared to take on, and what existing missional challenges are we better able to address? Where do we want to be regarding preparedness to take on new and existing missional challenges three, six, or nine months or a year from now?
5. **Purposeful Narrative:** Do we describe ourselves like a main river with various different racial/ethnic streams, or do we describe ourselves as one large river moving forward together? Where do we want to be regarding how we describe our racial/ethnic togetherness three, six, or nine months or a year from now?

**Members**

The recommendation that created the task force specified that the task force’s membership would 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.

Current members of the Five-Fold Test Task Force include Tom De Vries (general secretary), James E. Steward (African American Black Council), Pedro Agudelo (Council for Hispanic Ministries), Paul Lee (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries), Evan Vermeer (2014 General Synod president), Sharon Palms (GSC), Joshua Bode (Commission on Church Order), and Rick DeBruyne (Commission on Race and Ethnicity). Tony Campbell staffs the task force.

As of March 1, 2017, participation of some members needed to be confirmed and “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” needed to be identified and recruited.

**Meetings**

Due to difficulty assembling the members, the task force did not meet in 2015. At the 2015 General Synod, GSC reported:

> Due to the specificity of the stated requirements for the membership of this task force, it took longer than expected to fully form the task force, but all members are now committed, and each task force member is passionate, gifted, and determined to carry out the recommendation’s mandate. The task force is moving forward with setting up its first meeting, and anticipates bringing a report to General Synod 2016 (*MGS 2015*, p. 72).

The task force had its first meeting on March 28, 2016. This was reported to the 2016 General Synod:

> The task force met via conference call on March 28 (scheduling challenges prevented them from meeting earlier) to discuss its mandate and steps for accomplishing its work. One of its planned next steps is to consult with the White Privilege Task Force that recommended the creation of the current task force. A conference call has been set up with Shari Brink, moderator of the previous task force. The Five-Fold Test Task Force is also reaching out to the Evangelical Covenant Church to consult with that denomination on how it has used the Five-Fold Test to great effect to become more multiracial and freer from racism. Because of this, the task force has asked General Synod Council for an extension to complete its work. It anticipates being able to complete its work within the budget it was initially given (*MGS 2016*, p. 139).
The task force subsequently held conference calls on December 13, 2016, and February 22 and March 20, 2017.

On December 13, the task force heard from Shari Brink, who had served on the R-91 Task Force on White Privilege, to ascertain a clearer understanding of the intent of R-15 (2014). Rick DeBruyne, moderator of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, shared that commission’s perspective. Rick DeBruyne was subsequently selected to chair the Five-Fold Test Task Force.

On February 22, the task force had a conference call with Gary Walter, president of the Evangelical Covenant Church. As mentioned above, the ECC developed the Five-Fold Test. The conversation was very helpful and stimulating. Walter noted that while the Five-Fold Test had helped them with evaluation and planning, more significantly, the five dimensions have become core values for the life and ministry of their church.

On March 20, the task force had a conference call to determine the meaning and scope of “governance” in R-15’s wording, “to assess the RCA’s governance,” and to set a course of action for fulfilling the task force’s mandate.

**Time Frame**

The original recommendation called for the task force to make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016. Due to the difficulty in assembling the group, the task force asked the General Synod Council for an extension. The task force plans on completing its work in the spring of 2018 and bringing a final report to the 2018 General Synod.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator

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**GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL’S RESPONSE TO GENERAL SYNOD 2013 REFERRALS**

Response to *MGS 2013, R-10, p. 72, Transformed and Transforming Implementation Plan*

R-10 (2013)

To instruct the General Synod Council, working with the boards, institutions, agencies, and commissions of the General Synod:

- To develop a clear implementation plan with measurable ends and goals for “Transformed and Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together”;
- To report this plan to the 2014 General Synod;
- To share this plan widely throughout the greater church;
- To report progress on this plan to General Synod annually thereafter.

The GSC finalized ends policy statements regarding Transformed & Transforming at its fall 2014 meeting. The monitoring reports on each of these policy statements included on pages 197 to 207 of these minutes report on the implementation of the priorities of Transformed & Transforming.
Overtures

Purpose of Church Discipline

1. The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick recommends that the General Synod request that the Commission on Church Order add the following to the BCO, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, “Nature of Discipline” (2016 edition, p. 77), as a new section 3 (additions underlined):

Sec. 3. The purpose of church discipline is to benefit people who adhere to it. Any discipline is unholy and contrary to the gospel that can be shown to 1) produce no benefit or fruit of the Spirit in the lives of those who adhere to it; 2) actively cause harm; 3) unjustly burden one group more than another. Spiritually unfruitful, harmful, unjust discipline denies the truths of the gospel and divides the church.

Reasons:

1. Church discipline that produces no benefit or fruit of the Spirit is unholy.

In the RCA’s Book of Church Order, the RCA considers its authority to discipline to be divinely bestowed to the church by Jesus, “to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1; 2016 edition, p. 77). But any church rule or discipline that results in the systematic destruction of human life is an abomination against our Lord Jesus Christ. The RCA has ample reason to abandon it. It does not at all benefit offenders if the threat of church discipline makes people miserable and destroys families and communities.

God’s Holy Spirit yields love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). However, Christians who are LGBTIAQ people and their allies testify that the traditional position on homosexuality is a kind of church discipline that produces no spiritual fruit in their lives. Instead, in their lives, as in our denomination, this position creates enmity, strife, anger, divisions, and sects.

Faithful LGBTIAQ people and their allies who are long-term members of the RCA’s sister denomination, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), contributed personal narratives to a 150-page report that supports same-sex marriage in the church. They describe the heartbreak the traditional position on homosexuality causes them, their partners, family members, and communities even when they are faithful, even when they comply with the position of the church.

They say the church hurts them in five ways.

• Personal Condemnation. The simple fact that their church holds the traditional position on homosexuality causes them pain, as they say: “To be told in strong terms that God does not approve of you acting out a primary drive that comes naturally is devastating.” Reformed Christians have been known to claim they “love the sinner but hate the sin of gay sex.” However, gay and lesbian people do not feel their love but their hatred of the sexuality that God has woven into their personal identity.

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Compelled Celibacy. Celibacy, says the Apostle Paul, is a gift from God and compelling someone to be celibate who does not experience that call puts them at grave risk of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:7). Gay and lesbian Christians in the CRC say they do not experience a divine call to celibacy, they never experience an end to same-sex attraction, and they find no spiritual benefit in church-compelled celibacy at all—only deprivation.

Persecution by Others. Lesbian and gay CRC members say they find themselves subject to the traditional position not only by official actions of church discipline but also by all church members. They say: “All [church members] fear God’s judgment on them for not calling a person they know to be actively sinning to repentance, as stated in Acts 20.” Therefore families and friends must choose between standing with the church and supporting one’s family member or friend: “Parents mourn over gay children who are condemned and ostracized by the church. Marriages are damaged when one parent remains loyal to a gay child while the other disowns the child out of loyalty to the church. Gay people choose between their church and their partner. Loss of a faith community takes a heavy toll.”

Life-Threatening Mental Health. Lesbian and gay people say enforced celibacy causes them “pervasive loneliness and low self-esteem. They experience deep-seated longings for the love, touch, and affirmation that are fundamental to their identity. All around them they see viable partners, opportunities for lifelong partnerships of mutual love and service but the church requires them to sacrifice these for the sake of membership.” These CRC members experience numerous cases of depression, addiction, and suicide. They cite alarming national statistics that correlate family rejection with astronomical rates of homelessness, anxiety, depression, and suicide.

Disastrous Consequences. CRC members explain how the traditional position encourages gay people to hide behind a heterosexual marriage, though they may be caught indulging in forbidden, same-sex affairs. Paul advocates marriage to help people avoid this very same temptation (1 Corinthians 7:5). Thus, their perfectly human inability to forego satisfaction in sexual intimacy—the same kind of intimacy that churches endorse to fortify the fabric of heterosexual lives—damages the lives of their children, spouses, and parents; it destroys families and caring communities.

Based on the five ways our CRC siblings tell us the church’s restriction of marriage to heterosexuals harms faithful LGBTIAQ people, we call Reformed Christians everywhere to stop harmful church discipline of same-sex loving people and restore wholeness and healing to people, families, and communities whom the church has harmed.

2. Discipline must be based on precepts that apply equally to all people.

The RCA’s position requires same-sex loving people to live celibate lives or to marry people to whom they feel no sexual attraction. Thus, the RCA’s position compels a sacrifice from same-sex loving Christians unequal to any required of heterosexual Christians. However, a precept is only just if it applies equally to all people, as Martin Luther King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow, and that it is willing to follow itself.²

² In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King used this principle to indict the hypocrisy of white Christian pastors who urged him to cease unlawful demonstrations and wait patiently.
King was echoing the principle that Paul describes in Galatians when he accuses Peter of selectively adhering to Jewish law as a free choice while compelling Jewish law universally on Galatians (Galatians 2:14).

In the case of human sexuality, it is unjust for the RCA to compel some people to lives devoid of satisfying sexual intimacy and the possibility of lifelong sexual partnerships—if the RCA does not compel all people to live this way. This is also contrary to the guidance of Paul who definitively says that celibacy is a gift of the spirit of God given to some, but not all (1 Corinthians 7:7). Therefore, the RCA sins when it compels celibacy on people who do not experience it as a divine call. Paul cautions that to deny the need of some for sexual satisfaction is to invite sexual immorality. Thus, the RCA sins when it encourages same-sex loving people to either be celibate or enter heterosexual marriages because this practice endangers the health, safety, and security of partners, families, children, and communities.

3. It is unjust to modify moral precepts for a majority but not for minorities.

The RCA has modified the Bible’s ethical rules for heterosexual marriage to promote the wellbeing of heterosexuals and to allow for historical changes in culture. The church condemns the practice of polygamy as the sin of adultery even though ancient Israel’s faith leaders practiced polygamy. In the 20th century, the RCA modified Jesus’ prohibition of divorce to accommodate the social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of heterosexuals. Yet the RCA refuses to adapt its rules for marriage to support the social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of people who experience same-sex attraction. By caring only for heterosexual people and failing to care for same-sex loving people, the RCA harms the body of Christ.

4. Justification by faith is an ethical principle enunciated by Paul that requires Christians to adjudicate responsibly between conflicting ethical demands.

The RCA inflicts suffering on lesbian and gay people because of longstanding tradition and its interpretation of Scripture. However, this puts the church in a state of contradiction with Scripture itself. The importance of reexamining Scripture and tradition in light of one’s personal experience of suffering is emphasized in the conversion of the apostle Paul. Paul tells us that as a Pharisee, he embraced Scripture and tradition, excelling so far beyond his peers that he violently pursued the assembly of people who followed Jesus, to the point that he ravaged it (Galatians 1:13-14). As a young Pharisee named Saul, he was so pleased with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4) that he became bloodthirsty for more punishment that would purify his faith:

Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8:2-3).

His excellence in Scripture and tradition so blinded Paul that he witnessed Stephen’s stoning without pausing to consider Stephen’s extraordinary trust in God.

To explain how he went from being the persecutor of the church to the church’s great evangelist, Paul says that it pleased God to reveal God’s Son in him (Galatians 1:16). The author of Luke and Acts dramatized this revelation with a
stroke of blinding light and an audible voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” and then, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5). Jesus identifies himself with Saul’s victims. Paul experiences Jesus directly in the suffering of Paul’s victims.

To Paul’s astonishment, Paul discovered God was not on Paul’s side! God was on the side of Paul’s victims, people Paul justifiably bludgeoned and lawfully crucified. Instead of the self-righteous Paul, who aggressively executed the law, God raised as God’s Son the humble Galilean healer who became a willing victim of lawful persecution. This is the scandal of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 5:11), the stumbling block that stops Paul dead in his tracks and causes him to reevaluate his entire moral framework. But there’s more. When Paul says, “It pleased God to reveal Christ in me,” not only does Paul see Christ in the victims of his persecution, but Paul sees Christ, the resurrected victim, in himself. Paul experiences Jesus handing himself over in love for Paul, so that the persecutor in Paul could be replaced and Christ himself could live in Paul. The lawless victim and the lawful persecutor are enfolded together in the love of Christ. This divine embrace—the supersession of moralistic law by God’s more foundational law of love—is true Christian atonement. God’s law of love is a super-law, Paul says, a law that undergirds all other laws:

The entire law is summed up in one Word: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest by one another you are destroyed (Galatians 5:15).

Using adherence to religious tradition to justify discipline that causes only suffering is exactly opposite the intent of the gospel. Unlike the RCA, Paul does not increase his persecution but ceases it entirely and then joins those he persecuted. Paul considers himself to be judged by Jesus. Like Jesus, Paul allows himself to be crucified—for his sin of causing human suffering. If changing one’s mind because one experiences Christ in human suffering were contrary to the gospel, we might not have a gospel today.

The story of Paul’s divine revelation shows that for Christians, the experience of human suffering must be a critical ground for reevaluating our moral positions. Paul first awakened to this revelation in his personal experience. Then, in an entirely new situation, Paul explained how his revelation provided an ethical principle for adjudicating between conflicting moral claims and reevaluating moral decisions, as explained in Matthew’s Judgment of the Nations, saying to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41-46).
doctrine in our communities. He wrote his letter to Galatians to stop Jews who followed Christ from compelling circumcision on Galatians who were not Jews. Later, in his letter to Romans, Paul used the same principle of justification by faith to convince Hellenistic Romans who followed Christ to maintain social solidarity with their Jewish neighbors who were persecuted by Rome (Romans 5:1-15). In the same way, Classis New Brunswick seeks to stop the RCA from compelling faithful LGBTIAQ Christians to lifelong celibacy simply because they are not heterosexual.

Like Paul, Reformed Christians who hold the traditional position on homosexuality may be theologically rigorous, faithful people. Like Paul, they may be supremely skeptical about departing from tradition and changing biblical interpretation. That is why Paul tells us that the only way for Christians to be justified in our moral reasoning is to follow Jesus, crucified and resurrected (Galatians 2:16). Paul understood the cross of Christ to be a giant direction marker or billboard, an ethical rule for the Christian application of moral law. Every time we must judge between executing a law and the welfare of people whom the law is to protect, we must constantly privilege our care for the law’s victims. *This* is what distinguishes us as Christians in the world. In the resurrection of Jesus, God affirmed that God is always on the side of people who are harmed by our merciless adherence to law.

5. Acts of the Apostles urges us to remain open to personal revelation in order to experience the suffering of Christ in people who are harmed by church discipline.

A conversion like Paul’s is a holy and personal experience. Revelation happens when each of us is guided by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves some of us when we read personal stories of faithful LGBTIAQ Christians. Yet the Holy Spirit is most likely to move us when we are in the physical presence of a person who is suffering, someone who, like Paul, bears the marks of Jesus, the stigmata of the cross (Galatians 6:17). When we perceive the marks of our idolatrous punishment etched in the flesh of their body and in the church-endorsed torment of their souls, we must blind ourselves to the requirements of law and tradition. We must suspend our deadly judgments. Blindly, we follow Jesus because we Christians are justified by faith alone.

One by one, the power of the Holy Spirit converts us. Thus we hear about a steady stream of conversions of formerly non-affirming parents after their beloved children come out as gay or transgender. We are moved by the stories of faith leaders like the ministers and elders of San Francisco’s City Church. In March 2015, City Church leaders changed their membership rules because they were converted by the suffering of faithful, loving gay couples in their congregation. As people who experience Christ crucified in the church’s persecution of LGBTIAQ people, we in Classis New Brunswick need no further justification to disavow any rule, guideline, liturgy, judicial decision, or edict that supports the RCA’s restriction of marriage to heterosexual relationships.

Sadly, many Reformed Christians do not understand Christ’s crucifixion as a divine “stop sign” meant to halt our very human trait of destroying people in our zeal to be seen by God as righteous in the law. When people suffer because of church discipline, some Reformed Christians may tell themselves, “This is God’s will.” Like Paul before his conversion, they cannot see the crucified Christ in the people they persecute. They judge faithful, same-sex couples to be unrepentant
sinners. They refuse to reexamine the biblical interpretation that drives them to confront, disparage, and discipline openly gay and lesbian people and their allies. They long to purify the church of our defiling presence. They imagine the presence of sinners like us prevents the church from upholding Christ’s one-time atonement for all humanity’s sins. Tragically, they miss the mark. Jesus handed himself over to be crucified in order to show us how wrong we can be when we follow tradition and scriptural interpretation without love for the suffering of people. In his willing crucifixion, Jesus expanded upon the holy truth that each of us is created in the image of God. When we use the law to destroy one another, it is God we destroy. God suffers on the cross. God raised his beloved son from the dead to prove to us that, when it comes to God’s mercy, our only hope is to let go of the law and let God take over.

6. To deny the blessing of the church to faithful, committed same-sex couples is harmful church discipline.

Throughout Holy Scripture, the social institution of marriage changes and evolves. In the time of Abraham and through that of King David, marriage included the practice of polygamy, which today we consider profoundly unjust, especially to women and children. In the days of Jesus, the first-century Jewish practice of marriage also differed radically from our modern-day religious arrangements. However, what does not change throughout history are the kinds of holy relationships that God calls us to celebrate in union with one another. As people of faith, we celebrate holy relationships defined by qualities that do not change over time. As relational beings, we are called to live in relationship with one another. As image bearers of God, we are made to find emotional, relational, and physical fulfillment in one another. In the soul of another we see reflections of God and of our own selves. We reflect God’s love most clearly when we are in relationships defined by unconditional love, mutuality, trust, healthy boundaries, and accountability. We experience holiness in such relationships. When two people cultivate with one another these qualities, they become sacramental presences to one another and visible expressions of the invisible love and grace of God—to their families, to their friends, and to their community. To withhold the blessing of the church from same-sex couples is unholy discipline that harms people, families, communities, and the church.

In response to Overture 1 the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-17**
To deny Overture 1. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. Proposed Section 3 is already implied in Sections 1 and 2.
2. Proposed Section 3 is a commentary on Sections 1 and 2. Our church order does not typically include commentary.
Take Separate Declarative Votes on Constitutional Amendments

2. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:
1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:
   a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.
   b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.
   c. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.
   d. It confirms that a previous General Synod, and the classes, have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.

Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively noncontroversial or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together and voted upon as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice in general for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.
3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a second vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, some kind of process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, they may also encourage the beginning of much-needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so will not come before General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Creating a more intentional process for deliberation about second votes will, inevitably, take more time in General Synod’s process. However, time-saving practices are not as important as wise discernment, and efficiency is not as important as reconciliation. Given the tenuous and conflicted position the RCA now finds itself in, it is time for General Synod to recognize the consequences of abbreviating its process and change course.

3. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:
1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:
   a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.
   b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.
   c. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.
   d. It confirms that a previous General Synod and the classes have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.

Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively noncontroversial or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together and voted upon as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice in general for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression that the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ
in Matthew 18:20 (NRSV), “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Word and Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32 [MGS 2016, pp. 84 and 164]) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a second vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, a process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, it may also encourage the beginning of much-needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so will not come before General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Creating a more intentional process for deliberation about second votes will, inevitably, take more time in General Synod’s process. However, time-saving practices are not as important as wise discernment, and efficiency is not as important as reconciliation. Given the tenuous and conflicted position the RCA now finds itself in, it is time for General Synod to recognize the consequences of abbreviating its process and change course.

4. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates at their tables before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:

1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken:
   a. General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority.
   b. Each classis votes on the amendment.
   c. If two-thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a second, declarative vote.

The benefits of incorporating a second vote in the amendment process include:

a. Two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, allowing General Synod to exercise its full authority and discretion toward amendments.

b. It provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit.

b. It promotes the Constitution as an instrument of unity in the church, rather than an instrument of controversy.

d. It confirms that a previous General Synod and the classes have faithfully sought the will of God for the RCA.
Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members and assemblies of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not incorporated into the agenda, it can leave the impression the second, declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet the second vote is not a rubber stamp. It is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility and wisdom for the RCA. By incorporating discussion into the agenda, it will help delegates recognize their legitimate and expected participation toward the second vote.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in his or her deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the church are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility when changing the Constitution to enable delegates to discern the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

40. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to take a separate declarative vote on each amendment to the Constitution, and to give time for conversation among delegates, at their tables, before each declarative vote is taken.

Reasons:
1. In the process of amending the Constitution of the RCA, three steps are taken: (1) General Synod votes in favor of the amendment by a simple majority, (2) each classis votes on the amendment, (3) if two thirds of the classes have voted to approve the amendment, General Synod, in a subsequent year, ratifies the amendment through a declarative vote. The benefits of incorporating a declarative vote in the amendment process include: (a) two separate General Synods consider the changes of the Constitution, (b) it provides the whole RCA the gift of time (at least a full year) to discern the work of the Holy Spirit, and (c) to confirm that a previous General Synod, and the classes, have correctly determined the will of God for the RCA.

Understandably, in years when amendments are relatively non-controversial, or obviously necessary, these declarative votes have been grouped together, and voted upon, as one motion—without an expectation that discussion is needed. However, this may not be the best practice, in general, for General Synod. Constitutional changes can significantly affect the way members, and assemblies, of the RCA live together. When grouping these votes into one motion, and when discussion is not built into the agenda, it can leave the impression the declarative vote is simply a “rubber stamp” on the will of classes. Yet, the declarative vote is not a rubber stamp—it is, in fact, an essential step in a process by which General Synod administers its unique responsibility, and wisdom, for the RCA.

2. It is the responsibility of each General Synod delegate to represent Christ in their deliberation and voting. To do so, one should not forget the words of Christ in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there
among them.” In the Reformed tradition, we believe the assemblies of the Church (where two or three—or more—are gathered) are the best way to discern God’s will. As such, it is valuable for delegates to take time to consider the work of the Holy Spirit, first in prayerful conversation with their congregations and classes, but also among other General Synod delegates. General Synod is a distinct assembly of the RCA, and if delegates truly desire to hear Christ speak through General Synod, their own discernment process is best served by including the voices of other General Synod delegates. Yet, when a delegate is not intentionally given time with other delegates of General Synod to discuss their declarative vote, the nature of their gathering in Christ’s name is needlessly limited. General Synod, as a distinct assembly of the RCA, has a responsibility, when changing the Constitution, to ensure its delegates have discerned the will of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, together.

3. The potential changes to the Constitution (specifically R 16-14 and R 16-32) that may be before General Synod 2017 for a declarative vote are attached to a long history of conflict, divisiveness, and hurt in the RCA. If General Synod is to take a declarative vote on these amendments, some kind of process of reconciliation must accompany it. While short conversations around tables may only be a small gesture toward the work of reconciliation, it may also encourage the beginning of much needed relational change. Moreover, even if these two amendments do not pass the two-thirds threshold among the classes (and so do not warrant a declarative vote by General Synod), the practice of talking together as delegates remains valuable to the future work of reconciliation.

4. Throughout the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics during this last year, we have worked to create a space of learning among our members. Our intention has been to better understand the nature of the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the ramifications of the proposed recommendations and amendments that have come from the Special Council and General Synod. In that process we have been encouraged by how we have grown—not only in knowledge of the issues, but also how we have grown closer to each other. Our hope is that as General Synod meets, delegates will also be able to engage in such learning—especially with those they otherwise do not know, nor typically interact with, at General Synod.

Separate declarative votes were taken on each amendment to the Constitution adopted by the 2016 General Synod and approved by a vote of at least two-thirds of the classes. Before voting, delegates discussed the amendments around their tables. See the Report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod, p. 42.

Identify and Minister to Breakdown in Community; Education around Constitution, Polity, and Unity in Christ; Affirmation/Declaration Regarding Interpretation of Scripture; P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary

5. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of Greater Palisades is seeing that the distress of community in the RCA and in the General Synod is the most important and most urgent challenge facing the General Synod today.
2. Reformed assemblies have two basic functions: *koinonia* (fellowship, relationship, community) and *episcope* (oversight, governance). And the two are deeply related. The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. Put negatively, to the extent that people do not know each other and do not trust each other, they will not be able to think and work well together. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.

3. We see in the life of the RCA as a whole that people and groups are not communicating well between the echo chambers in which we live. Across the RCA, people are not understanding why others in the church who have perspectives different than their own think what they think and feel what they feel. People are attributing to others intentions they would never attribute to themselves. The RCA is lacking the means to communicate across lines of difference, to let off steam throughout the year, to make our cases, to make ourselves known to each other. The cost is a breakdown of trust across the RCA. We note that trusting is different than agreeing. And while agreeing is not a necessary condition for either community or governance, trusting is.

   a. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility to positively nurture community in the RCA.
      i. A mechanism from the past we can point to as an example of community-nurturing is the “Flak and Flattery” section of the *Church Herald*, in which members would read perspectives from beyond their own context. Apart from whether or not folks agreed, those letters at least nurtured knowing each other. This overture mentions “Flak and Flattery” not to communicate nostalgia for the *Church Herald*. We mention it as an example of what we see missing in the *RCA Today*.

   b. Additionally, we believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to mitigate what is hurting community in the RCA.
      i. We think, as an example, of the impact on community of the success of TEA and MFCA (the good of which we absolutely do not dispute, but the cost of which we believe can be addressed), which have brought into the RCA many ministers who do not share a common seminary formation experience.
      ii. We think, as an example, of the ever-polarizing North American cultural context, to which the RCA as a communion is not immune. It will take hard, focused, intentional work if the RCA is to evade capture by the polarizing powers. We believe that work merits addressing the problem of community as a matter of the synod’s highest priority.

4. We see in the life of the General Synod assembly a microcosm of the RCA as a whole. Many delegates come to the synod meeting not knowing each other and not trusting each other. They have to overcome enormous obstacles to get to workable community. This at a time when the church urgently needs the synod to do governance well. Yet it is not working well.

   a. In the absence of real community, and in the consequent absence of thoughtful governance, we see the synod increasingly becoming a body over-determined by arid procedure and in which dialogue is replaced by mere voting.

   b. The synod’s procedural rules make allowance for things like anonymous voting, calling the question, limiting speaking time, replacing a year’s worth of considered work with last-minute substitute amendments. While rules like these may serve other worthy values, we believe they do not promote
the value of trust a Reformed assembly needs today.

c. We wonder if the synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday or to allow the synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.

d. We believe it may be counterproductive to community among delegates for the synod to consider shortening its meeting time or move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counterproductive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory committee structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict amelioration, the GSC’s program, or other values.

6. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of Mid-Hudson is seeing that the distress of community in the RCA and in the General Synod is the most important and most urgent challenge facing the General Synod today.

2. Reformed assemblies have two basic functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). And the two are deeply related. The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. Put negatively, to the extent that people do not know each other and do not trust each other, they will not be able to think and work well together. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.

3. We see in the life of the RCA as a whole that people and groups are not communicating well between the echo chambers in which we live. Across the RCA, people are not understanding why others in the church who have perspectives different than their own think what they think and feel what they feel. People are attributing to others intentions they would never attribute to themselves. The RCA is lacking the means to communicate across lines of difference, to let off steam throughout the year, to make our cases, to make ourselves known to each other. The cost is a breakdown of trust across the RCA. We note that trusting is different than agreeing. And while agreeing is not a necessary condition for either community or governance, trusting is.

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i. A mechanism from the past we can point to as an example of community-nurturing is the “Flak and Flattery” section of the Church Herald, in which members would read perspectives from beyond their own context. Apart from whether or not folks agreed, those letters at least nurtured knowing each other. This overture mentions “Flak and Flattery” not to communicate nostalgia for the Church Herald. We mention it as an example of what we see missing in the RCA Today.

b. Additionally, we believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to mitigate what is hurting community in the RCA.
We think, as an example, of the impact on community of the success of TEA and MFCA (the good of which we absolutely do not dispute, but the cost of which we believe can be addressed), which have brought into the RCA many ministers who do not share a common seminary formation experience.

We think, as an example, of the ever-polarizing North American cultural context, to which the RCA as a communion is not immune. It will take hard, focused, intentional work if the RCA is to evade capture by the polarizing powers. We believe that work merits addressing the problem of community as a matter of the synod’s highest priority.

4. We see in the life of the General Synod assembly a microcosm of the RCA as a whole. Many delegates come to the synod meeting not knowing each other and not trusting each other. They have to overcome enormous obstacles to get to workable community. This at a time when the church urgently needs the synod to do governance well. Yet it is not working well.
   a. In the absence of real community, and in the consequent absence of thoughtful governance, we see the synod increasingly becoming a body over-determined by arid procedure and in which dialogue is replaced by mere voting.
   b. The synod’s procedural rules make allowance for things like anonymous voting, calling the question, limiting speaking time, replacing a year’s worth of considered work with last-minute substitute amendments. While rules like these may serve other worthy values, we believe they do not promote the value of trust a Reformed assembly needs today.
   c. We wonder if the synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday or to allow the synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.
   d. We believe it may be counterproductive to community among delegates for the synod to consider shortening its meeting time or move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counterproductive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory committee structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict amelioration, the GSC’s program, or other values.

7. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the General Synod Council to identify areas in which the community and communication across the Reformed Church in America has broken down, as well as the consequences to which this breakdown has led in regard to the process of governance, with report back to the General Synod in 2018 with recommendations to address these matters.

Reasons:

1. The Classis of Schenectady recognizes that there has been a fundamental breakdown in communication, both within the General Synod itself and throughout the denomination as a whole, and that this has had a negative effect on relationships within the denomination.

2. Reformed assemblies have two basic, deeply related functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.
8. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to identify ways to minister to (1) the breakdown of communication and community in the church and synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:
1. The Classis of Schoharie is seeing a breakdown in communication, both within the General Synod itself and throughout the denomination as a whole, and this has had a negative impact on relationships within the denomination.
2. Reformed assemblies have two basic and related functions: *koinonia* (fellowship, relationship, community) and *episcope* (oversight, governance). The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. We see that the General Synod is suffering in its governance capacity because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the synod as an assembly. We believe the synod has the capacity and responsibility to address and make room for both.

10. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the LGBTQ community’s inclusion in the life and witness of the RCA.

Reasons:
1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. Misunderstanding about the nature of RCA polity—specifically in regard to the authority of consistories and classes—has led to much of the conflict surrounding the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the RCA. Such misunderstandings, if not corrected, will only continue to fuel acrimony in the RCA.

For example, if the amendments are not ratified by the RCA, the current situation will remain problematic for those who advocated for their inclusion in the Constitution. Indeed, it is highly likely that a failure to ratify these amendments will create even more problems for classes where churches have threatened to leave the RCA. However, a greater appreciation of RCA polity may help those concerned about future affiliation with the RCA come to terms with the current reality.

Conversely, if these amendments are ratified, a realistic understanding of the RCA’s Constitution and polity suggests consistories and classes will interpret these amendments differently. General Synod delegates must understand that the authority of a consistory, and subsequently a classis, to interpret and adjudicate these amendments is not an accident but by design and, inevitably, the adherence to these amendments will be dealt with differently throughout the RCA. While it may seem to some proponents of the amendments that these changes will decrease the conflict in the RCA, a study of how RCA polity works suggests the conflict will actually increase. Again, it is highly likely that even if these amendments are ratified, greater acrimony will be created when those who want uniformity of practice in the RCA are not satisfied with non-uniform outcomes.
If General Synod 2017 authentically intends to pursue unity, purity, and peace for the whole of the RCA, it will necessarily need to correct future misunderstandings of the Constitution and RCA polity—specifically as they pertain to the authority of consistories and classes.

2. In an oversight of process, delegates of General Synod 2016 were not given the opportunity to learn about existing RCA polity as a way forward for the RCA. The Special Council created by General Synod 2015, which was given the task of recommending a constitutional pathway forward for the RCA, in its initial report, made a recommendation to affirm existing RCA polity. This recommendation was regarded by the Special Council as having the greatest consensus among delegates. However, by the time General Synod 2016 met and considered the other recommendations of the Special Council, the affirmation of existing RCA polity was removed—effectively eliminating the Special Council’s most agreed-upon recommendation from General Synod 2016’s consideration and allowing misunderstanding of RCA polity to continue. If delegates of General Synod 2016 had discussed this recommendation as originally intended by the Special Council, delegates would have had a better understanding of the consequences of the other recommendations. This oversight in process between the Special Council and General Synod needs to be corrected.

3. At the heart of the RCA’s conflict is a fundamental disagreement on how Holy Scripture should be interpreted in light of shifting societal definitions of gender identity and sexual orientation. However, this disagreement has revealed a second problem for the RCA—a lack of appreciation of how the Constitution and RCA polity can, and cannot, help in solving the issues that have arisen. Much frustration and mistrust have grown as attempts to use the polity have yielded little change. This is not the fault of the RCA’s polity but a failure of those who try to use the polity to achieve ends the polity cannot create—such as actually changing the hearts and minds of how people interpret Holy Scripture with regard to the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the church.

4. In this toxic environment of frustration and mistrust, there is an additional consequence to General Synod—those to whom General Synod delegates would typically look for wisdom on matters of a way forward (commissions, committees, special councils, professors of theology, General Synod staff, etc.) are too often viewed with suspicion. If delegates of General Synod have lost trust in their leaders to the point that leaders’ voices are dismissed from deliberation, it behooves all General Synod delegates, for the good of the RCA, to understand the Constitution and RCA polity well enough to still complete General Synod’s mandate to speak for the RCA. Additionally, it behooves those in leadership to earn back delegates’ trust by relating and communicating more effectively about what can and cannot be achieved with the Constitution and RCA polity.

5. While RCA polity and the Constitution are limited in solving the fundamental disagreements in the RCA, they can be guiding lights in a process toward that end. If we spend time understanding how RCA polity and the Constitution have helped the RCA pursue purity in tension (if not in balance) along with unity and peace, we will come to realize “the way forward” for the RCA is already available to us in the Constitution and the polity.

11. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the inclusion of LGBTQ Christians in the full life and witness of the RCA.
Reasons:

1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32 [MGS 2016, pp. 84 and 164]) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. Misunderstanding about the nature of RCA polity—specifically in regards to the authority of consistories and classes—has led to much of the conflict surrounding the inclusion of the LGBTQ Christians in the RCA. Such misunderstandings, if not corrected, will only continue to fuel acrimony in the RCA.

For example, if the amendments are not ratified by the RCA, the current situation will remain problematic for those who advocated for their inclusion in the Constitution. Indeed, it is highly likely that a failure to ratify these amendments will create even more problems for classes where churches have threatened to leave the RCA. However, a greater appreciation of RCA polity may help those concerned about future affiliation with the RCA come to terms with the current reality.

Conversely, if these amendments are ratified, a realistic understanding of the RCA’s Constitution and polity suggests consistories and classes will interpret these amendments differently. General Synod delegates must understand that the authority of a consistory, and subsequently of a classis, to interpret and adjudicate these amendments is not an accident but by design and, inevitably, the adherence to these amendments will be dealt with differently throughout the RCA. While it may seem to some proponents of the amendments that these changes will decrease the conflict in the RCA, a study of how RCA polity works suggests the conflict will actually increase. Again, it is highly likely that even if these amendments are ratified, greater acrimony will be created when those who want uniformity of practice in the RCA are not satisfied with nonuniform outcomes.

If General Synod 2017 authentically intends to pursue unity, purity, and peace for the whole of the RCA, it will necessarily need to correct future misunderstandings of the Constitution and RCA polity—specifically as they pertain to the authority of consistories and classes.

2. In an oversight of process, delegates of General Synod 2016 were not given the opportunity to learn about existing RCA polity as a way forward for the RCA. The Special Council created by General Synod 2015, which was given the task of recommending a constitutional pathway forward for the RCA, in its initial report, made a recommendation to affirm existing RCA polity. This recommendation was regarded by the Special Council as having the greatest consensus among delegates. However, by the time General Synod 2016 met and considered the other recommendations of the Special Council, the affirmation of existing RCA polity was removed—effectively eliminating the Special Council’s most agreed-upon recommendation from General Synod 2016’s consideration and allowing misunderstanding of RCA polity to continue. If delegates of General Synod 2016 had discussed this recommendation as originally intended by the Special Council, delegates would have had a better understanding of the consequences of the other recommendations. This oversight in process between the Special Council and General Synod needs to be corrected.

3. At the heart of the RCA’s conflict is a fundamental disagreement on how Holy Scripture should be interpreted. However, this disagreement has revealed a second problem for the RCA: a lack of appreciation of how the Constitution and RCA polity can, and cannot, help in solving the issues that have arisen. Much frustration and mistrust have grown as attempts to use the polity have yielded little change. This is not the fault of the RCA’s polity but a failure of those who
try to use the polity to achieve ends the polity cannot create—such as actually changing the hearts and minds of how people interpret Holy Scripture with regard to the inclusion of the LGBTQ Christians in the church.

4. In this toxic environment of frustration and mistrust, there is an additional consequence to General Synod: those whom General Synod delegates would typically look to for wisdom on matters of a way forward (commissions, committees, special councils, professors of theology, General Synod staff, etc.) are too often viewed with suspicion. If delegates of General Synod have lost trust in their leaders to the point that leaders’ voices are dismissed from deliberation, it behooves all General Synod delegates, for the good of the RCA, to understand the Constitution and RCA polity well enough to still complete General Synod’s mandate to speak for the RCA. Additionally, it behooves those in leadership to earn back delegates’ trust by relating and communicating more effectively about what can and cannot be achieved with the Constitution and RCA polity.

5. While RCA polity and the Constitution are limited in solving the fundamental disagreements in the RCA, they can be guiding lights in a process toward that end. If we spend time understanding how RCA polity and the Constitution have helped the RCA pursue purity in tension (if not in balance) along with unity and peace, we will come to realize “the way forward” for the RCA is already available to us in the Constitution and the polity.

12. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to instruct the General Synod Council, working in consultation with the Commissions on Church Order, Christian Discipleship and Education, History, and Theology, to implement as a highest priority actions that educate about the importance of and foster a covenant community within the life of the RCA, for final report to the General Synod of 2020; and further,

that this include an educational component for all delegates to the General Synods of 2018, 2019, and 2020 on the Constitution of the RCA, our polity, and the authority and relationship of the various assemblies of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. The Commission on Church Order raised concerns with the General Synod of 2006 over changes in society that were putting strains on our covenant relationship (MGS 2006, pp. 66-68). We observe that this stress has only gotten worse in recent years and continues to threaten how we work and live together.

2. It is important for the church to reflect on how it has manifested its covenantal relationships among the assemblies, offices, and congregations.

3. In John 13:35, Jesus reminds us that the world knows we are his disciples when they see our love for one another. The church’s witness is strengthened when we understand how we demonstrate to the world how we live together in Christ despite all our disagreements. Pulling together, we are stronger. The Reformed Church has done this through its understanding of doctrine, liturgy, and government, where our covenant is lived out.

13. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution and RCA polity.
Reasons:
1. In the midst of discussion around various overtures and constitutional amendments, it has become clear that many delegates are unclear about matters of our denominational polity. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that it has been many years since many of our ministers have taken polity courses, that elder delegates often never take polity courses at all, and that constant changes to the Book of Church Order have led to delegates often not having the present awareness regarding matters of polity and governance.
2. Providing continuing education for our delegates is beneficial to both the process of the General Synod and the church as a whole.

14. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA’s Constitution and RCA polity.

Reasons:
1. In the midst of discussion around various overtures and constitutional amendments, it has become clear that many delegates are unclear about matters of our denominational polity. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the fact that it has been many years since many of our ministers have taken polity courses, that elder delegates often never take polity courses at all, and that constant changes to the Book of Church Order have led to delegates often not having the present awareness regarding matters of polity and governance.
2. Providing continuing education for our delegates is beneficial to both the process of the General Synod and the church as a whole.

15. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to direct the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education, in consultation with the Commissions on Theology and Christian Unity and the General Synod Council, to provide education and training, including opportunities for practice and reflection, across the denomination to recognize and further the Reformed Church in America’s understanding and practice of unity in Christ, in contrast to uniformity, including the recognition and celebration of the gifts of our diversity, even what may seem incongruent perspectives that arise out of our diversity of theological perspective or biblical interpretation, other than our shared belief in Christ.

Reasons:
1. In the current divisive cultural climate, the false dichotomy of polarization has crept into the church. Scripture reminds the church many times that Christ is our unity (Romans 15:5; Malachi 2:10; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:26-28; John 17:23). It is the church’s responsibility, and highest priority, to practice this reality.
2. Unity in Christ, lived out in mutual respect and continued missional partnership across theological divides, is a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit, witnessing against the cultural temptations toward echo-chamber divisions in which people, even Reformed Christians, associate and listen only to those of like mind, ignoring or consciously dismissing those of like spirit with different perspectives.
3. The Reformed Church in America is at a critical point in which a temptation to define one viewpoint on a topic not related to Christ over and against relationship to each other may divide the church. Throughout Scripture, God implores God’s people to choose relationship with God and others as the “greatest” command (Mark 12:29-31).
4. According to the Belhar Confession, unity is “both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.” In the Belhar, we further confess, “true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.” And further, “We believe this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God.”

5. Placing an emphasis on one “right belief,” other than Christ, over relationship to one another not only divides the church but greatly hinders our witness to the larger world.

29. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to affirm that the Bible is God’s Living Word, which, rather than being static, is continually reinterpreted by the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of human beings, and that this reinterpretation reveals a continuous arc toward greater mercy, acceptance, and justice, reflecting a divine love that has no limit and transcends our human formulations.

Reasons:
1. We must reaffirm our Reformed approach of continually seeking to understand Scripture.
2. Scripture, in numerous instances, models its own reinterpretation: Hosea knew what Scripture commanded regarding sacrifices and offerings, and yet God speaks through him to say, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NRSV). In Matthew 9:13 Jesus explicitly commands the Pharisees to go and learn the meaning of this prophetic word. Jesus continually reframes the law in terms of its intent to bless people by helping them love God, neighbor, stranger, and enemy. Peter and the other apostles knew without question what the law commanded regarding dietary laws and consorting with Gentiles, but the Holy Spirit moved to direct them away from the letter of the law toward its ultimate purpose (see Acts 10:1–11:18), which Paul stated simply, that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10, NKJV).
3. Scripture implicitly reveals the slowness and struggle of God’s people to comprehend God’s true nature. The self-revelation of God occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures under the shadow of human culture and practices. In the New Testament, Peter and others backslide from the revelation of God’s wider welcome, and the dispute between circumcised and uncircumcised continues to obsess the church; nevertheless, the Spirit moves the church at last to heed God’s will. Jesus himself intimates that the church will be given understanding beyond what even he has spoken, through the Holy Spirit. “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything” (John 14:25-26a, NRSV). And, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13a, NRSV).
4. When the church tries to stop this process of leading, sanctification, and transformation by the Holy Spirit, it becomes concretized, constricted in spirit, and fearful in heart. God has sent prophets of reform, as we note God called Martin Luther 500 years ago, to summon the church away from the idolatry of its own self-satisfied certainty.
5. A strict, literalist interpretation of Scripture leads to the inability to correctly understand and teach the meaning of apocalyptic literature, thereby encouraging
millennialist thinking, which is superstitious and dangerous.

6. We must address the ways in which we choose particular passages of Scripture to interpret literally or nonliterally in order to confirm our own preconceptions or prejudices. This slavish misuse of Scripture blinds us to the true intent of the gospel and the leading of the Spirit.

7. LGBTQ inclusion discussion at the Special Council and at General Synod was obstructed by disputes about scriptural interpretation. This and other issues will remain intractable until we reclaim a reasonably unified understanding of Scripture.

30. The Classis of Mid-Hudson, in concern and love for the Reformed Church in America, overtures the General Synod to declare that: 1) God, in unconditional love and grace, freely elects and calls persons into communion with God and with the church; 2) God freely justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies those whom God calls, conforming them to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, and preserving them in God’s salvation; 3) God freely moves and acts to redeem God’s whole creation in ways that surprise and prompt God’s people to reconsider and deepen their current interpretation of Scripture in relation to God’s movement; 4) in response to God’s ongoing, sovereign action in the church, the world, and the lives of individuals, the church is called to speak and to hear in light of God’s Word and what God’s Spirit is doing, and to discern through our assemblies the truth and meaning of this witness for the life, mission, and ministry of the church; and 5) the church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our present interpretation of Scripture, for to do so would be to give more authority to our current interpretation of Scripture rather than to the Triune God, who is still revealing, speaking, and acting. God does not abandon the revelation of Scripture but continually deepens our grasp of that revelation.

Reasons:
1. As a denomination, we are at a critical juncture in our life together. We are poised to rend the body of Christ over the question of what it means to fully include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians in the full ministry and mission of the church. We are, by the grace of God, one body in Jesus Christ, and we are called to manifest the unity that we are given. We acknowledge that manifesting our unity in Christ is always a challenge for the church. We inevitably experience disagreement as we undergo and participate in God’s mission and ministry in our varied contexts. In the midst of disagreement and tension, the church is always free to rend the body rather than stay engaged in the hard work of discerning together the truth of God’s Word and Spirit. As a classis, we implore the RCA to stay in the process of discernment together and to have the biblical and theological conversations that have not yet taken place but that we believe must be had.

We are asking the RCA to take account of the whole witness of Scripture through the interpretive lens of our Reformed confessional Standards. With this overture, we set forth several core Reformed convictions about who God is, what God has done, and what God is doing to redeem the whole creation. We also set forth core Reformed convictions about the church as a creature of God’s Word and Spirit, and its vocation to continually open itself to the ministry of God’s Word and Spirit in search of truth in particular times and places.

We acknowledge that this is a challenging and difficult vocation no matter what we are called to discern together. But it is our vocation, and as a classis, we believe that if we can declare what this overture invites us to declare—the
core wisdom of our Reformed confessions—we will center ourselves and our conversations in the unconditional love and grace of the Triune God, who is the source of our being and our salvation, and whose glory is the goal of all our living. Thus centered, we trust that we can commit ourselves to the good, hard work of ongoing discernment, as we undergo and participate in God’s mission and ministry to make all things new.

2. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God freely elects and calls whom God chooses. The Heidelberg Catechism (HC) states: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). Using virtually the same words, this belief is stated in the Belhar Confession (Belhar, 1). The Belgic Confession elaborates on the nature of God’s grace in election, saying: “God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from … perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works” (Belgic, Article 16). The Canons of Dort describe election as “God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation” (Canons, First Point, Article 7). The Canons further declare that “the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve God’s choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as God’s own possession” (Canons, First Point, Article 10). God’s election “can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God’s chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced” (Canons, First Point, Article 11). Election is then entirely grounded in God, who not only draws the elect to God’s self but also brings to completion the redemption of those whom God has chosen and called.

3. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God justifies, sanctifies, and preserves those whom God calls, finally fully glorifying persons when God’s new creation is fully come. In Romans, Paul writes: “And those whom [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30, NRSV). Those whom God chooses, God justifies; that is, God makes the elect right with God and unfolds in them the fruits and fullness of God’s justification accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is God’s gracious initiative and faithful work that both begins and brings to completion the redemption of those chosen in Christ. “Election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects” (Canons, First Point, Article 9).

The Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that God’s justification completely changes the believer’s situation. The “being made right with God” includes the reality that by God’s “sheer grace,” sinners, through no effort of their own, are granted and credited “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,” as if they “had never sinned nor been a sinner” and as if they “had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient” (HC, Q&A 60). In grace, God not
only grants and credits the elect with Christ’s righteousness and holiness, but also actively effects Christ’s righteousness and holiness in their lives, cleansing them by Christ’s “blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle” (Canons, Second Point, Article 8).

God’s justification cannot be separated from God’s work of sanctification. In Christ, through union with Christ, sinners receive what is not theirs and they become what they are not and cannot be on their own. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, “the Spirit is given also to me, so that, through true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his benefits through true faith, comforts me, and will remain with me forever” (HC, Q&A 53). Baptism is the sign and seal of the Christian’s union with Christ, the visible event that assures us that the Holy Spirit, having joined us to Christ, “has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and live holy and blameless lives” (HC, Q&A 70).

Through faith that is produced in us by the hearing of God’s Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit, “[God] regenerates us and makes us new creatures, causing us to live a new life and freeing us from the slavery of sin” (Belgic, Article 24). Our sanctification consists of the Spirit’s daily work of causing us to die to sin and rise to new life and obedience. The Canons of Dort describe regeneration, or sanctification, as the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God’s work is done, it remains in human power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture … teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God, but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, people themselves, by that grace which they have received, are also rightly said to believe and to repent (Canons, Third and Fourth Points, Article 12).

Joined to Christ, activated and motivated by God’s Spirit, persons are renewed. Their wills are conformed to the will of God, and they become responsive to what God has done and is doing in their lives and in the life of the world. Yet, despite the mystery and power of God’s Spirit at work in us, we struggle against sin throughout our whole lives. The Belgic Confession says of Christians, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him” (Belgic, Article 29). In the words of the Heidelberg, “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning” of obedience to God’s commandments; “[n]evertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (HC, Q&A 114).
We are unable to perfectly love God and our neighbors, but in full assurance of God’s saving grace and faithfulness, we await our “entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Belgic, Article 27). God keeps God’s promises. Those whom God chooses and calls God justifies and sanctifies and ultimately glorifies. It is the action of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, past, present, and future—which begins and completes our redemption, activating us to believe and receive with thanksgiving what in grace God has given and promised.

4. The biblical witness shows us again and again that God’s free and sovereign action surprises God’s people and challenges them to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture, theological understanding, and missional practice. God impinges upon individuals and communities, recalling them to what they have forgotten, and revealing God’s self and God’s purposes in ways previously inconceivable. Israel’s prophets received a special measure of God’s Spirit and were called to reinterpret and help the people re-understand the meaning of the Torah. When the people of Israel became obsessed about making the proper sacrifices to God as a way to fulfill their covenant obligations and righteousness, the prophets reminded them that what God requires, what God wants, is that they do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (see Micah 6:6-8). The Hebrew Scriptures have a great deal of quite clear instruction about making the right kinds of sacrifices (see Leviticus 1-7, 12, 14, 16). It is an easier set of instructions to follow than the call to do justice and love kindness. The people’s preoccupation with right sacrifice prevented them from discerning and living into the deeper meaning of what God commands and desires as a whole (see Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Isaiah 1:11-17). What God wants, what love of God looks like, is obedience to God’s rules for right living in community where love of neighbor, strangers, aliens, slaves, widows, orphans—love of the little, the least, the weakest, and the most at risk—is a sharing in God’s righteousness. Prophets, in the power of the Spirit, disrupted the settled arrangements and understandings of Scripture and tradition. Through the prophets, God’s Spirit speaks and calls the people to listen less selectively and more comprehensively to the Word of God in Scripture.

God’s free and sovereign action in Jesus Christ, who is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit and is himself God’s Word made flesh, points to the most profound surprise and challenge to the people’s interpretation of Scripture and their theological understanding. In light of Jesus Christ, in light of their experience of God’s presence and God’s kingdom in him, in light of Jesus’ own articulation of his mission through the lens of Isaiah’s suffering servant, some in the Jewish community were compelled to reinterpret the Hebrew Scriptures and to see there what they previously had not been able to see. God’s Davidic Messiah could be a king who acts like a servant to all, accepts a crown of thorns, does not return violence with violence, and is finally hanged upon a tree to die, despite all of the contrary expectations that the people held based on their interpretation of the Scriptures.

Because of what they witnessed in the person and life of Jesus, because of the presence and power of the Spirit in Jesus and in them, Jesus’ followers came to understand that Jesus himself both taught and embodied a new and deeper interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures—he knew and loved the Scriptures, and he was himself God’s Word, God’s speech, God’s conversation in the flesh. But this revelation did not come instantaneously. The New Testament shows how difficult it was for religious leaders, committed disciples, and curious crowds to apprehend what Jesus was saying and doing and who he was. While Jesus was
with them in the flesh, their religious world was being turned upside down by God. To many, it seemed that Jesus was playing fast and loose with the Word of God, ignoring and trying to abolish the “Law and the Prophets,” when, in fact, Jesus was doing the exact opposite. Anointed and led by the Spirit, in total trust of God’s love and purpose, Jesus apprehended the profound depth of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus walked humbly with God. He surrendered himself completely to God, opened himself to the unfolding of God’s Word and will, and in perfect obedience and love, Jesus fulfilled—he filled full to overflowing—the whole intent of the Law and Prophets. In so doing, he embraced the heart of the biblical witness more clearly and truly.

In order to perceive and receive the new thing that God was doing in Jesus, members of the community had to surrender their certainty, their unimpeachable clarity about what they assumed Scripture says and means, their settled understanding of who God is and what God will do. They had to risk their lives on the living God who does not stop speaking, moving, and acting in ways that surprise.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people at Pentecost, bearing witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ, all heaven breaks loose on earth. The eschatological age arrives in Jesus Christ. The new heavens and the new earth are aborning. The huddled disciples become apostles, sent in the Spirit to discern and embrace what the Spirit is doing to make all things and all people new. The apostle Peter has no interest in eating unclean food, nor sitting at the table to eat with unclean people. He is not a careless reader of Scripture. He takes seriously the written Word which, on moral grounds, prohibits the eating of certain foods and dining with Gentiles who are defiled and unclean. But, in a vision, God speaks to him and orders him to eat food Peter deems profane. Peter argues with God. But God wins the argument, saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15, NRSV). Before Peter can justify his resistance by citing Scripture, while he is still puzzling over the vision and conversation with God, the Spirit instructs him to go to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. So he goes. Upon arriving there, Peter says to those assembled, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28, NRSV). Cornelius explains that he had a vision in which he was told to ask Peter to come, then says, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (Acts 10:33b, NRSV). Peter tells them all about Jesus, and while he is still speaking, the Spirit falls on them, and some of the “circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45, NRSV). When Peter is asked to explain to the other apostles and believers in Jerusalem why he went to “uncircumcised men” and ate with them, he tells them the whole long story of what had happened and how the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as the Spirit had fallen on them, and he asks his critics, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17, NRSV).

Peter’s experience of and testimony to what the Spirit is doing among the Gentiles is not the end of the conversation between the apostles. But Peter’s testimony is honored. It is listened to and taken seriously as a communication and revelation from God that ultimately prompts the apostles to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture as it relates to association with Gentiles.
Because of who God is and how God continues to move in freedom and love to redeem creation, and because God gathers, equips, and calls the church to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace, communal discernment is and must be a core practice of the church of Jesus Christ. This requires us to listen to one another in love as we discern together what the Spirit of God is doing in our midst, as we minister in our varied contexts. We cannot simply ignore those whose experience of and testimony to the Holy Spirit rubs up against our understanding of the written Word, nor simply dismiss them as persons who “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4b, NRSV). Such judgments have been made by some against others in the RCA. Together, we are undergoing the work of the Triune God in electing, calling, justifying, sanctifying, and ultimately glorifying a people for God’s self. This requires us to welcome and listen to each other in love as we engage in the long, difficult, necessary work of discerning through our assemblies the revelatory interplay of God’s Word and Spirit, deepening our grasp of the heart of the biblical witness. The church will cease its discerning only when the Lord Jesus Christ himself comes again in glory and completes his work of judging the living and the dead.

5. Central to the church’s process of discernment is our opening to the possibility that God is effecting salvation. God is bringing God’s reign. God is redeeming creation in ways that appear to be contrary to our traditions, our contexts of ministry, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our interpretation of Scripture. This would be to give more authority to our current interpretation of Scripture, and our particular cultures and ministry contexts, rather than to the Triune God, who is still revealing, speaking and acting across time, within every earthly culture, and in varied ministry contexts. God does not abandon the revelation of Scripture but continually deepens our grasp of that revelation. This broad and generous working of God is clearly seen in Scripture and summarized in the Belgic Confession: “And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (Belgic, Article 27).

Our contextual interpretations of Scriptures must not, indeed cannot, prevent the action of the Holy Spirit. The very fact that the Bible is recorded in human language speaks of its limits. In our finiteness, human beings can never fully comprehend the fullness of God, who is infinite, and human words can never fully express what God has and does reveal. Human language in and of itself is not a thing that can ever express itself perfectly. Yet God chooses to accommodate God’s self to us, and condescends to use us in our sin and fragility, and appropriates our words to convey that which is divine. This is the true beauty of Scripture—that it is fully human, but that it witnesses to divine things. It contains all the presuppositions of Peter and Paul’s culture, but that does not mean these presuppositions are to dictate or rule our context. This would make the culture of Peter and Paul superior to ours and require us to bow down to first-century culture as a fixed, contextual idol. However, God does not love or hold in esteem one time or people over another, and for us to hold such a view would mean reaping detrimental theological consequences.

Because Scriptural interpretation is always contextual, it is incumbent on our various assemblies to seek the Holy Spirit and to reason together with the mind of Christ. Our assemblies must always be engaged in a search for truth in our
shared life, mission, and ministry if our witness is to have relevance and vitality. This concept of truth that speaks with relevance and vitality is expressed perhaps nowhere better than in the phrase *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—the church reformed and always being reformed. The church’s ongoing discernment of the truth is always grounded in the inseparable relationship of Word and Spirit. The Spirit is always laboring to transform us and to enliven and deepen our grasp of the Word. Assemblies play a critical role in this process of seeking truth that attends to the redemptive interplay of Word and Spirit. The Belgic Confession states that the truth of God “is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself” (Belgic, Article 7). Because of this, assemblies must work to find the truth in a sea of human vanity that longs to make its own understanding the truth. Therefore we are called as assemblies to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1, KJV). Only as assemblies seeking truth in Word and Spirit and longing always to be reforming accordingly can we hope to bear witness with relevance and vitality while maintaining fidelity to our Reformed confessions.

31. The Classis of Schoharie, in concern and love for the Reformed Church in America, overtures the General Synod to declare that: 1) God, in unconditional love and grace, freely elects and calls persons into communion with God and with the church; 2) God freely justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies those whom God calls, conforming them to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, and preserving them in God’s salvation; 3) God freely moves and acts to redeem God’s whole creation in ways that surprise and prompt God’s people to reconsider their current interpretation of Scripture in relation to God’s movement; 4) in response to God’s ongoing, sovereign action in the church, the world, and the lives of individuals, the church is called to speak and to hear in light of God’s Word and what God’s Spirit is doing, and to discern through our assemblies the truth and meaning of this witness for the life, mission, and ministry of the church; and 5) the church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are at odds with our interpretation of Scripture, for to do so would be to give ultimate authority to our interpretation of Scripture rather than to the Triune God who is still revealing, speaking, and acting.

Reasons:

1. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God freely elects and calls whom God chooses. The Heidelberg Catechism states: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (HC, Q&A 54). Using virtually the same words, this belief is stated in the Belhar Confession (Belhar, 1). The Belgic Confession elaborates on the nature of God’s grace in election, saying: “God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from … perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works” (Belgic, Article 16). The Canons of Dort describe election as “God’s unchangeable purpose by which he did the following: Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, God chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. God did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and
the foundation of their salvation” (Canons, First Point, Article 7). The Canons further declare that “the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve God’s choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as God’s own possession” (Canons, First Point, Article 10). God’s election “can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can God’s chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced” (Canons, First Point, Article 11). Election is then entirely grounded in God, who not only draws the elect to God’s self, but also brings to completion the redemption of those whom God has chosen and called.

2. The Reformed tradition unequivocally affirms that the Triune God justifies, sanctifies, and preserves those whom God calls, finally fully glorifying persons when God’s new creation is fully come. In Romans, Paul writes: “And those whom [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). Those whom God chooses, God justifies; that is, God makes the elect right with God and unfolds in them the fruits and fullness of God’s justification accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is God’s gracious initiative and faithful work that both begins and brings to completion the redemption of those chosen in Christ. “Election is the source of every saving good. Faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts, and at last eternal life itself, flow forth from election as its fruits and effects” (Canons, First Point, Article 9).

The Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that God’s justification completely changes the believer’s situation. The “being made right with God” includes the reality that by God’s “sheer grace,” sinners, through no effort of their own, are granted and credited “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,” as if they “had never sinned nor been a sinner” and as if they “had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient” (HC, Q&A 60). In grace, God not only grants and credits the elect with Christ’s righteousness and holiness, but also actively effects Christ’s righteousness and holiness in their lives, cleansing them by Christ’s “blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle” (Canons, Second Point, Article 8).

God’s justification cannot be separated from God’s work of sanctification. In Christ, through union with Christ, sinners receive what is not theirs and they become what they are not and cannot be on their own. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, “the Spirit is given also to me, so that, through true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his benefits through true faith, comforts me, and will remain with me forever” (HC, Q&A 53). Baptism is the sign and seal of the Christian’s union with Christ, the visible event that assures us that the Holy Spirit, having joined us to Christ, “has renewed and sanctified us to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and live holy and blameless lives” (HC, Q&A 70).

Through faith that is produced in us by the hearing of God’s Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit, “[God] regenerates us and makes us new creatures, causing us to live a new life and freeing us from the slavery of sin” (Belgic, Article 24). Our sanctification consists in the Spirit’s daily work of causing us to die to sin and rise to new life and obedience. The Canons of Dort describe regeneration, or sanctification, as
the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God’s work is done, it remains in human power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture … teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God, but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, people themselves, by that grace which they have received, are also rightly said to believe and to repent (Canons, Third and Fourth Points, Article 12).

Joined to Christ, activated and motivated by God’s Spirit, people are renewed. Their wills are conformed to the will of God, and they become responsive to what God has done and is doing in their lives and in the life of the world. Yet, despite the mystery and power of God’s Spirit at work in us, we struggle against sin throughout our whole lives. The Belgic Confession says of Christians, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him” (Belgic, Article 29). In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning” of obedience to God’s commandments; “[n]evertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (HC, Q&A 114).

We are unable to perfectly love God and our neighbors, but in full assurance of God’s saving grace and faithfulness, we await our “entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Belgic, Article 27). God keeps God’s promises. Those whom God chooses and calls God justifies and sanctifies and ultimately glorifies. It is the action of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, past, present, and future—which begins and completes our redemption, activating us to believe and receive with thanksgiving what in grace God has given and promised.

3. The biblical witness shows us again and again that God’s free and sovereign action surprises God’s people and challenges them to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture, theological understanding, and missional practice. God impinges upon individuals and communities, recalling them to what they have forgotten, and revealing God’s self and God’s purposes in ways previously inconceivable. Israel’s prophets receive a special measure of God’s Spirit and are called to reinterpret and help the people re-understand the meaning of the Torah. When the people of Israel become obsessed about making the proper sacrifices to God as a way to fulfill their covenant obligations and righteousness, the prophets remind them that what God requires, what God wants, is that they do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. The Hebrew Scriptures have a great deal of quite clear instruction about making the right kinds of sacrifices. It is an easier set of instructions to follow than the call to do justice. The people’s preoccupation with right sacrifice prevents them from discerning and living into the deeper meaning of what God commands as a whole. What God wants, what love of God looks like, is obedience to God’s rules for right living in community where love of neighbor, strangers, aliens, slaves, widows, orphans—love of the little, the least,
the weakest, and the most at risk—is a sharing in God’s righteousness. Prophets, in the power of the Spirit, disrupt the settled arrangements and understandings of Scripture and tradition. Through the prophets, God’s Spirit speaks and calls the people to listen less selectively and more comprehensively to the Word of God in Scripture.

God’s free and sovereign action in Jesus Christ, who is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit and is himself God’s Word made flesh, points to the most profound surprise and challenge to the people’s interpretation of Scripture and their theological understanding. In light of Jesus Christ, in light of their experience of God’s presence and God’s kingdom in him, in light of Jesus’ own articulation of his mission through the lens of Isaiah’s suffering servant, some in the Jewish community were compelled to reinterpret the Hebrew Scriptures and to see there what they previously had not been able to see. God’s Davidic Messiah could be a king who acts like a servant to all, accepts a crown of thorns, does not return violence with violence, and is finally hanged upon a tree to die, despite all of the contrary expectations that the people held based on their interpretation of the Scriptures.

Because of what they witnessed in the person and life of Jesus, because of the presence and power of the Spirit in Jesus and in them, Jesus’ followers came to understand that Jesus himself both taught and embodied a new interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures—he knew and loved God’s Word, and he was himself God’s Word, God’s speech, God’s conversation in the flesh. But this revelation did not come instantaneously. The New Testament shows how difficult it was for religious leaders, committed disciples, and curious crowds to apprehend what Jesus was saying and doing and who he was. While Jesus was with them in the flesh, their religious world was being turned upside down by God. To many, it seemed that Jesus was playing fast and loose with the Word of God, ignoring and trying to abolish the “Law and the Prophets,” when, in fact, Jesus was doing the exact opposite. Anointed and led by the Spirit, in total trust of God’s love and purpose, Jesus apprehended the profound depth of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus walked humbly with God. He surrendered himself completely to God, opened himself to the unfolding of God’s Word and will, and in perfect obedience and love, Jesus fulfilled—he filled full to overflowing—the whole intent of the Law and Prophets.

In order to perceive and receive the new thing that God was doing in Jesus, members of the community had to surrender their certainty, their unimpeachable clarity about what Scripture says and means, their settled understanding of who God is and what God will do. They had to risk their lives on the living God, who does not stop speaking, moving, and acting in ways that surprise.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on all people at Pentecost, bearing witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ, all heaven breaks loose on earth. The eschatological age arrives. The new heavens and the new earth are aborning. The huddled disciples become apostles, sent in the Spirit to discern and embrace what the Spirit is doing to make all things and all people new. The apostle Peter has no interest in eating unclean food, nor sitting at table to eat with unclean people. He is not a careless reader of Scripture. He takes seriously the written Word, which, on moral grounds, prohibits the eating of certain foods and dining with Gentiles who are defiled and unclean. But, in a vision, God speaks to him and orders him to eat food Peter deems profane. Peter argues with God. But God wins the argument, saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call
profane” (Acts 10:15). Before Peter can justify his resistance by citing Scripture, while he is still puzzling over the vision and conversation with God, the Spirit instructs him to go to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. So he goes. Upon arriving there, Peter says to those assembled, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Cornelius explains that he had a vision in which he was told to ask Peter to come, then says, “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (Acts 10:33b). Peter tells them all about Jesus, and while he is still speaking, the Spirit falls on them, and some of the “circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). When Peter is asked to explain to the other apostles and believers in Jerusalem why he went to “uncircumcised men” and ate with them, he tells them the whole, long story of what had happened and how the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as the Spirit had fallen on them, and he asks his critics, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

Peter’s experience of and testimony to what the Spirit is doing among the Gentiles is not the end of the conversation between the apostles. But Peter’s testimony is honored. It is listened to and taken seriously as a communication and revelation from God that ultimately prompts the apostles to reconsider their interpretation of Scripture as it relates to association with Gentiles.

Because of who God is and how God continues to move in freedom and love to redeem creation, and because God gathers, equips, and calls the church to be a sign and instrument of God’s grace, communal discernment is and must be a core practice of the church of Jesus Christ. This requires us to listen to one another in love as we discern together what the Spirit of God is doing in our midst, as we minister in our varied contexts. We cannot simply ignore those whose experience of and testimony to the Holy Spirit rubs up against our understanding of the written Word, nor simply dismiss them as persons who “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4b). Such judgments have been made by some against others in the RCA. Together, we are undergoing the work of the Triune God in electing, calling, justifying, sanctifying, and ultimately glorifying a people for God’s self. This requires us to welcome and listen to each other in love as we engage in the long, difficult, necessary work of discerning through our assemblies the revelatory interplay of God’s Word and Spirit. The church will cease its discerning only when the Lord Jesus Christ himself comes again in glory and completes his work of judging the living and the dead.

4. Central to the church’s process of discernment is our opening to the possibility that God is effecting salvation, God is bringing God’s reign, God is redeeming creation in ways that appear to be contrary to our traditions, our contexts of ministry, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The church does not have the authority or the ability to foreclose on the possibility that the Spirit will act and effect God’s salvation in ways that are sometimes at odds with our interpretation of Scripture. This would be to give ultimate authority to our interpretation of Scripture, and our particular cultures and ministry contexts, rather than to the Triune God who is still speaking and acting across time, within every earthly culture, and in varied ministry contexts. This broad and generous working of God is clearly seen in Scripture and summarized in the
Belgic Confession: “And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (Belgic, Article 27).

Our contextual interpretations of Scriptures must not, indeed cannot, prevent the action of the Holy Spirit. The very fact that the Bible is recorded in human language speaks of its limits. In our finiteness, human beings can never fully comprehend the fullness of God, who is infinite, and human words can never fully express what God has and does reveal. Human language in and of itself is not a thing that can ever express itself perfectly. Yet God chooses to accommodate God’s self to us, and condescends to use us in our sin and fragility, and appropriates our words to convey that which is divine. This is the true beauty of Scripture—that it is fully human, but that it witnesses to divine things. It contains all the presuppositions of Peter and Paul’s culture, but that does not mean these presuppositions are to dictate or rule our context. This would make the culture of Peter and Paul superior to ours and require us bow down to first-century culture as a fixed, contextual idol. However, God does not love or hold in esteem one time or people over another, and for us hold such a view would mean reaping detrimental theological consequences.

Because Scriptural interpretation is always contextual, it is incumbent on our various assemblies to seek the Holy Spirit and to reason together with the mind of Christ. Our assemblies must always be engaged in a search for truth in our shared life, mission, and ministry if our witness is to have relevance and vitality. This concept of truth that speaks with relevance and vitality is expressed perhaps nowhere better than in the phrase *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church always reforming). Over and above this, truth is always grounded in the inseparable relationship of Word and Spirit. Assemblies play a critical role in this process of seeking truth that attends to the redemptive interplay of Word and Spirit. The Belgic Confession states that the truth of God “is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself” (Belgic, Article 7). Because of this, assemblies must work to find the truth in a sea of human vanity that longs to make its own understanding the truth. Therefore, we are called as assemblies to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1, KJV; Belgic, Article 3). Only as assemblies seeking truth in Word and Spirit and longing to always be reforming accordingly can we hope to bear witness with relevance and vitality while maintaining fidelity to our Reformed confessions.

5. As a denomination, we are at a critical juncture in our life together. We are poised to rend the body of Christ over the questions of what it means to fully include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians in the full ministry and mission of the church. As a classis, we implore the RCA to stay engaged in conversation and discernment, taking account of the whole witness of Scripture through the interpretive lens of our confessional tradition, and in light of the ongoing movement of God’s Spirit in our various contexts of ministry. We acknowledge that this is a challenging and difficult spiritual practice no matter what we are called to discern together. But we humbly and hopefully believe that if we can declare what this overture invites us to declare and embrace—the core wisdom of our Reformed confessions—we will center ourselves and our conversations in the unconditional, powerful, transforming love and grace of the Triune God who is the source of our being and our salvation, and whose glory is the goal of all our living, both now and forevermore.
41. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to instruct the General Synod Council to create and implement a process of learning during all-synod advisory committee time at General Synod 2018. This learning process would include information on the RCA's Constitution, RCA polity, and the authority of consistories and classes in the matter of the LGBTQ's inclusion in the life and witness of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. Regardless of whether or not the amendments to the Constitution about marriage (R 16-14 and R 16-32) are ratified, it is obvious the RCA will still need a “way forward” after General Synod 2017. For example, if the amendments are not ratified by the RCA, will those who advocated for their inclusion in the Constitution be willing to accept this? Or will it actually fuel greater acrimony in classes where churches have threatened to leave the RCA? Conversely, if these amendments are ratified, a realistic understanding of the RCA’s Constitution and polity suggests consistories and classes will interpret these amendments differently. Do General Synod delegates understand that the authority of a consistory, and subsequently a classis, to interpret and adjudicate these amendments is not an accident, but by design? Do they understand why our Constitution and polity work this way? And, will those who want uniformity of practice in the RCA be satisfied when, inevitably, the adherence to these amendments are dealt with differently throughout the RCA? While it may seem to some proponents of the amendments that these changes will decrease the conflict in the RCA, a study of how RCA polity works suggests the conflict will actually increase. In fact, in even asking classes to take this vote, the only reasonably assumed outcomes look like greater division. If General Synod 2017 authentically intends to pursue unity, purity, and peace for the whole of the RCA, it will necessarily need to correct future misunderstandings of the Constitution and RCA polity—specifically as it pertains to the authority of consistories and classes.

2. The Special Council, created by General Synod 2015 and given the task of recommending a constitutional pathway forward for the RCA, offered, in its initial report, that one way forward for the RCA was to affirm existing RCA polity. This way forward was regarded in the Special Council’s initial report to have the greatest consensus among delegates. However, by the time General Synod 2016 met and considered the other recommendations of the Special Council, the affirmation of existing RCA polity was removed—effectively eliminating the Special Council’s most agreed-upon recommendation from General Synod 2016’s consideration. This oversight in process between the Special Council and General Synod needs to be corrected.

3. At the heart of the RCA’s conflict is a fundamental disagreement on how Holy Scripture should be interpreted in light of shifting societal definitions of gender identity and sexual orientation. However, this disagreement has revealed a second problem for the RCA—a lack of appreciation of how the Constitution and RCA polity, can, and cannot, help in solving the issues that have arisen. Much frustration and mistrust have grown as attempts to use the polity have yielded little change. This is not the fault of the RCA’s polity, but a failure of those who try to use the polity to achieve ends the polity cannot create—such as actually changing the hearts and minds of how people interpret Holy Scripture in regard to the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the church.

4. In this toxic environment of frustration and mistrust, there is an additional consequence to General Synod—those whom General Synod delegates would typically look to for wisdom on matters of a way forward (commissions, committees, Special Councils, General Synod professors, General Synod Council staff, etc.) are too often viewed with suspicion. If delegates of General Synod
have lost trust in their leaders to the point that leaders’ voices are dismissed from deliberation, it behooves all General Synod delegates, for the good of the RCA, to understand the Constitution and RCA polity well enough to still complete General Synod’s mandate to speak for the RCA. Thus, it behooves all delegates to have a more comprehensive understanding of the Constitution and RCA polity. Additionally, it behooves those in leadership to earn back delegates’ trust by relating, and communicating, more effectively about what can, and cannot, be achieved with the Constitution and RCA polity.

5. While RCA polity and the Constitution are limited in solving the fundamental disagreements in the RCA, they can be guiding lights in a process toward that end. If we spend time understanding how RCA polity and the Constitution have helped the RCA pursue purity in tension (if not in balance) along with unity and peace, we will come to realize “the way forward” for the RCA is already available to us in the Constitution and the polity.

43. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct its General Synod Council to implement as a matter of its highest priority actions that minister to what is not working in the life both of the RCA and of the General Synod in respect to (1) the breakdown of community in the church and General Synod, and (2) the consequent cost of that breakdown to processes of governance.

Reasons:

1. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is seeing that the distress of community in the RCA and in the General Synod is the most important and most urgent challenge facing the General Synod today.

2. Reformed assemblies have two basic functions: koinonia (fellowship, relationship, community) and episcope (oversight, governance). And the two are deeply related. The governance function of the assembly works only to the extent that its community is healthy. Put negatively, to the extent that people do not know each other, do not trust each other, they will not be able to think and work well together. The story we are telling about General Synod is that its governance is suffering because its community is suffering. We believe that this phenomenon is present both in the life of the RCA as a whole and in the life of the General Synod as an assembly. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility to address both.

3. The story we are telling about the life of the RCA as a whole is that people and groups are not communicating well between the echo-chambers in which we live. Across the RCA, people are not understanding why others in the church with different perspectives than their own think what they think and feel what they feel. People are attributing to people of different perspectives than their own intentions they would never attribute to themselves. The RCA is lacking the means to communicate across lines of difference, to let off steam throughout the year, to make our cases, to make ourselves known to each other. The cost is a breakdown of trust across the RCA. We note that trusting is different than agreeing. And while agreeing is not a necessary condition for either community or governance, trusting is.
   a. We believe the General Synod has the capacity and responsibility positively to nurture community in the RCA.
      i. A mechanism from the past we can point to as an example of community-nurturing is the “Flak and Flattery” section of the Church Herald, in which members would read perspectives from beyond their own context. Apart from whether or not folks agreed, those letters at least nurtured knowing each other. This overture mentions “Flak and
Flattery” not to communicate nostalgia for the *Church Herald.* We mention it as an example of what we see missing in the RCA today.

b. Additionally, we believe the General Synod needs to look at the forces militating against community in the RCA, and to take action to mitigate them.

i. We think, as an example, of the impact on community of the success of TEA and MFCA (the good of which we absolutely do not dispute; but the cost of which we believe can be addressed), which have brought into the RCA many ministers who do not share a common seminary formation experience.

ii. We think, as an example, of the ever-polarizing North American cultural context, to which the RCA as a communion is not immune. It will take hard, focused, intentional work if the RCA is to evade capture by the polarizing powers. We believe that work merits addressing the problem of community as a matter of the General Synod’s highest priority.

4. The story we are telling about the life of the General Synod assembly is that it is a microcosm of the RCA. Many delegates come to the General Synod meeting not knowing each other, and not trusting each other. They have to overcome enormous obstacles to get to workable community. This is at a time when the church desperately needs the General Synod to do governance well. Yet it is not working well.

a. In the absence of real community, and in the consequent absence of thoughtful governance, we see the General Synod increasingly becoming a body over-determined by arid procedure and in which dialogue is replaced by mere voting.

b. The General Synod’s procedural rules make allowance for things like calling the question, limiting speaking time, replacing a year’s worth of considered work with last-minute substitute amendments. While rules like these may serve other worthy values, we believe they do not promote the kind of trust a Reformed assembly needs today.

c. Anonymous voting may speed up the pace, but it works against knowing each other.

d. We wonder if the General Synod can find ways to bring the most controversial issues to its plenary floor before Monday, or to allow the General Synod to sleep on the hottest deliberations.

e. We believe it may be counter-productive to community among delegates for the General Synod to consider shortening its meeting time. We believe it may be counter-productive to community among delegates to move toward biennial business meetings. We believe it may have been counter-productive to community among delegates to move to the current advisory group structure. These moves are worth examining from the perspective of nurturing community as a priority above other worthy priorities like efficiency, conflict-amelioration, the General Synod Council’s program, or other values.

In response to Overtures 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 29, 30, 31, 41, and 43, as well as P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-18
To request that the GSC as well as each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention
and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for God’s people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church might be reflected, and should include the following questions:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of conversations at all levels should be shared across the classes and regions. The summary of these conversations should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and the small group of pastors and elders, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world."

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-18 as follows (additions are underlined):

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, stated clerks, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-18 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-18 as follows (deletions are stricken):

… 2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration? …

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

R 17-18 as amended was before the house.

A motion was made and supported to further amend R 17-18 as follows (additions are underlined):
The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity, etc.) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

A motion was made and supported to amend the proposed amendment as follows (deletion to the proposed amendment is highlighted):

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

VOTED: To amend the proposed amendment.

The amended proposed amendment to R 17-18 was before the house. It reads as follows:

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions: …

VOTED: To adopt the amended proposed amendment.

R 17-18 as further amended was before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-18 as amended and further amended.

The final version of R 17-18 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

R 17-18

To request that the GSC as well as each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for God’s people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions:
1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?

2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?

3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of conversations at all levels should be shared across the classes and regions. The summary of these conversations should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and the small group of pastors and elders, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world. (ADOPTED)

Reaffirm Theological Commission Reports

9. The Classis of Greater Palisades respectfully overtures General Synod 2017 to reaffirm the reports of the Theological Commission concerning questions of marriage that do not fit our “norms” (MGS 1970, pp. 203-205; MGS 1975, pp. 162-171; MGS 1983, pp. 277-278; and MGS 1986, pp. 321-322), and circulate these reports to our congregations for study and to be used as guidelines for congregations discerning whether or not to perform specific marriages.

Reasons:
1. The Theological Commission did extensive study of the question of marriage during the 1970s and 1980s. These reports are largely forgotten by our congregations but would serve as good guidelines during our current marital conversations.
2. These papers quite properly place the decisions concerning whether or not to perform weddings in the hands of the ministers and boards of elders, and to some of us it appears that we need a reminder of this.
3. These are a reminder that our current marriage liturgy has wording that can be altered for specific circumstances as is required by need.
4. Our deeper understanding of the views of marriage since the days of the early church would serve as good guidelines for our current churches, many of whom are conflicted as they decide who may be married in their congregations.

In response to Overture 9, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-19
To deny Overture 9. (ADOPTED)
Reason:
These documents are available in the minutes of General Synod from 1970, 1975, 1983, and 1986 and can be accessed and studied by congregations.

Property of Church Withdrawing from Denomination

16. The Classis of British Columbia overtures the General Synod to amend the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42), as follows (deletions are crossed out; additions are underlined):

    f. If the classis shall then determine that it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, and to retain all or part of its property, the classis shall divest itself from the real and personal property free from any claim, fees, or penalties on the part of the denomination or any assembly, board or agency thereof; and it shall then so declare and proceed promptly to assist the consistory of the church in (1) dissolution of the relationship of the church to the denomination, and (2) transfer of its property to a church of another denomination.

Reasons:
1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 (2016 edition, pp. 42-43), assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4f; 2016 edition, p. 42).

17. New Thing Classis overtures the General Synod to amend the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42) as follows (deletions are crossed out; additions are underlined):

    f. If the classis shall then determine that it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, and to retain all or part of its property, the classis shall divest itself from the real and personal property free from any claim, fees, or penalties on the part of the denomination or any assembly, board or agency thereof; and it shall then so declare and proceed promptly to assist the consistory of the church in (1) dissolution of the relationship of the church to the denomination, and (2) transfer of its property to a church of another denomination.

Reasons:
1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5, pp. 42-43 (2016 edition) assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4f; 2016 edition, p. 42).
In response to Overtures 16 and 17, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-20**
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose constitutionally appropriate amendments to the *Book of Church Order* to accomplish the intent of Overtures 16 and 17 for report to the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5 (2016 edition, pp. 42-43), assures that the withdrawing church’s financial obligations to the denomination and its entities are fulfilled prior to withdrawal.
2. Levying assessments, fees, or penalties on property would be detrimental to the church and counterproductive to the previously determined decision that “it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 5f; 2016 edition, p. 42).
3. This is a complicated matter that requires the expertise of the Commission on Church Order to provide appropriate language.

**Consistory’s Authority Concerning Marriage**

18. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

Sec. 11. The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a–f remain unchanged]

**g.** The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.

Reasons:
1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2016 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. This proposed amendment is the recommendation brought to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (*MGS 2015*, pp. 188ff). In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (*MGS 2016*, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on the original recommendation as proposed by the Commission on Church Order.
3. The authority and responsibility to provide for worship rightly belongs to the consistory of the local church: “The consistory shall provide services of worship … for the spiritual benefit and growth of Christ’s people” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 10; 2016 edition, p. 15). The solemnization of Christian marriage is a service of worship. The opening rubric of the Order for Christian Marriage (2002) recognizes it as such: “As a service of Christian worship, the marriage service is under the direction of the minister and the supervision of
the consistory” (*Worship the Lord*, p. 84) (from the report of the Commission on Church Order, *MGS 2015*, p. 190). The decision about which weddings to approve, how the service is to be conducted, and how strictly the Order for Christian Marriage is to be followed should remain with the consistory and the minister.

4. The language proposed in this overture would accomplish the recommendation contained in the initial report of the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality, which originally stated:

To reaffirm:

- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the *BCO*.

However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it was not brought before the General Synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Albany is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

19. The Classis of Mid-Hudson respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

*Sec. 11.* The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a–f remain unchanged]

**g. The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.**

Reasons:

1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2016 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. The Classis of Mid-Hudson believes this would be an appropriate way forward for the RCA.
3. The rationale for and language of this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (*MGS 2015*, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (*MGS 2016*, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.
4. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation,
To reaffirm:

- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.

The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (MGS 2016, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Mid-Hudson is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

20. The Classis of Schoharie respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2

Sec. 11. The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

/subsections a–f remain unchanged/

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Reasons:

1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2015 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.
2. The Classis of Schoharie believes this would be an appropriate way forward for the RCA.
3. The rationale for and language of this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (MGS 2015, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (MGS 2016, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.
4. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation,

To reaffirm:

- That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.
- That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.
The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (MGS 2016, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place, a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture, the Classis of Schoharie is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.

42. The Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics respectfully overtures the General Synod to adopt the following amendment to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 2

Sec. 11. The consistory shall be guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship:

[subsections a-f remain unchanged]

g. The consistory or governing body shall determine what marriages may be solemnized in a church or congregation.

Reasons:

1. If either or both the proposed constitutional amendments from General Synod 2015 regarding marriage fail to be approved, this action becomes available as a possible way forward for the RCA with respect to its practices of marriage.

2. The rationale for, and language of, this amendment was already given to the General Synod by its Commission on Church Order (MGS 2015, pp. 188ff) and is ready for the General Synod to act on it. In 2015 this recommendation was tabled and in 2016 it was subject to a substitute amendment (MGS 2016, p. 164). The synod has not yet voted on this proposal.

3. Most importantly, the language proposed in this overture would accomplish the second bullet point of the first recommendation from the General Synod’s 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality. The initial report of the 2016 Special Council on Human Sexuality contained the following as its first recommendation, “To reaffirm:

• That authority and responsibility on ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament rests with the classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.

• That authority and responsibility on marriage rests with the consistory and classis by adding clarifying words to the BCO.”

The report then stated, “Observation from the Group of Five: This recommendation appears to have a higher level of consensus from among the ten groups” (MGS 2016, pp. 77-78). However, despite this being the item of highest consensus in the Special Council, it did not come to the synod for consideration. In its place a recommendation was presented to study the issue of the authority of General Synod statements on human sexuality. In this overture the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is asking the General Synod to consider for the first time the marriage part of the first recommendation of its Special Council.
In response to Overtures 18, 19, 20, and 42 the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-21
To deny Overtures 18, 19, 20, and 42. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
The general secretary’s proposal, P-1, provides a way forward for the body which has more potential for manifesting unity, purity, and peace.

Certificates of Fitness for Ministry Granted Directly by General Synod; Clarify Roles of Classis and MFCA in Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Process

21. The Classis of Central California overtures the General Synod to assume responsibility for granting certificates of fitness for ministry by acting as a committee of the whole and amending and adding to the Book of Church Order the following sections (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 1
A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity from a seminary of the Reformed Church in America, upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found to be a qualified candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of an RCA seminary a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2
a. A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not officially related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found to be a qualified candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination.

[Subsections b–c remain unchanged]

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4
f. When the candidate passes the examination, and after a group vote of named candidates shall receive from the General Synod the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

Reasons:
1. The General Synod acting as a committee of the whole is in the best position to reflect the broadest views of the church with regard to who is fit to minister. The
General Synod in its annual meeting is the most representative gathering of the
Reformed Church in America.

2. The Christian Reformed Church, with whom we have a unique and growing
relationship, has long held to this practice and has managed the logistical issues
of certifying candidates for ministry at the synodical level.

3. It is a conflict of interest for those who provide ministerial training to also certify
that the training is adequate.

4. The participation of the synod acting as a committee of the whole would promote
greater confidence in ministerial certification process.

26. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to
recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of
Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation
Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates
of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

a. A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master
of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not
officially related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful
completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found by
the candidate’s supervising classis, in consultation with the Ministerial
Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), to be qualified, and is adjudged
by the supervising classis to be a fit candidate for the ministry of Word
and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, shall receive from the
General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation
Certification Agency–MFCA a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is
entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination. The MFCA
shall ensure candidates demonstrate adequate academic preparation and
denominational identity, including a thorough understanding of the history,
polity, liturgy, and confessions of the RCA, and an adherence to the same.
In the event the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s
readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than
academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

Reasons:

1. As currently written, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2 is not clear about
who judges the fitness of a candidate for ministry. These proposed changes
would locate the final authority of a candidate’s fitness for ministry within the
supervising classis for which the candidate was initially brought under care.

2. The BCO states clearly in other areas that the classis is the ultimate arbiter for
overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, as well as calling ministers
to churches within its bounds, specifically Sections 7 to 9 of Chapter 1, Part
supervision over all students of theology subject to its jurisdiction. Sec. 8.
The classis shall examine students of theology for licensure, and licensed
candidates for the ministry for ordination. Sec. 9. The classis shall ordain, install,
commission, transfer, suspend, depose, declare demitted, declare inactive, and
declare retired ministers” (italics added).

3. The Preamble of the BCO reminds us that governance in the Reformed tradition
is “presbyterial,” consisting of consistory, classis, regional synod, and General
Synod. Crucially, “[t]he governmental functioning of these of offices takes place,
not apart from, but in harmony with the understanding of the mission of the church and the nature of its ministry” (italics added). Furthermore, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser. Consistories, classes, and synods work together in mission and ministry within their shared boundaries” (2016 edition, p. 3, italics added).

27. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

c. The General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis shall determine that the candidate meets minimum competencies as determined by the standards established by the General Synod and designated as indispensable for the proper exercise of the ministerial office of the church. If a candidate comes under the jurisdiction of a new agent of the General Synod, the classis in which the candidate is enrolled shall apply to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency on behalf of the candidate. If the candidate has completed less than half the process toward reception of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, the relevant agents of the General Synod shall effect the transfer. If the candidate has completed half the process or more, the original agent shall award the Certificate in consultation with the supervising classis. If the applicant has previously been asked to terminate studies, has withdrawn under duress, or has been denied the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry at a Reformed Church in America seminary or the MFCA, further supervision and/or examination of the applicant shall only be carried out by or with the consent of the seminary or agent within whose program the candidate had previously been enrolled. Any further supervision and/or examination will occur in partnership with the supervising classis.

Reason:
This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.

28. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology in the Approved Alternate Route and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4

e. When the candidate has completed the program, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry by the Ministerial
Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis. The method of assessment shall be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

f. When the candidate passes the examination, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. In the event the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

Reason:
This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development, and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.

In response to Overtures 21, 26, 27, and 28 and P-4 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-22
To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018.

(ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. The PFCC is the body designated by General Synod to oversee the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and the standards for preparation for ministry. This is the appropriate body to address the concerns raised in Overtures 21, 26, 27, and 28.
2. This action will address the role of General Synod and classes as classes ordain candidates for ministry.

Prior to the adoption of R 17-22 a motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-22 as follows (additions are underlined):

To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018 where a final decision shall be made.

A point of order was raised questioning the propriety of the 2017 General Synod taking action that requires a future General Synod to take a particular action. In response the vice president declared the point well-taken and ruled that the motion to amend R 17-22 was out of order.
Discipline of a Classis

22. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to develop one or more constitutionally appropriate proposals for amending the Book of Church Order (BCO) to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline by another classis and/or classes, and to present such proposal(s) for the consideration of the 2018 General Synod.

Reasons:
1. Book of Church Order Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 (2016 edition, pp. 77-80), includes procedures for the discipline of a member, elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, minister, General Synod professor, and a consistory, but not a classis.
2. Our current polity only allows complaints against a classis, and those complaints must be initiated from within a classis or an immediate lower assembly. The BCO does not provide appropriate or necessary judicial procedures to address issues when they are not internally initiated at the local level.
3. Such polity would be reflective of and consistent with our covenantal theology.
4. Other reformed and presbyterian denominations provide for similar disciplinary procedures.
5. While the Commission on Church Order is not responsible to make decisions regarding disciplinary procedures, the commission is the most appropriate body in the RCA to resource the General Synod in developing constitutionally appropriate BCO amendments.

In response to Overture 22, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-23
To instruct the Commission on Church Order to investigate the feasibility of one or more constitutionally appropriate proposals for amending the Book of Church Order to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline initiated by another classis and/or classes, and to present recommendations to the 2018 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Book of Church Order Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 (2016 edition, pp. 77-80), includes procedures for the discipline of a member, elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, minister, General Synod professor, and a consistory, but not a classis.
2. Our current polity only allows complaints against a classis, and those complaints must be initiated from within a classis or an immediate lower assembly. The BCO does not provide appropriate or necessary judicial procedures to address issues when they are not internally initiated at the local level.
3. The Commission on Church Order is the most appropriate body in the RCA to investigate the theological and practical implications of such changes.

Withdraw from Formula of Agreement

23. The Classis of Wisconsin overtures the 2017 General Synod to vote on the following recommendation:

To withdraw from the Formula of Agreement.
Reasons:

1. The justification for the Formula of Agreement (FOA) was stated as “a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past thirty-two years coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel of unity in contemporary society.” Since 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA) have changed their doctrinal views regarding marriage and gender. When the FOA was approved, the RCA sent a delegation to the United Church of Christ (UCC) to admonish them for their positions on marriage and gender. The UCC has not accepted this admonition as a reason for change. On the contrary, it has continued to move away from the RCA’s doctrinal understanding of marriage and gender. The changing positions of the other three members of the FOA have undermined and violated the “gospel unity” the FOA was intended to proclaim.

2. The FOA provides for “full communion” between its member denominations, recognizing “each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached … according to the Word of God.” The acceptance of same-sex marriage and the rejection of the traditional, biblical view of gender by the other three member denominations of the FOA violates the foundation of the FOA that the gospel is rightly preached according to the Word of God. Therefore, it is inconsistent and inappropriate for the RCA to be in “full communion” with the other member denominations of the FOA.

3. Withdrawal from the FOA would not change the existing BCO procedures for “Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14; 2016 edition, pp. 50-52).

4. Withdrawal from the FOA would not inhibit or prohibit appropriate ecumenical cooperation at the local church level.

New Thing Classis overtures the 2017 General Synod to vote on the following recommendation:

To withdraw from the Formula of Agreement.

Reasons:

1. The justification for the Formula of Agreement (FOA) was stated as “a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past thirty-two years coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel of unity in contemporary society.” Since 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA) have changed their doctrinal views regarding marriage and gender. When the FOA was approved, the RCA sent a delegation to the United Church of Christ (UCC) to admonish them for their positions on marriage and gender. The UCC has not accepted this admonition as a reason for change. On the contrary, it has continued to move away from the RCA’s doctrinal understanding of marriage and gender. The changing positions of the other three members of the FOA have undermined and violated the “gospel unity” the FOA was intended to proclaim.

2. The FOA provides for “full communion” between its member denominations, recognizing “each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached … according to the Word of God.” The acceptance of same-sex marriage and the rejection of the traditional, biblical view of gender by the other three member denominations of the FOA violates the foundation of the FOA that the gospel is rightly preached according to the Word of God. Therefore, it is inconsistent and inappropriate for the RCA to be in “full communion” with the other member denominations of the FOA.
3. Withdrawal from the FOA would not change the existing BCO procedures for “Reception of Ministers and Licensed Candidates from Other Denominations” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 14; 2016 edition, pp. 50-52).

4. Withdrawal from the FOA would not inhibit or prohibit appropriate ecumenical cooperation at the local church level.

In response to Overtures 23 and 24, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-24
To direct the GSC to create a task force, including members of the Commission on Christian Unity, the Commission on Church Order, the overturing bodies, and other parties deemed appropriate to review the RCA’s commitment to the Formula of Agreement, including its role in ecumenism and exchange of ministers, and report back to General Synod 2019 with recommendations for future General Synod action. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. The Formula of Agreement has broad engagement and its full purpose needs to be understood by the RCA.
2. Twenty years is a long history of engagement in relationship, and it is important to understand the various areas of relationship.
3. Change has happened over the last 20 years, and it is important to review our relationships.

Clarify “Appropriate Character” for Supervision of Students of Theology

25. The Classis of West Sioux respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to amend the Book of Church Order Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 6; 2016 edition, p. 45) to read:

Sec. 6. As the candidate pursues theological education, the classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits (1) appropriate character and lifestyle consistent with Christian morals and values, including a commitment to marriage as between one man and one woman; (2) call to the ministry of Word and sacrament; (3) comprehension of Scripture and of the history, theology, and church order of the Reformed Church in America; (4) requisite skills in interpretation and proclamation of Scripture, including sufficient Greek and Hebrew to understand nuances of the biblical text; (5) competence for ministry; (6) commitment to the unity of the church, the ministry of all Christians, and the proclamation of the gospel.

Reasons:
1. To bring clarity, unity, and consistency around “appropriate character” in regard to our shared understanding of marriage.
2. Classes are functioning under incompatible definitions of what constitutes “appropriate character” in regard to character, lifestyle, and marriage.
3. Students of theology have different expectations of character and lifestyle based on the classis in which they are examined. This lack of clarity is unfair to students of theology.
4. This clarification is consistent with the actions of the 2016 General Synod.
In response to Overture 25, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-25
To deny Overture 25. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
The general secretary’s proposal, P-1, provides a way forward for the body which has more potential for manifesting unity, purity, and peace.

Clarify Consistory’s Responsibility When Minister’s Insurance Is through Spouse

32. The Classis of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod of 2017 to instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare such changes to BCO Formulary No. 5, paragraph 5 (2016 edition, pp. 132-133), that make clear a consistory’s responsibility for any additional costs borne by a minister and the minister’s family when that minister’s insurance comes through the spouse’s employer-sponsored plan, for report to the General Synod of 2018.

Reasons:
1. Many secular employers no longer cover the full cost of insurance for a spouse and family.
2. This creates consistency between the full coverage provided by the church and coverage provided by a spouse’s employer.

In response to Overture 32, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-26
To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Board of Benefits Services, to prepare such changes to BCO Formulary No. 5, paragraph 5 (2016 edition, pp. 132-133), that make clear a consistory’s responsibility for any additional costs borne by a minister and the minister’s family when that minister’s insurance comes through the spouse’s employer-sponsored plan, for report to the General Synod of 2018. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Many secular employers no longer cover the full cost of insurance for a spouse and family.
2. This creates consistency between the full coverage provided by the church and coverage provided by a spouse’s employer.

Minutes of General Synod Online

33. The Reverend Schenectady Classis respectfully overtures the General Synod to direct denominational staff to make all Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod (hereinafter referred to as “the minutes”) available on the denominational website, for completion by December 2017.

Reasons:
1. Currently, only the minutes from years 1995–2016 are available on the website. Previous years are only available in print, which is not easily accessible.
2. In a denomination as old as ours, it is important that we know and remember our history. Having accessible means to revisit our history is important.

The General Synod was informed that the actions requested by Schenectady Classis are already being taken and that the acts and proceedings of all previous General Synods are scheduled to be available on the RCA website by the end of 2017.

**Declarative Authority of the General Synod**

34. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to establish a permanent and public record of the Declarative Acts of General Synod; that from this time forward, all declarative acts of General Synod shall be distinguished by beginning with the phrase, “In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares . . .”; and that, for the sake of the unity of the church as stipulated in The Representative Principle (BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle; pp. 3-4, 2016 edition), all declarative acts of General Synod shall be binding upon all assemblies and officers of the RCA.

Reasons:

1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (BCO, “Preamble, The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).

2. From time to time, doctrinal matters arise in the life of the church that are not addressed directly in our Standards. At such times, the church needs the wisdom and counsel of its leadership in knowing how to interpret Scripture and apply it to the current challenges facing its people. Thus, it is incumbent upon the officers of the church, for the welfare of the church, to exercise periodically its responsibility of declarative authority.

3. The BCO gives authority to determine doctrinal matters exclusively to the General Synod. It is the General Synod alone that approves our Standards of Unity, BCO, Formularies, Liturgy, etc. There is no place in the BCO where any of the lower assemblies are granted such authority in doctrinal matters. An example: “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church” (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7).

4. Acts of declarative authority by the General Synod require acceptance and adherence by all RCA officers, leaders, and members. The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states “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” (BCO, Preamble, The Representative Principle; pp. 3-4, 2016 edition). When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “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, The Representative Principle; p. 4, 2016 edition).
In response to Overture 34, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-27
To deny Overture 34. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
It is not within the authority of the General Synod to make this sort of declaration without making a change to the Constitution.

Adopt Act of Declarative Authority regarding Marriage

35. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to adopt the following act of declarative authority:

In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares that the Bible teaches: 1) marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman, and 2) all sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin, including same-sex sexual activity.

Reasons:
1. According to the BCO, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (BCO, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).
2. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with Holy Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7; Matthew 19:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 2:7-8; James 3:1; Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109).
3. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with previous acts and statements of General Synod.
4. This act of declarative authority will bring clarity to the denomination’s official and authoritative position on matters related to gender and marriage.
5. A precedent for such declarative acts has already been set. In his book Constitutional Theology, Dr. Allan Janssen, General Synod professor, writes, “When the 1979 General Synod approved the ordination of women to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, it did so because a previous synod (1958) had already declared that there were no clear biblical grounds against the ordination of women to ministry” (Janssen, Dr. Allan J., Constitutional Theology, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 25). If General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about women’s ordination, then General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about gender and marriage.

36. The Regional Synod of the Far West Region overtures the General Synod to adopt the following act of declarative authority:

In accordance with the nature of the church’s authority, the General Synod declares that the Bible teaches: 1) same-sex sexual activity is a sin, and 2) marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman.
Reasons:

1. According to the *BCO*, there are three kinds of authority within the church: “ministerial, declarative, and spiritual” (*BCO*, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition). “Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this” (*BCO*, Preamble, “The Nature of the Church’s Authority”; p. 2, 2016 edition).

2. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with Holy Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:22-33; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7; Matthew 19:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; Titus 2:7-8; James 3:1; Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109).

3. These statements on same-sex sexual activity and marriage are consistent with previous acts and statements of General Synod.

4. This act of declarative authority will bring clarity to the denomination’s official and authoritative position on matters related to gender and marriage.

5. A precedent for such declarative acts has already been set. In his book *Constitutional Theology*, Dr. Allan Janssen, General Synod professor, writes, “When the 1979 General Synod approved the ordination of women to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament, it did so because a previous synod (1958) had already declared that there were no clear biblical grounds against the ordination of women to ministry” (Janssen, Dr. Allan J., *Constitutional Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 25). If General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about women’s ordination, then General Synod has the authority to declare what the Bible says about gender and marriage.

In response to Overtures 35 and 36, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**R 17-28**

To deny Overtures 35 and 36. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

It is not within the authority of the General Synod to make this sort of declaration without making a change to the Constitution.

*Clarify Heidelberg Catechism’s Interpretation of Marriage*

37. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to clarify that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards by all assemblies and officers therefore entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons pertaining to the appeal to the Heidelberg Catechism:

1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and Constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.

2. In the *2014 Minutes of the General Synod*, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA” (*MGS 2014*, p. 241). This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak
only against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.

4. The Catechism has always been understood to prohibit categorically same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, on the basis of biblical texts such as Genesis 2:18-25, Leviticus 18:22, Matthew 19:1-9, Acts 15:19-20, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:21-33, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10.

5. Some might argue that the Heidelberg Catechism does not specifically name same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriage. But this line of logic would lead us to conclude that adultery is the only specific sexual sin prohibited by the Catechism, when the clearly stated intention of the Catechism is to include all sexual sins, though not to provide a specific list of sins. The New Testament itself frequently does this when it uses the Greek term porneia, often translated “sexual immorality,” as an umbrella term for sexual sin rather than listing each particular sin. Since the Catechism is meant to be a summary of Scripture’s teaching on sexual morality, it should be taken to prohibit same-sex sexual activity, because this is precisely what Scripture does.

Reasons pertaining to the authority of General Synod to clarify the Standards:

1. The CCO states that the General Synod, “like the other assemblies, does carry out its work in deepest relationship to the teaching of the church (which is found in its Confessions) and under the authority of Scripture.” Furthermore, the CCO notes that the judicial decisions of all assemblies require them to “explicitly and authoritatively interpret the Constitution and Scripture” (MGS 2014, p. 240. See BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2, Section 1). The Commission on Church Order thus notes that the General Synod clearly has authority, but raises the question: what kind of authority does it have and how does it exercise it? The BCO answers that question.

2. By its authority as the “highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America,” the “General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy.” If the General Synod fails to speak and clarify the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, it would amount to giving lower assemblies the right to ignore the Standards or have lower assemblies interpret the Standards in ways that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. In that sense, the Standards would cease to be Standards of Unity and the RCA would be, functionally, congregational or classical in polity (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4.)

3. The BCO also states that “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational polity as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.” The intent of this statement, however, is to make clear that the General Synod has ultimate oversight of the doctrine and teaching of the Reformed Church, not merely the theological seminaries, insofar as the theological seminaries are accountable to the General Synod, and not to any other assembly. Thus, our polity makes it clear that the doctrinal buck stops, so to speak, with the General Synod on matters of doctrine. As the BCO states, “the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.” If lower assemblies were granted the authority (functionally, even if not officially) to set doctrine on matters of sexual ethics addressed in the Standards, set denominational polity, or exercise independent oversight of theological students, true denominational unity would be sacrificed.

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4  BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1; p. 65, 2016 edition.
5  BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4; p. 65, 2016 edition.
6  BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7; p. 66, 2016 edition.
and the RCA would essentially be a loose federation or association of classes
and/or churches.  

4. “The General Synod shall recommend to the churches such methods as shall
effectively sustain the denominational program, ... to secure the largest
dissemination of the gospel.” The current state of the RCA is such that the deep
divisions over the question of same-sex marriage threaten the very existence of
the denomination, let alone the “denominational program.” Furthermore, the
time, energy, and effort put into this effort, though necessary in defense of God’s
Word, take away from time, energy, and effort that could be put into further
dissemination of the gospel. The General Synod must clarify the way in which
the Heidelberg Catechism speaks to the matter of same-sex marriage, for the sake
of the denomination but, more importantly, for the sake of the gospel.

5. The BCO states that the church, through its office holders, exercises “declarative
authority,” which is “the right to speak in his [Christ’s] name within the limits set
by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it...” The
Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states, “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.” When officers at General Synod
exercise authority as our highest assembly to clarify and declare the meaning of
the RCA’s Standards, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative
authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “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.” Failing to submit
to the clarification and declaration made by the General Synod would foster
disunity in the church and, thus, violate one’s vow as an officer or member of the
church to seek “the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”

6. The General Synod has taken upon itself the role of interpreter of the RCA’s
Constitution in the past. Debates about whether women could serve in office
turned on the interpretation of the word “person” in the BCO, as it stated at that
time that “those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination…”
When several classes moved to ordain women to the Office of Minister of
Word and Sacrament prior to 1979, other classes filed complaints which were
considered by the General Synod of 1979. As John Coakley notes, that General
Synod decided that the matter could be treated as judicial business—“that is, as a
matter of interpreting rather than changing the Book of Church Order. This meant
that it was no longer necessary to secure agreement from two-thirds of all the
classes.” Instead, all that was needed was the majority vote of General Synod.
If the General Synod has the right and authority to interpret (not change) one
aspect of the Constitution—the BCO—then it must have the right and authority
to interpret another aspect of the Constitution—the Heidelberg Catechism.
Furthermore, the Judicial Business Committee of 1979 declared that General

8 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 8; p. 66, 2016 edition.
9 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 10; p. 66, 2016 edition.
11 BCO, Preamble; p. 3-4, 2016 edition.
12 BCO, Preamble; p. 4, 2016 edition.
13 BCO, Formulary 3, Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, p. 130; Formulary 7,
Declaration for a General Synod Professor, p. 134; and Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the
and Deacons,” p. 49.
14 BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3; p. 11, 2016 edition, which now reads “those men and
women . . .”
15 John Coakley, “Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America,” in Patterns and
Portraits: Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America, p. 9 (emphasis added).
Synod had the right to clarify the meaning of the *BCO* on the basis that:

a) The General Synod had repeatedly voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that church offices were open to women (even though these amendments were not approved by two-thirds of the classes) and

b) The General Synod had taken no action on overtures that would have limited offices to men. *(MGS 1979, p. 68).*

In a similar way, on the issue of same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage,

a) The General Synod has repeatedly approved statements and voted in favor of amendments that would clarify that marriage is between one man and one woman and

b) The General Synod has taken no action on overtures which would have affirmed same-sex marriages.

The method of approving women in office thus sets an important precedent for affirming that marriage is between one man and one woman. If the General Synod has the authority to interpret what the *BCO* and, by implication, the Bible say about women’s ordination, then it certainly has the authority to interpret what the Heidelberg Catechism and, by implication, the Bible say about same-sex marriage.

38. The Regional Synod of the Far West overtures the General Synod to clarify and declare that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically forbids same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage insofar as it states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards therefore entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons pertaining to the Heidelberg Catechism’s declarations regarding human sexuality and marriage:

1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and Constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.

2. In the 2014 *Minutes of the General Synod*, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA.” This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak *only* against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.

4. The Catechism has always been understood to prohibit categorically same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, on the basis of biblical texts such as Genesis 1-2, Leviticus 18:22, Matthew 19:1-9, Acts 15:19-20, Ephesians 5:21-33, Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10.

5. This condemnation of unchastity does not imply that Christians will be perfected in this life. Nevertheless, our failure to live perfectly into our calling does not mean that we are free to change the calling and commands that God has given us.

6. Some might object that the Catechism does not specifically name same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriage, and therefore it does not condemn it. But this line of logic would lead us to conclude that adultery is the only specific sexual sin prohibited by the Catechism, when the clearly stated intention of the Catechism is to include *all* sexual sins, though not to provide a specific list of sins. The New Testament itself frequently does this when it uses the Greek term *porneia,* often translated “sexual immorality,” as an umbrella term for sexual

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17 See Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 114 and 115.
sin rather than listing each particular sin. Since the Catechism is meant to be a summary of Scripture’s teaching on sexual morality, it should be taken to prohibit same-sex sexual activity, because this is precisely what Scripture does.

Reasons pertaining to the General Synod’s authority to clarify the Standards of the RCA:

1. The CCO states that the General Synod, “like the other assemblies, does carry out its work in deepest relationship to the teaching of the church (which is found in its Confessions) and under the authority of Scripture.” Furthermore, the CCO notes that the judicial decisions of all assemblies require them to “explicitly and authoritatively interpret the Constitution and Scripture.” The Commission on Church Order thus notes that the General Synod clearly has authority, but raises the question: what kind of authority does it have and how does it exercise it? The BCO answers that question.

2. By its authority as the “highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America,” the “General Synod alone shall determine denominational policy.” The General Synod alone approves the Standards of Unity, BCO, Formularies, and Liturgy. There is no place in the BCO where any of the lower assemblies are granted such authority in doctrinal matters. If the General Synod fails to speak and clarify the Heidelberg Catechism’s teaching on same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage, it would amount to giving lower assemblies the right to ignore the Standards or have lower assemblies interpret the Standards in ways that are contradictory and mutually exclusive. In that sense, the Standards would cease to be Standards of Unity and the RCA would be, functionally, congregational or classical in polity.

3. The BCO also states that “The General Synod shall have original authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational policy as they relate to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church.” One might argue that this statement only speaks to the General Synod’s authority over all matters pertaining to doctrine and denominational policy in relation to the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church. The intent of this statement, however, is to make clear that the General Synod has ultimate oversight of the doctrine and teaching of the Reformed Church, insofar as the theological seminaries are accountable to the General Synod, and not to any other assembly. Thus, our polity makes it clear that the doctrinal buck stops, so to speak, with the General Synod on matters of doctrine. As the BCO states, “the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.” If lower assemblies were granted the authority (functionally, even if not officially) to set doctrine on matters of sexual ethics addressed in the Standards, set denominational polity, or exercise independent oversight of theological students, true denominational unity would be sacrificed and the RCA would essentially be a loose federation or association of classes and/or churches.

4. “The General Synod shall recommend to the churches such methods as shall effectively sustain the denominational program, ... to secure the largest dissemination of the gospel.” The current state of the RCA is such that the deep divisions over the question of same-sex marriage threaten the very existence of the denomination, let alone the “denominational program.” Furthermore, the time, energy, and effort put into this effort, though necessary in defense of God’s

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18 MGS 2014, p. 240. See BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 2, Section 1; p. 77, 2016 edition
19 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 1; p. 65, 2016 edition
20 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 4; p. 65, 2016 edition
21 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 7; p. 66, 2016 edition
22 BCO, Preamble; p. 3, 2016 edition
23 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 8; p. 66, 2016 edition
24 BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 10; p. 66, 2016 edition
Word, take away from time, energy, and effort that could be put into further dissemination of the gospel. The General Synod must clarify the way in which the Heidelberg Catechism speaks to the matter of same-sex marriage, for the sake of the denomination but, more importantly, for the sake of the gospel.

5. The BCO states that the church, through its office holders, exercises “declarative authority,” which is “the right to speak in his [Christ’s] name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it…” The Representative Principle in the Preamble of the BCO states, “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.” When officers at General Synod exercise authority as our highest assembly to clarify and declare the meaning of the RCA’s Standards, the entire denomination is subject to its acts of declarative authority. This is necessary according to the Representative Principle. “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.” Failing to submit to the clarification and declaration made by the General Synod would foster disunity in the church and, thus, violate one’s vow as an officer or member of the church to seek “the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”

6. The General Synod has taken upon itself the role of interpreter of the RCA’s Constitution in the past. Debates about whether women could serve in office turned on the interpretation of the word “person” in the BCO, as it stated that “those persons who have been inducted into that office by ordination…” When several classes moved to ordain women to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament prior to 1979, other classes filed complaints which were considered by the General Synod of 1979. As John Coakley notes, that General Synod decided that the matter could be treated as judicial business—“that is, as a matter of interpreting rather than changing the Book of Church Order. This meant that it was no longer necessary to secure agreement from two-thirds of all the classes.” Instead, all that was needed was the majority vote of General Synod. If the General Synod has the right and authority to interpret one aspect of the Constitution—the BCO—then surely it has the right and authority to interpret another aspect of the Constitution, the Heidelberg Catechism. Furthermore, the declaration of the 1979 General Synod on women in office was rooted in the repeated amendments that the General Synod had repeatedly approved constitutional amendments in favor of women in office. In a similar way, the General Synod has repeatedly made statements and approved amendments clarifying that marriage is between a man and woman. If the General Synod has the authority to interpret what the BCO and, by implication, the Bible say about women’s ordination, then it certainly has the authority to interpret what the Heidelberg Catechism and, by implication, the Bible say about same-sex marriage.

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26 BCO, Preamble; p. 3-4, 2016 edition.
27 BCO, Preamble; p. 4, 2016 edition.
29 BCO, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3; p. 11, 2016 edition, which now reads “those men and women …”
In response to Overtures 37 and 38, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

R 17-29
To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Reasons:
1. The Heidelberg Catechism is the authoritative and constitutional interpreter of Scripture for the RCA, and it speaks to the matter of marriage and sexual ethics in Q&A 108 and 109, as well as Q&A 87.

2. In the 2014 Minutes of the General Synod, the Commission on Church Order, in conjunction with the Commission on Theology, states that “only those things that are included in our Constitution may be treated as binding upon the ministers and congregations of the RCA” (p. 241). This clearly includes the Heidelberg Catechism.

3. The Heidelberg Catechism is clear that the seventh command does not speak only against adultery, but against all unchastity, or sexual sin. In other words, all unchaste “actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires” are prohibited.

4. This condemnation of unchastity does not imply that Christians will be perfected in this life. Nevertheless, our failure to live perfectly into our calling does not mean that we are free to change the calling and commands that God has given us (see Heidelberg Q&A 114 and 115.)

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows:

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman. To urge the GSC to consider carefully Overtures 37-38, along with Overtures 29-31 and others, as they fulfill the mandate of R 17-18.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate. The president ruled it out of order because the motion to cease debate was made by a corresponding delegate. Thereafter another motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to refer R 17-29 as follows:

To refer R 17-29 to the Commission on Theology, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Church Order to report back to General Synod 2018.
A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not refer R 17-29.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A point of order was raised, claiming that R 17-29 was a violation of the Belhar Confession and therefore out of order.

The president ruled that the point was not well taken.

A motion was made and supported to appeal the ruling of the president.

The vice president assumed the chair.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To sustain the ruling of the president.

The president assumed the chair.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows (deletions are stricken, additions are underlined):

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, all unchaste actions, looks, talk, thoughts, or desires and whatever may incite someone to them and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.

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

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to amend R 17-29 as follows (deletions are stricken):

To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.
VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

R 17-29 was again before the house.

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

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-29.

The final version of R 17-29 as adopted reads:

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R 17-29
To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns “all unchastity,” which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman. (ADOPTED)
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The following motion was made from the floor:

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General Synod 2017 affirms that Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 74 categorically states that infants as well as adults are included in God’s covenant people and therefore infants should be incorporated into the Christian church through baptism and that faithful adherence to the RCA standards requires pastors and consistories to incorporate this standard in their baptismal practices.
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A point of order was raised questioning whether the motion was germane to the prior motion. The president submitted the question to the full assembly for its decision.

VOTED: To consider the point of order well taken (and thus to declare the motion out of order).

**Clarify Which Classes May Vote on Constitutional Amendments**

39. The Regional Synod of Albany respectfully overtures the 2017 General Synod to declare that only classes that have seated delegates at a General Synod which recommends a proposed change to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America to the classes for approval may vote on that proposed change, And furthermore, to instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose language for the Book of Church Order to clarify this matter, for recommendation to General Synod of 2018.

Reasons:

1. The Bylaws of General Synod are explicit in stating the configuration of classes and regional synods for determining delegates to General Synod (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1b and 1c; p. 103, 2016 edition). Having a clear statement regarding which classes can vote on proposed changes to the Constitution would be helpful.
2. When classes are formed between stated sessions of General Synod, formal action must be taken by the General Synod Council to send proposed changes to
these new classes. There is no standard practice for this, and this overture asks the General Synod for clarification.

3. The General Synod is composed of delegates from “each of the classes” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; p. 65, 2016 edition) who conduct the business of the Reformed Church in America. It seems to be out of order for classes, who are not yet imagined by the General Synod and are not represented during the General Synod in which proposed changes to the Constitution were approved for recommendation to the classes, to be permitted to vote on these proposed changes.

In response to Overture 39, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**R 17-30**

To declare that only classes that have seated delegates at a General Synod which recommends a proposed change to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America to the classes for approval may vote on that proposed change, and furthermore, to instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose language for the *Book of Church Order* to clarify this matter, for recommendation to the General Synod of 2018. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. The Bylaws of General Synod are explicit in stating the configuration of classes and regional synods for determining delegates to General Synod (*BCO*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Sections 1b and 1c; 2016 edition, p. 103). Having a clear statement regarding which classes can vote on proposed changes to the Constitution would be helpful.

2. When classes are formed between stated sessions of General Synod, formal action must be taken by the General Synod Council to send proposed changes to these new classes. There is no standard practice for this, and this overture asks the General Synod for clarification.

3. The General Synod is composed of delegates from “each of the classes” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; 2016 edition, p. 65) who conduct the business of the Reformed Church in America. It seems to be out of order for classes that are not yet imagined by the General Synod and are not represented during the General Synod in which proposed changes to the Constitution were approved for recommendation to the classes to be permitted to vote on these proposed changes.

**Further Amendment to Regional Synod Responsibilities**

44. The Regional Synod of the Far West overtures the 2017 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to amend the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 to read as follows: “The regional synod shall form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds. Prior to these actions, the regional synod will provide a 60-day notification of its intended action with all churches and classes being effected.”

Reasons:

1. Additions and changes to the *BCO* are intended to reflect changes to our polity and/or bring further clarification to how we do ministry together. The prior
reading was simple and clear (BCO, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2; p. 61, 2016 edition):

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds.

2. The recently ratified change adds confusion and disputable language (as underlined):

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, form, combine, or disband classes. The regional synod, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, may also transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds.

3. The terms “reasonable” and “timely” have not been used in the BCO to designate timing. “Reasonable” and “timely” as a standard is vague, and is subject to various interpretations.

4. The standard “reasonable and timely” does not properly address the problem of allowing sufficient interaction prior to the forming or disbanding of classes or the transfer of churches between classes.

5. Clear and verifiable language, such as “60 days” is a definitive and measurable way to allow for communication, scheduling of meetings, and meaningful dialogue.

In response to Overture 44, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

R 17-31
To send Overture 44 to the Commission on Church Order for consultation with the Regional Synod of the Far West.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-31.
FROM THE REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, P-2, P-3, P-4, and P-5 from the Report of the President (see pp. 33-35), were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business. The advisory committee’s response to P-4 was included in R 17-22 (see p. 146). P-1 from the Report of the General Secretary was also referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business; for the resulting recommendation see R 17-18 on pp. 134-137. Additionally, the Committee of Reference referred one item of new business to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business (see p. 19).

In response to the president’s proposal P-2, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

R 17-32

1. This falls within the current Transformed & Transforming initiatives and will be run by General Synod staff, specifically under the direction of the Global Mission team.
2. RCA missionaries and mission personnel have already developed and will continue to develop job descriptions and ministry opportunities across the globe.
3. It is requested that RCA churches and classes help recruit young adults for these opportunities.
4. RCA churches and classes are invited to think creatively about ways of sending, funding, and supporting the change of this corporate norm for the sake of the kingdom. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. This falls under the full scope of Transformed & Transforming.
2. It builds another level of relationship with our missionary partners and young people.
3. In light of our need to rebuild trust and community, this refocuses our energy on God’s mission.

In response to the president’s proposal P-3, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

R 17-33
To urge every church in the RCA to use the three-part video series and discussion guide on the RCA website entitled, “A Light to My Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians.” (ADOPTED)

Reason:
“A Light to my Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians” is a tool to assist us in a deeper understanding of interpretation of Scripture, a concern addressed in Overtures 29–31.

In response to P-5 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:
R 17-34
To urge all RCA assemblies and other bodies and all RCA members to maintain our covenant bonds with each other, especially with regard to the conflict over human sexuality, and further, to refrain from pushing the boundaries around the human sexuality conflict and to not leave the denomination, instead focusing on our God-given mission. (REFERRED)

A motion was made and supported to refer R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt the motion to refer R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

Thereafter, in response to the referral of R 17-34 back to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business as well as the item of new business that was referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business by the Committee of Reference, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business presented:

R 17-35
To urge all RCA assemblies and other bodies and all RCA members to maintain our covenant bonds with each other, especially with regard to the conflict over human sexuality; and further, to urge classes to refrain from approving the requests of churches to transfer to another denomination prior to the conclusion of General Synod 2018, instead focusing on our God-given mission. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. We want to take seriously the appeal for trust, conversation, unity, building relationships, and our understanding and interpretation of Scripture, as well as the uses and limits of our polity that was so prevalent in many of our overtures.
2. A church divided is not God’s intention for his people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-35.

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report for ends policy E-2: Cultivating Transformation in Christ follows.

ENDS POLICY E-2: CULTIVATING TRANSFORMATION IN CHRIST

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities in the work of cultivating transformation that results in faithful and passionate disciples of Jesus.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus’ command to make disciples is the church’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. Transformed disciples become more like Christ as they read and reflect on God’s Word, pray and listen to God, spend time in community with other Christ followers, and engage in Christ’s mission. The RCA’s commitment is to help provide accessible environments, processes, resources, and relationships that local congregations can use to foster, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, more fully devoted followers who willingly and boldly live and love like Jesus.

The unique discipleship pathways created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations. Transformation will manifest in our relationships with one another, our increasing love for each other, our sacrifice for the cause of Christ, our willingness to influence our world for the gospel, and how we advocate for justice with compassion in communities where we live and serve. The way we live and love like Jesus will impact how we reach out to those who live on the margins, to those who have been disempowered in our society, and to those who have no voice in the broken world in which we reside.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

“Go and make disciples of all nations” is a pretty clear instruction from Jesus. In Transformed & Transforming, the discipleship priority area is called “Cultivating Transformation in Christ”—with Jesus’ words at its heart. As we follow Jesus as disciples, both leadership and mission follow.

The Transformational Experiences (discipleship) guiding coalition, led by Jill Ver Steeg, is a team of people who are passionate about changing lives and communities for greater kingdom impact. This is a team of ten to twelve practitioners in the field of discipleship who help shape the goals of this priority area and the approach to accomplishing them. The guiding coalition will work passionately toward every RCA congregation having a discipleship pathway or process to bring greater kingdom impact and deeper transformation, both personally and systemically.
The Transformational Experiences guiding coalition is focusing on the following six processes to help congregations create a discipleship pathway in their context.

**Discipleship Connection Events**

The purpose of a discipleship connection event is to help congregations discern and dream about what future ministry could look like, serving as an on-ramp for a discipleship learning community. This is a group of 12 to 20 churches in relatively close geographical proximity who share current discipleship challenges and celebrations, together creating a sense of urgency around seeing greater transformation in their context. The goal of a discipleship connection event is to paint a picture of a future greater ministry impact and invite churches to take a next faithful step toward that future.

**Discipleship Pathway Learning Communities**

A discipleship pathway learning community is a cluster of eight to ten RCA congregations in relatively close geographical proximity that each gather a team of three to five people, including the pastor, to learn about discipleship together. Each congregation in the learning community will develop its own unique pathways through which people will be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into passionate, outwardly focused followers of Jesus that live for the sake of others.

**Discipleship Leadership Communities**

Teams of three to five staff and leaders from RCA congregations engage in a two-year process; each leadership community will have between five and seven congregations, drawn from all geographic regions of the RCA. Teams from the pilot group of eight RCA congregations completed their two-year process at the end of April 2016. Reports from all eight congregations are extremely positive. Four of those eight congregations are now serving as “discipleship bases of operation” where ongoing learning, coaching, resourcing, and partnership are happening for wider impact. Another discipleship leadership community was launched in October 2016.

**Faithwalking Learning Communities**

Faithwalking is the personal transformation component of Ridder Church Renewal. Many RCA congregations lead Faithwalking experiences with neighboring congregations as one dimension of their discipleship pathway. A long-term goal will be to expand Faithwalking to non-Ridder congregations through the development of learning communities.

**3DM Learning Communities**

3DM learning communities consist of ten to twelve RCA, CRC, and other neighboring congregations that gather four times over the course of two years, implementing what they learn between gatherings. Each congregation will learn and employ the 3DM missional community process as a primary way to focus on multiplying disciples, leaders, and mission. The RCA is also partnering with 3DM to see five to seven pastors trained in 3DM by June 2017.

**VantagePoint3 Learning Communities**

This is a one-year learning community of three to five RCA congregations in which each congregation will learn from and with one another as they employ VantagePoint3’s
primary introductory resource, *The Journey*, which focuses on discipleship and leadership development.

**Year Four Goals (by June 2017)**

- Launch one discipleship leadership community with six to eight RCA congregations.
- Launch one Growing Generosity leadership community with seven to ten congregations.
- Launch two discipleship learning communities with ten to fifteen RCA and CRC congregations.
- Launch four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities.
- Train five to seven pastors for leadership in 3DM.
- Twelve to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a 3DM learning community.
- Launch one to two Faithwalking retreats, involving six to eight RCA and other congregations.
- Hold five connection events focused on cultivating transformation.

**Progress**

- One discipleship leadership community launched in October 2016 at Corinth Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan, involving six congregations from Michigan, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. A seventh congregation was added for the second gathering in April 2017.
- One Growing Generosity leadership community launched in November 2016 with three participating congregations. The intention is to add three or four more congregations by the second gathering.
- One discipleship learning community launched in East and West Sioux Classes in September 2016 at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa. Nine congregations are involved in this learning community.
- A joint RCA/CRC discipleship learning community launched in Holland, Michigan, in May 2017.
- A discipleship learning community will launch in the Rochester, New York, area in June 2017.
- Three Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities have launched, one in each of Albany, Mid-America, and New York. Each of these learning communities has three congregations participating.
- Seven pastors (from Lynden, Washington; Chino, California; Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Okoboji, Iowa; and Colorado Springs, Colorado) are in the process of being trained for leadership in 3DM.
- Thirteen RCA congregations—from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, to Okoboji, Iowa, to Edmonds, Washington—are participating in a 3DM learning community.
- Approximately eight Faithwalking retreats, involving 25 RCA congregations, have been held in classes such as Canadian Prairies, Albany, Wisconsin, and New York.
- Discipleship connection events have been held in Orange City, Iowa; Holland, Michigan; and Rochester, New York.
- A joint next generation/discipleship connection event was held in Pella, Iowa.
Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- 16 RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations resources for discipleship as requested.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- 50 to 65 RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Ten to twelve RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- We have collaborated with Organic Outreach to develop a pre-discipleship learning community to launch in 2017–2018.

NEXT GENERATION ENGAGEMENT

Rick Zomer assumed leadership of this team as the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement in February 2016. The team consists of nine members—three are RCA staff and six are RCA pastors. Their purpose is to empower young adults, ministry teams, and congregations to create a culture where people of all ages serve in leadership positions at the church, classis, and denominational levels. The goal is to create an environment where the emphasis moves from merely keeping people in the church when they reach adulthood to equipping congregations to both fully include younger members in the church and reach out to those who have left the church.

Next Generation Connection Events

Clusters of RCA churches in the same geographical area gather for a one-day process to examine their current reality regarding young adults’ presence and involvement in their congregations. In addition, participants are given the opportunity to envision ways to increase the number and involvement level of young adults in their church.

Next Generation Learning Communities

Plans have been developed and clusters of churches have been asked to consider an 18- to 24-month process focused on three specific goals: creating a shared understanding of their current reality as it relates to young adults, considering steps for connecting across generations, and developing plans to commit to ministry with young adults in their church and regions.

Growing Young Learning Community

Growing Young is a transformational process that is offered by the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), housed at Fuller Theological Seminary. RCA churches are given the opportunity to engage in a one-year process with congregations from across North America. The goal is to have congregations identify and implement specific steps to engage young adults in connection and leadership in their church.
Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Launch one high-quality learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Recruit and complete the Growing Young learning community with at least two RCA churches.
- Design and execute six connection events focused on involvement and leadership pathways for emerging adults in the local church.
- Recruit a Next Generation guiding coalition composed of a diversity of ages and contexts within the RCA and begin meeting quarterly.

Progress

- Ten congregations from Central Iowa Classis are thinking about joining a joint discipleship/next generation learning community that would launch in September 2017. These congregations gathered for a connection event on January 31, 2017, in Pella, Iowa.
- Three RCA churches (New Life Community Church in Artesia, California; Rancho Community Church in Temecula, California; and Third Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa) completed the Growing Young cohort in March 2017. Each participant received coaching calls between cohort meetings from FYI staff.
- 18 churches participated in two connection events held in Wisconsin in August 2016. Congregations were given the opportunity to consider joining a learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Seven churches attended a connection event in Des Moines, Iowa, in September 2016. Several of these churches also attended the next generation/discipleship connection event in Pella and are currently discerning becoming involved in a learning community.
- Eight churches participated in a connection event in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in September 2016. These churches were offered the opportunity to form a learning community focused on next generation strategies.
- Six RCA churches in the Regional Synod of New York participated in a connection event in New York City in November 2016 that focused on calling and vocation and the next generation.
- Three RCA churches participated in a connection event in German Valley, Illinois, in April 2017.
- Six RCA churches in the Regional Synod of Canada are participating in a learning circle that is utilizing FYI materials.
- Three RCA churches (New Life Community Church in Artesia, California; Woodhaven Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan; and Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan) have hosted learning events focused on understanding young adults and faithful next steps for their churches regarding the next generation.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- 30 congregations will have participated or will be participating in a learning community and will have a next generation ministry that is resourced.
- 150 congregations will have attended a next generation connection event and will have been invited to participate in a learning community as a next step toward developing a next generation strategy and ministry.
- Onboarding of the FYI collaboration is complete and Growing Young resources have been introduced to 20 congregations through participation in the onsite cohort experience or through specific FYI-resourced connection events.

Each spring, the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report on ends policy E-3: Equipping Emerging Leaders follows.

ENDS POLICY E-3: EQUIPPING EMERGING LEADERS

The RCA will identify potential leaders and encourage and equip potential and existing leaders for missional, congregational, and pastoral leadership. These leaders will reflect the full diversity of the RCA with regard to such things as gender, age, race, ability, and cultural backgrounds, with a special emphasis on young leaders.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

Women and men are open to being used by God to help guide the church as they actively pursue God’s purpose for congregations and ministries. Leaders willingly and passionately live out their calling and giftedness to accomplish a missional vision that brings a gospel of grace and hope to a lost and broken world.

The RCA’s commitment is to help develop leaders, based on a foundation of discipleship, who:

- Know how to lead themselves (their leadership begins with their inward journey).
- Know how to lead others (they are equipped to lead and influence in a God-ordained direction).
- Know how to reproduce new leaders (they view leadership development as a key component of their call to be a leader).

This commitment to leadership development requires environments and accessible opportunities for growth and learning that will help lead RCA congregations forward in mission.

The RCA vision for leadership sees the leadership potential in all followers of Jesus Christ. It helps to raise up servant leaders who develop a courage and competence to lead in the church and the world, in many different environments, and with an openness to equipping and empowering all people to be influencers for Christ’s kingdom. This leadership vision has a special focus on empowering people who may not have leadership positions, privilege, power, or even access to these things, but who have been called and gifted by God to serve boldly. It is a vision that is especially committed to the next generation and developing leaders for the church of the future.

OVERVIEW

Three initiative teams work within the Equipping Emerging Leaders strategic priority. Emerging Leaders focuses on leadership mobilization and development. Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches focuses on supporting the spiritual transformation and health of the leadership teams of RCA congregations. Women’s Transformation and Leadership works toward full inclusion of women’s gifts in the life of the RCA.
EMERGING LEADERS

The Emerging Leaders initiative is guided by a coalition of local pastors and lay leaders representing different regions of the RCA. Eddy Alemán has been providing GSC staff leadership for this initiative since 2014. The work of the Emerging Leaders initiative is to increase awareness that God is calling all people to become leaders in the church, and to help local RCA congregations develop and design leadership development processes customized to their vision and needs. We believe that, through this process, RCA congregations will be spiritually renewed and aspiring leaders will be identified, equipped, and sent out to impact their local communities and the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Leadership Development Connection Events

A leadership development connection event is a gathering of churches that can last anywhere from a few hours to a full day. Its purpose is to introduce pastors and congregational leaders of a region or classis to ways in which they might get involved in developing leaders in their local congregations. The goal for these gatherings is for pastors and congregational leaders to join a learning community, leadership community, or leadership collaborative.

Leadership Development Leadership Communities

Leadership development leadership communities consist of up to 11 congregations who are already engaged in leadership development but want to make their ministry even stronger. These congregations can come from any geographic region of the RCA. Each congregation commits a team of three to five staff members, pastors, and lay leaders to engage in a two-year process. The newest leadership development leadership community had its first meeting in the spring of 2017 in West Michigan.

Leadership Development Learning Communities

Groups of three to six RCA congregations gather for six one-day meetings over the course of two years to learn from one another about different areas of leadership. Each congregation sends a team of three to five people to these gatherings; congregations are encouraged to include a variety of people with regard to gender, age, and ethnicity on their team. Through this process, each congregation develops its own leadership development pathway uniquely designed for its vision, context, and needs.

Leadership Collaboratives

Clusters of 12 leaders from RCA congregations in relatively close geographical proximity commit to a 12-month, 18-month, 24-month, or 36-month leadership collaborative to deepen their personal leadership skills. This experience provides learning, support, and accountability for each participant’s leadership journey. It is a commitment to grow, to invest, to share, and to change. The focus for leadership collaboratives is on personal leadership development for greater kingdom impact in a participant’s local context. Participants grow in their leadership skills, discern God’s call for their lives, and clarify their next steps in ministry. The leadership collaboratives are varied in focus; focuses could include children and family ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry, multicultural ministry, and developing a strategic ministry plan.

This process includes in-person gatherings and video conference calls. Each participant commits to personally contributing to the process and to peer coaching.

These collaborative groups focus on three key areas of leadership:
1. Personal leadership: leading from the inside out, developing the capacity to lead oneself before leading others.
2. Organizational leadership: developing the competencies and skills required of effective leaders.
3. Reproducing leadership: helping leaders develop more leaders, not just followers.

Reformed Leadership Initiative

The Reformed Leadership Initiative is a collaborative effort between the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), the RCA, Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS), and Western Theological Seminary (WTS). Both denominations need leaders at all levels who are grounded in a biblical vision of church and kingdom, personally formed and growing in the image of Christ, and competent to lead thriving congregations in contextualized and mission-focused ministry.

The Reformed Leadership Initiative launched six congregational leadership learning networks (CLLN) in the first six months of 2016. These CLLNs will serve as the first steps in developing diverse networks for leadership training aimed at serving the local church while that local church engages in mission and ministry.

Congregational leadership learning networks that have been launched include a Korean-language network in New Jersey; a Spanish-language network in southern California; and four other networks in New Jersey, Ontario, central Iowa, and central California. Each CLLN has a balance of RCA and CRCNA congregations.

Congregational leadership learning networks are led by a local team of coleaders, one CRCNA and one RCA. These leaders are supported by two codirectors, one from each denomination: Ken Eriks for the RCA and Denise Posie for the CRCNA. An implementation team that includes members of both denominations and both institutions offers additional support to the project and the congregations. The coleaders of the congregational leadership learning networks have an external, paid coach to assist them in their leadership of these networks.

Each network is expected to pursue four outcomes:

- Innovate, create, and engage new leadership development practices that equip leaders, change cultures, and impact the world through local congregations.
- Learn how to prepare leaders of all ages for leadership in diverse environments.
- Evaluate and learn together from what they implement.
- Help all four partners (CRCNA, CTS, RCA, WTS) develop processes that are scalable and sustainable in all regions of our denominations.

Every congregation in a congregational leadership learning network agrees to design and implement leadership development processes that are appropriate to its size, situation, and context. Each congregation will focus on one or more of the following groups: councils or consistories, church staff, emerging leaders, people who lead congregational ministries, people who lead ministries in their local communities, and others.

Each congregation is encouraged to develop and implement equipping processes focused on the same three key dimensions of leadership development mentioned under the leadership collaboratives: personal leadership, organizational leadership, and reproducing leadership.
Four values will undergird the processes in each congregation:

- In-ministry formation: hands-on ministry within the context of the local church as the principal location for leadership development.
- Competency-based equipping: providing tools and skills to be more effective in one’s ministry call and context.
- Missional context: a vision of the church as a covenant community in mission, raising up workers for the harvest.
- Lifelong learning: cultivating and growing one’s leadership takes a commitment that lasts a lifetime.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Hold five connection events.
- Launch two learning communities in different areas of leadership development.
- Launch three leadership collaborative cohorts.
- Launch one leadership development leadership community.
- Launch the Reformed Leadership Initiative with 27 RCA and CRC congregations.
- Collaborate with World Impact to launch site of the Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) in Los Angeles.
- Collaborate with seven classis leaders to create an elder and deacon leadership training process. These classis leaders will work with Eddy Alemán to develop a process based on the following principles:
  - Grassroots
  - Research based
  - Easy to contextualize
  - Field tested
  - User friendly
  - Flexible

Progress

- 104 RCA congregations have participated in 15 leadership development connection events in different regions.
- Six RCA congregations completed the first leadership development leadership community, done in collaboration with Leadership Network. This leadership community took place in Dallas, Texas, from December 2014 to June 2016.
- The second leadership development leadership community will take place in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from May 2017 to September 2018.
- Five RCA Hispanic congregations completed a leadership development learning community in West Michigan. The meetings took place from July 2015 to November 2016. Participating congregations were:
  - Alas Conexiון Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan
  - My Father’s House Church in Holland, Michigan
  - La Casa de Mi Padre in Wyoming, Michigan
  - Iglesia Alas de Aguila in Allendale, Michigan
  - Iglesia Alas de Aguila in Wyoming, Michigan
- Four RCA African American congregations in the New York area are participating in a two-year leadership development learning community that launched in May 2016. These congregations are:
  - Mott Haven Church in Bronx, New York
  - Highbridge Community Church in Bronx, New York
  - Reformed Church of Prince Bay in Prince Bay, New York
  - First Reformed Church of Astoria in Astoria, New York
• Six churches in the Detroit Kingdom Enterprise Zone are participating in a two-year leadership development learning community that launched in August 2016. These congregations are:
  o First Christian Reformed Church of Detroit in Detroit, Michigan
  o Dearborn Christian Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Dearborn, Michigan
  o Hesed Community Church in Detroit, Michigan
  o Grace Reformed Church in Allen Park, Michigan
  o CenterPoint Church in Lewis Center, Ohio
  o Word Encounter Church in Detroit, Michigan

• Six RCA churches in Iowa completed an 18-month leadership collaborative focused on children and family ministries. Participating churches were:
  o Adventure Life Reformed Church in Altoona, Iowa
  o Bethel Reformed Church in Aplington, Iowa
  o Cedar Hills Community Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa
  o Crossroads Church in Norwalk, Iowa
  o Orchard Hills Reformed Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa
  o Trinity Reformed Church in Allison, Iowa

• Six Reformed Leadership Initiative cohorts (congregational leadership learning communities, CLLNs) were launched between September 2016 and January 2017.
  o One Spanish-language CLLN with 12 congregations
  o One Korean-language CLLN with eight congregations
  o Four geographically-based CLLNs (New Jersey, Ontario, Central Iowa, and Central California) with a total of 27 congregations

• Launched a Hispanic leadership collaborative in April 2017 in California. Another Hispanic leadership collaborative will launch in May 2017 in New York.
• Launched a TUMI site in the fall of 2016 in Los Angeles in collaboration with World Impact. More than 20 emerging leaders are being equipped to minister in urban centers through this site.
• One Mandarin-speaking leadership collaborative launched in May 2017 in connection with the pastors’ meeting of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries.
• Seven classis leaders have participated in an effort to develop a process to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the church. RCA pastor April Fiet is reviewing the process to ensure that it is inclusive of women who are called to serve as elders and deacons. The classis leaders are:
  o Jeff Ludington, Classis of California
  o Eric Moreno, Classis of California
  o Chris Godfredsen, Classes of East and West Sioux
  o Fred Bates, Classis of Southwest
  o Lyle Zumdahl, Classis of Wisconsin
  o Dale Assink, Classis of Central Plains
  o Mike Gafa, Classis of North Grand Rapids

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

• 30 congregations will have participated in a two-year learning community and are now actively engaged in identifying, equipping, and developing leaders for the work of ministry in the local church and in the world. These congregations will have a clear pathway to develop leaders that is unique to their local vision, context, and need.
• Seven RCA congregations will have completed a two-year leadership development leadership community and are engaged in replicating the process
with other RCA congregations. Ten more congregations will be participating in the second cohort of the leadership development leadership community.

- 17 congregations will be fully participating in an RCA leadership development leadership community, with 17 pastors and 85 church leaders who are fully engaged in creating leadership development processes to help churches identify, develop, and mobilize young, emerging, and current leaders.
- 27 RCA and CRC congregations will be participating in the Reformed Leadership Initiative in six congregational leadership learning networks of ten to twelve congregations each. One of these congregational leadership learning networks will be in Korean and one will be in Spanish.
- 48 pastors and church leaders of diverse gender, age, ethnicity, and contexts will have participated or will be participating in a leadership collaborative.
- 120 congregations from different regions will have participated in a leadership development connection event.
- In collaboration with seven classis leaders, the Emerging Leaders team will have created an elder and deacon leadership training process. This will be a resource for RCA congregations to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the church.

THRIVING LEADERS, THRIVING CHURCHES

Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches is guided by a coalition of pastors, denominational staff, and regional synod staff. Andy Bossardet leads this team as the coordinator for equipping thriving congregations. The team’s focus is to empower leaders and congregations to take the next faithful step in their ministries, navigating the complexities of leading change. This empowerment happens through high-impact coaching, learning communities focused on personal and corporate transformation, support systems for pastors and congregations in transition, and support in vision discernment.

Ridder Church Renewal

Ridder Church Renewal is a partnership of Western Theological Seminary, the RCA, and the CRCNA that helps leaders develop the tools to confront unhealthy models that hinder personal and congregational growth. Ridder is comprised of two intensive 30-month modules; congregations commit to one module at a time. Every module consists of five retreats (one retreat every six months for the course of the module), coaching, and homework between retreats. Participating congregations choose a leadership team of four to six congregants, plus the pastor. Five regions will engage in modules 1 and 2 of Ridder Church Renewal, and two regions are entering the process by engaging in module 1.

Maximizing First-Call Potential

To maximize first-call potential, pastors in their first call engage with a mentor and a peer group in self-directed learning based on challenges and opportunities in the ministry context. Covenants of support and accountability are drawn up between congregations and pastors to empower the first-call pastors in their learning. The first-call process lays the foundation for thriving congregational and pastoral ministry. This work is being done in partnership with the Lilly Endowment’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program. A variety of methods for learning communities are being pursued to provide support, training, and accountability.

Pastors and Congregations in Transition

The Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches team is developing new, more effective ways to serve churches and pastors in the midst of a ministry transition. This will include training
and certification mechanisms for transitional ministers and vocational assessment for pastors between ministries, as well as clarifying the role that each partner in the RCA plays in helping ministers and congregations through transitions. For now, the focus has been on classes and providing training and resources for classis supervision. New work is beginning on empowering search teams through quality consultation and written resources.

Coaching

The team is developing a catalytic coaching network that will be made up of all the coaches who are working with the various learning community pilots. We will be putting together a catalog highlighting best practices, coaching models, and training for the coaches.

The team also plans to maximize current content-neutral training through better tracking and assessment of coaches. By tracking relationships, we will be able to more easily assess coaches and provide ongoing training and accountability for desired ministry outcomes across the RCA. Salesforce will provide a great platform for helping coaches succeed.

Congregational Vitality Pathways

Congregational Vitality Pathways (CVP) is a tool created by the Evangelical Covenant Church and utilized by the Far West Region to help congregations discern and live into God’s vision for their church. Health and vitality are measured by ten markers. CVP uses assessment tools, events, and an empowered vitality team to help a congregation move toward its goals. RCA congregations engaging CVP are meant to do so in a learning community format.

The Ezra Project

The Ezra Project is a learning community designed to empower and encourage African American pastors in the RCA. The learning community involves five to ten pastors who spend time with African American pastors in thriving ministries, learning personal, organizational, and reproducing leadership content over the course of a year. Ezra graduates then become facilitators and teachers for the next cohort of Ezra pastors.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Engage 100 congregations in the Ridder Church Renewal process (module 1 or module 2). See 50 RCA congregations complete both modules and continue to cultivate personal transformation and deepen their missional impact.
- Launch one learning community of first-call pastors.
- Create and deploy a training plan for classis supervisors.
- Ten congregations will have used the Transformational Church Assessment Tool.
- Develop and implement a catalytic coaching system that supports all of the learning and leadership communities in each of the three strategic priorities.
- Engage three churches outside the Far West Region in CVPs.
- Launch phase 2 of the Ezra Project (with six RCA pastors).

Progress

- Currently, 112 pastors representing 96 congregations are participating in Ridder Church Renewal; 62 of them are RCA congregations. Those congregations are split across seven regions, representing ten learning communities. Additionally, there is a team of RCA chaplains participating in Ridder in the Great Lakes (a first for Ridder). The Ridder Church Renewal modules will wrap up in the fall of
2017; recruitment for the next round will happen at the same time.

• The first learning community for first-call pastors wrapped up in Albany in May 2017. Recruitment for the second learning community began in late February 2017. Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches will also supply guidance and potential leadership training to a fellowship program emerging in the Regional Synod of Albany.

• Classis supervisor training has been sent to classis clerks and posted to the RCA website at www.rca.org/ministryservices. Pilot training included approximately 20 supervisors in the Regional Synods of New York and Mid-America.

• Two churches are engaged with CVPs in the Regional Synod of the Heartland. Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches is committed to partnering with these congregations through resourcing. Conversations continue in the Regional Synod of New York.

• Catalytic coach training has been completed, and the coaching catalog has been given to every initiative leader for use in their learning and leadership communities. A coach training video was filmed during a live training in the second quarter of 2017.

• Phase 2 of the Ezra Project will launch in Benton Harbor, Michigan, in June 2017. Phase 1 has already shown considerable success, with churches growing in ministry impact and overall health. One of the members will be stepping into a leadership role. Phase 3 of the Ezra Project, which is a new cohort, will be learning from the current Ezra Project churches.

• The Transformational Church learning community ended on March 4, 2017. While staff changes at LifeWay Christian Resources disrupted the flow of this learning community, the churches are strengthening their ministries and have success stories. From this point, the Transformational Church Assessment Tool (TCAT) will be utilized to help congregations connect to an appropriate learning community instead of as a learning community itself. At least three churches (in the Regionals Synods of Great Lakes and Mid-America) have used or will use the TCAT as a discernment tool.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

• 150 churches will have engaged Ridder; either they will have completed both modules or they will be actively engaging the process.

• At least three first-call learning communities will have been launched, and the Albany Synod Fellows Program will be supported.

• A partnership of classes, regional synods, and others will have created resources for all stages of pastoral transition. At least 50 congregations will have benefitted from one or more of these resources.

• Two learning communities for CVPs will have been launched, with at least eight churches participating outside of the Regional Synod of the Far West.

• Phase 2 of the Ezra Project will have been completed; the original six pastors will have completed the Ezra Project and ten more pastors will have been recruited.

• 20 congregations will have used the TCAT in a connection event with the goals of ongoing transformation and (potentially) another learning community.

WOMEN’S TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has been established as part of Transformed & Transforming to help the Reformed Church in America pursue the full inclusion of women’s gifts and influence in all areas of the church and beyond. Liz Testa leads the Women’s Transformation and Leadership team.
We are committed to ensuring that women of all generations and geographical and cultural contexts are able to experience transformation, be raised up for leadership, and live vibrantly into their God-given potential. As we encourage, equip, and empower women to fully and freely use their gifts and be developed as leaders, we usher in a vision of God’s reign, where brothers and sisters work together to build the body for mission in the world.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has the following components:

- A ministry initiative to help the RCA pursue the full inclusion of the gifts and influence of women in the life of the church and as an integral part of Transformed & Transforming.
- A hub for opportunities that encourage, equip, and empower all women in their callings and connect them more deeply with God, each other, and the church.
- A place for congregations to begin or continue a journey of recognizing and exploring the gifts that women bring and designing ways to equip women for ministry.
- A catalyst for change, opening the RCA as a whole and women as individuals to the Spirit’s movement in women’s lives and ministries.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership lives out its vision by:

- Ensuring women have barrier-free access to RCA resources and opportunities.
- Celebrating the rich history of women in the RCA through things like the Women’s Sankofa trips and the “RCA Women: A Legacy of Leadership” booklet.
- Being an innovation incubator for new ideas such as the Lenten devotional video series.
- Offering an annual global experience for women—to Oman, to Israel/Palestine, and to Italy so far. Nicaragua and India are being explored for 2018 and 2019.
- Encouraging and equipping women through transformational connection events.
- Offering congregational learning communities to empower women to lead in ministry.
- Nurturing and developing both established and emerging female leaders through leadership collaboratives, mentoring, and clergy networks.
- Providing tuition assistance to female seminarians through the Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund.
- Connecting women virtually through a Facebook group and a quarterly e-newsletter.
- Creating a dynamic web resource featuring blogs by women; historical, biblical, and theological support for women in ministry; and ways for congregations, classes, and synods to intentionally integrate women’s gifts, voices, and leadership.
- Collaborating with the RCA seminaries, the Commission for Women, and other Transformed & Transforming initiatives to empower women in ministry.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Hold four to five connection events that encourage, equip, and empower female RCA lay leaders and clergy to live into their God-given callings.
- Develop a connection event model focused on equipping congregations to more fully include women’s gifts and influence, particularly in ministry leadership.
- Develop and launch one learning community focused on strengthening and expanding women’s leadership in church and society.
- Pilot three to five women’s leadership collaboratives with participants from a broad range of ministry contexts to develop their personal, organizational, and multiplying leadership.
• Organize and lead a women’s global mission experience to Italy that includes equipping the women on the trip to bring their learnings back to their congregations and effect change around the refugee crisis and human trafficking.

Progress

• Seven women’s connection events were held between March and December 2016, including the second annual Celebration of Women in Church Leadership at Western Theological Seminary; a women’s connection dinner at General Synod in Palos Heights, Illinois; a Women’s Sankofa through upstate New York; and a Hispanic women’s conference in Sacramento, California. More than 550 women from 110 RCA churches were represented at these events.
• Since 2014, more than 1,350 women have been impacted through Women’s Transformation and Leadership events.
• A connection event held in New York City in December 2016 drew 14 churches. Five of those churches committed to participate in the “Doing a New Thing” learning community, which launched on February 11, 2017.
• 2017 connection events are being developed with local partners in Michigan, New York, southern California, Colorado, Minnesota, and New Jersey.
• Six 18-month women’s leadership collaboratives were launched in February 2017. A lead facilitator and four other facilitators (RCA leaders from the Far West, Heartland, and New York regions) have been trained and will lead cohorts in English, Korean, and Spanish. Forty-five women will meet virtually and at an in-person gathering for personal, organizational, and multiplying leadership development over the next year and a half.
• A mini collaborative called Wholehearted Leadership has been developed as a next step to “Honoring our Stories” connection events. The first cohort was piloted in the fall of 2016 and drew nine women from a broad spectrum of ministry roles and ethnic/racial contexts. Two of these women have now joined the 18-month process.
• The women’s global mission experience took a group of 12 to 14 women to Palermo and Rome, Italy, in April 2017 to visit RCA missionaries JJ and Tim TenClay and experience their ministries for and among refugees and trafficked women. The group is bringing their learnings home to engage their home congregations.
• The Women’s Transformation and Leadership guiding coalition convened for a two-day summit at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in November 2016. Great energy and commitment emerged from this event. This group of 25 denominational leaders will all champion Women’s Transformation and Leadership in their regions.
• A delegation of coalition members will attend the Commission for Biblical Equality’s conference, “Mutual by Design,” in July 2017 to inform the development of a learning community model that assists congregations who want to explore and discern women’s leadership in the church.
• We are honored and delighted to partner with Eddy Alemán in the editing of a new elder and deacon training process. RCA pastor April Fiet is reviewing the process to ensure that it is intentionally inclusive of women who are called to be elders and deacons.
Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- More than 2,000 women across the denomination will have been positively impacted by connection events.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations will have engaged in learning communities to explore and discern women’s leadership and the culture shift necessary to support this process.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations will have participated in learning communities to develop intentional leadership training and mentoring processes for women.
- 85 to 100 women will have participated in women’s leadership collaboratives.
- Three to four global mission experiences will have equipped 50 to 60 women and their congregations for deeper missional engagement.
RETIRED MINISTERS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

During 2016, 54 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service. Those who retired are being recognized by General Synod through its endorsement of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

R 17-36
To adopt the following resolution:

These have loved Christ and fed his sheep. They have devoted themselves to spreading the Word and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Their contribution to a needy world is rich beyond measure; their record is on high.

The Reformed Church in America, with admiration, deep affection, and overflowing thanks to God, celebrates their lifelong service.

Lynn Allhusen
Rochester, New York

Robert Anderson
Concord, New Hampshire

Thomas Bartha
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

Ned Beadel
Fullerton, California

Roc Bottomly
Edmond, Oklahoma

Kenneth Bradsell
Boothbay Harbor, Maine

Norman Chen
Monroe, New Jersey

Grover Davis
Lockport, Illinois

Perry De Groot
Spencer, Iowa

Donald De Kok
Alton, Iowa

James DeVries
Kendall Park, New Jersey
Gary De Witt
Miami, Florida

William De Young
Belle Mead, New Jersey

John Eichenberger
Geneva, New York

Robert Hann
North Chili, New York

Stephen Hanson
Whiting, New Jersey

Donald Hoaglander
Ilion, New York

John Kapteyn
London, Ontario

Diane Konynenbelt
Hudsonville, Michigan

Harry Koops
Hudsonville, Michigan

Linda Lachesnez-Norment
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Harold Lay
Brick, New Jersey

Louis Lotz
Hudsonville, Michigan

Terry Maassen
Lincoln, Nebraska

Lonzy McCarey
Newark, New Jersey

Deborah McCreary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Marlin Meendering
Eden Prairie, Minnesota

John Ornee
Zeeland, Michigan

Luis Perez
Winter Garden, Florida
Roger Peterson
Tulare, California

Richard Plass
Madison, Indiana

Donald Poest
Brunswick, Ohio

Keith Poppen
El Dorado Hills, California

Roger Punt
Woodbury, Minnesota

Allan Ramirez
Hialeah, Florida

Paul Rosa
Bethel, Delaware

Kenneth Ruge
Scarsdale, New York

David Schutt
Pleasant Hill, Iowa

Steven Slater
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Thomas Stewart
Stillwater, Oklahoma

H. Arlan TenClay
Hudsonville, Michigan

Raymond Tilstra
DeKalb, Illinois

Marjorie Vander Wagen
Downers Grove, Illinois

Darwin Vander Wal
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Peter Van Dyke
Canyon Lake, California

Robert VanHofwegen
Modesto, California

Wayne Van Kampen
Denver, Colorado
Katie Van Veldhuizen
New River, Arizona

Paul Walther
Brielle, New Jersey

Donald Waterhouse
Highland Grove, Ontario

Robert Williams
Cleveland, Tennessee

Joseph Wojnarowski
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Joseph Woods
Spotswood, New Jersey

Kenneth Zorgdrager
Gulf Shores, Alabama
(ADOPTED)
NECROLOGY

Donald Anno Lam January 1, 2015  94
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Norman Charles Hamm December 18, 2016  64
Wayne E. Kiel December 19, 2016  87
Louis Otto Springsteen December 22, 2016  90
Bernard Daniel Hakken December 24, 2016  89
William Howard Jewett December 26, 2016  86

Byron E. “Bud” White

Byron E. White was born on July 3, 1923, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He studied at the University of Denver, from which he graduated in 1955. He received his LL.B. at the same school in 1956 and his J.D. in 1970. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1962. He also received an M.A. from Wayne State University in 1968 and a Ph.D. from The Fielding Institute (now Fielding Graduate University) in 1983.

Mr. White was licensed by the Classis of West Central in 1962 and ordained by the Classis of Muskegon the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Coopersville, Michigan, from 1962 to 1966; Faith Community, Detroit, Michigan, from 1966 to 1968; Resurrection, Flint, Michigan, from 1974 to 1984; Sunnyside, Long Island City, New York, from 1988 to 1989; Hope Community, Aurora, Colorado, from 1989 to 1990; Rolling Hills
Community, Orlando, Florida, from 1990 to 1991; Second Union, Puerto Rico, from 1991
 to 1992; and a church in Malaysia from 1993 to 1994. He also served as the executive
director of West Side Ecumenical Ministries in Cleveland, Ohio, from 1968 to 1974 and in
private practice in psychology in Traverse City, Michigan, from 1984 to 1987. He also had
a career as a corporate lawyer and a business executive.

Mr. White died on January 12, 2016, in Penney Farms, Florida. He was 92 years old.

Virgil E. Dykstra

Virgil E. Dykstra was born on September 4, 1934, in Leighton, Iowa. He studied at Central
College, from which he graduated in 1967. He received his theological education at Western
Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1970.

Mr. Dykstra was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Pella in 1970. He pastored the
following congregations: Zion, Sheffield, Iowa, from 1970 to 1980; Carmel, Iowa, from

Mr. Dykstra died on January 23, 2016, in Des Moines, Iowa. He was 81 years old.

Chester John Droog

Chester John Droog was born on December 16, 1921, in Hull, Iowa. He began his
undergraduate studies at Northwestern Junior College and completed them at Hope
College, from which he graduated in 1947. He received his theological education at
Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1950. He received a Ph.D.
from the California Graduate Seminary in 1976.

Mr. Droog was licensed by the Classis of West Sioux in 1950 and ordained by the Classis
of East Sioux the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Hope, Spencer,
Iowa, from 1950 to 1953; Fifth, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1953 to 1965; and Bethel,
Bellflower, California, from 1965 to 1973. He served as the field secretary for the Particular
Synod of the West from 1973 to 1988.

Mr. Droog died on February 5, 2016, in Artesia, California. He was 94 years old.

Anna Mae Dekker

Anne Mae Hager Dekker was born on April 27, 1924, in Chicago, Illinois.

She and her husband served as missionaries in Bahrain from 1951 to 1969.

Mrs. Dekker died on February 6, 2016. She was 91 years old.

Armand Robert Renskers

Armand Robert Renskers was born on August 10, 1928, in Cedar Grove, Wisconsin. He
studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1950. He received his theological
education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953.

Mr. Renskers was licensed by the Classis of Wisconsin in 1953 and ordained by the Classis
of Raritan the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Peapack, Gladstone,
New Jersey, from 1953 to 1955; Harrington Park, New Jersey, from 1955 to 1960; Bethany,
Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1960 to 1965; Pompton, Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, from
1965 to 1968; Second, Pella, Iowa, from 1968 to 1975; First, Grand Haven, Michigan, from 1975 to 1978; and Three Bridges, New Jersey, from 1978 to 1993. He also served as president of the Particular Synod of the West in 1972 and of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics from 1989 to 1990. He was also the president of the board of trustees of Central College and of the board of directors of The Reserve, where he lived in retirement.

Mr. Renskers died on April 4, 2016, in Urbandale, Iowa. He was 87 years old.

Kenneth Harrison Lobb

Kenneth Harrison Lobb studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1977. He received an Ed.M. from Adelphia University and an associate degree in telecommunications from the New York Institute of Technology. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 2007.

Mr. Lobb was ordained by the Classis of Delaware-Raritan in 2010. He pastored nine Presbyterian and Reformed congregations in New Jersey as a student, interim, or supply pastor, including Belvidere, Bradley Gardens, Forks Township, High Bridge, Lebanon, Millstone, Newtown, Phillipsburg, and Stanton. He then pastored Annandale Reformed in Annandale, New Jersey, from 2008 until his death. Mr. Lobb also served as the president of Delaware-Raritan Classis.

Mr. Lobb died on April 6, 2016, in Hanover Township, Pennsylvania. He was 62 years old.

Philip A. Rauwerdink

Philip A. Rauwerdink was born on December 31, 1944, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1968. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1988.

Mr. Rauwerdink was ordained by the Classis of Wisconsin in 1989. He pastored at Glendale, Queens, New York City, from 1990 to 1999 and Trinity in Munster, Indiana, from 1999 to 2000. He served a number of Reformed churches in an interim capacity during his retirement.

Mr. Rauwerdink died on April 14, 2016, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He was 71 years old.

Ernest Doyle

Ernest Doyle was received from the Anglican Church by the Classis of Cascades in 1977. He pastored Monarch Reformed in Alberta, Canada, from 1977 until his retirement in 1988. He retired to Lethbridge, Alberta, where he continued to conduct worship services into his 90s.

Mr. Doyle died on May 5, 2016, in Lethbridge, Alberta. He was 94 years old.

John Hollebrands Meyer

John Hollebrands Meyer was born on September 27, 1937, in Hudson, New York. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1959. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1962.

Mr. Meyer was licensed by the Classis of Schenectady in 1961 and ordained by the Classis of Schoharie the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Berne and
Beaverdam, New York, from 1962 to 1967; College Point, New York, from 1967 to 1972; and Douglaston, Queens, New York, from 1972 to 2000. Mr. Meyer has served on the board of trustees for Hope College and as president of the Regional Synod of New York from 1972 to 1975. He continued to preach in his retirement when called upon at the Sugar Run and Wyalusing Presbyterian Churches and Lake Carey Chapel in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Meyer died on May 9, 2016, in Laceyville, Pennsylvania. He was 78 years old.

Richard James Bates

Richard James Bates was born on October 15, 1937, in Detroit, Michigan. He studied at Grand Valley State College (now called Grand Valley State University), from which he graduated in 1966. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1969. He received an M.Th. from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1978 and a D.Min. from Austin Presbyterian Seminary in 1982.

Mr. Bates was licensed and ordained by the Classis of North Grand Rapids in 1969. He pastored the following congregations: Trinity, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1969 to 1976; Third, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1979 to 1983; Christ, Oakbrook, Illinois, from 1983 to 1990; Fairview, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1990 to 1994; and Orchard Hill, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1994 to 2000. He also served as a chaplain in the United States Army from 1976 to 1979.

Mr. Bates died on May 11, 2016, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was 79 years old.

David William Waanders

David William Waanders was born on January 23, 1941, in Sioux City, Iowa. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1962. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1965. He received a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1973.

Mr. Waanders was licensed by the Classis of South Grand Rapids in 1965 and ordained by the Classis of New Brunswick in 1970. Mr. Waanders’s ministry was spent teaching pastoral care and counseling at New Brunswick Theological Seminary from 1969 until his retirement in 2007. He also served as a pastoral counselor at Trinity Counseling Service in Princeton, New Jersey.

Mr. Waanders died on May 23, 2016, in Piscataway, New Jersey. He was 75 years old.

Paul Leslie Lupkes

Paul Leslie Lupkes was born on January 21, 1927, in Austinville, Iowa. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1950. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953. He also received an S.T.M. from Christian Theological Seminary in 1953 and a D.Min. from McCormick Theological Seminary in 1989.

Mr. Lupkes was licensed by the Classis of Pleasant Prairie in 1953 and ordained by the Classis of Germania the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Immanuel, Willow Lake, South Dakota, from 1953 to 1955; Grace, Waterloo, Iowa, from 1955 to 1961; Keystone, Indianapolis, Indiana, from 1961 to 1968; Church of the Rockies, Denver, Colorado, from 1969 to 1974; and the Church of New Hope (independent), Thornton, Colorado, from 1975 to 1976. He also ministered in the following capacities: hospital
chaplain, Denver, Colorado, from 1976 to 1977; minister of evangelism, Particular Synod of the West, from 1968 to 1969; campus ministry, Rapid City, South Dakota, from 1977 to 1992; associate professor, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, from 1979 to 2000; and chaplain, VA Medical Center, Fort Meade, Sturgis, South Dakota, from 1990 to 2000.

Mr. Lupkes died on May 31, 2016, in Rapid City, South Dakota. He was 89 years old.

Jonathan James Hinkamp

Jonathan James Hinkamp was born on January 22, 1935, in Schenectady, New York. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1955. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1958.

Mr. Hinkamp was licensed by the Classis of Poughkeepsie in 1958 and ordained by the Classis of Metropolitan Jersey the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Fifth Street, Bayonne, New Jersey, from 1958 to 1962 and Flatlands, Brooklyn, New York, from 1962 to 2002.

Mr. Hinkamp died on June 21, 2016, in Ticonderoga, New York. He was 81 years old.

Marilyn Tanis Franken

Marilyn Tanis Franken died in July 2016. Marilyn and her husband Darrell served as RCA missionaries in Bahrain for eight years from 1963 to 1968. Marilyn was a nurse at the American Mission Hospital and Darrell was pastor of the National Evangelical Church in Bahrain. The daughter of Edward Tanis, Marilyn graduated from Central College with a BS in 1954, having become a registered nurse at Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines in 1953. She worked as a nurse and nursing instructor in Iowa before moving to Bahrain in 1955 to serve as a volunteer nurse at the American Mission Hospital. She returned to the United States in 1958, but her experience inspired a lifelong passion for mission service. During the first Gulf War in 1991, Marilyn served again as a Red Cross volunteer, this time in Kuwait. The Kuwait City Hospital had a staff of 300 before the war began, but only 24 staff members were left to treat the people of Kuwait during the war. Marilyn received a medal from the Department of Defense for her sacrificial service during that war.

Richard J. Vander Borgh

Richard J. Vander Borgh was born on May 12, 1942, in Bay Shore, Long Island, New York. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1964. His theological education began at the Oberlin School of Theology in 1964 and was completed at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1967.

Mr. Vander Borgh was licensed by the Classis of Nassau-Suffolk in 1967 and ordained by the Classis of Columbia-Greene the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Linlithgo, Livingston, New York, from 1967 to 1972; Mohawk, New York, from 1973 to 1983; and Old North, Dumont, New Jersey, from 1983 to 2013.

Mr. Vander Borgh died on July 16, 2016, in Westwood, New Jersey. He was 74 years old.

Robert Lawrence Grupe

Robert Lawrence Grupe was born on January 24, 1931, in Schenectady, New York. He studied at Siena College, from which he graduated in 1953. He received his theological
education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1956.

Mr. Grupe was licensed by the Classis of Schenectady in 1956 and ordained by the Classis of Montgomery the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Sprakers and Currytown, New York, from 1956 to 1959 and Rosendale, New York, from 1959 to 1961. He served as the stated pulpit supply pastor at Highwoods, Saugerties, New York, from 1961 to 1965 and was engaged in specialized ministry as a teacher at Stone Ridge, New York, beginning in 1966 until his retirement. He also served as an interim pastor in various churches, including Ellenville, New York, from 1998 to 1999; Federated, Kerhonkson, New York; Rochester, Accord, New York; Marbletown, Stone Ridge, New York; North Marbletown, Kingston, New York; Woodstock, New York; Community, High Falls, New York; and Gardiner, New York.

Mr. Grupe died on August 5, 2016, in Belgrade, Montana. He was 85 years old.

James Lewis Johnson

James Lewis Johnson was born on December 13, 1944, in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. He studied at Bloomsburg College. He received his theological education at Bangor Theological Seminary, from which he graduated, with additional graduate study at Drew University.

Mr. Johnson was ordained in the United Methodist Church and served several congregations there. He was received by the Classis of Rockland-Westchester in 1981 and pastored Tappan Reformed in New York from 1981 to 2004. He also served as president of the Particular Synod of New York and as chaplain for the Tappan, New York, fire department.

Mr. Johnson died on August 5, 2016, in Portland, Maine. He was 71 years old.

Bernard Dean Ekema

Bernard Dean Ekema was born on June 23, 1930, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1963. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966.

Mr. Ekema was licensed by the Classis of Kalamazoo in 1966 and ordained by the Classis of Dakota the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Harrison, South Dakota, from 1966 to 1969; First, Three Oaks, Michigan, from 1969 to 1979; and Community, Williamsville, New York, from 1979 to 1980. Mr. Ekema was engaged in specialized ministry with NuWay, Inc. in Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1981 to 1996.

Mr. Ekema died on September 1, 2016, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He was 86 years old.

Thomas James Harris, Jr.

Thomas James Harris, Jr. was born on September 23, 1932, in Blakely, Pennsylvania. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1958. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1961. He also studied at the International Christian University in Japan from 1963 to 1965.

Mr. Harris was licensed and ordained by the Classis of New York in 1961. He pastored the following congregations: Hillsborough, Millstone, New Jersey, from 1968 to 1978; United, Somerville, New Jersey, from 1978 to 1980; and Stony Brook, New York, from 1980 to 1998. He was also an administrative assistant for the RCA Board of World Missions from 1961 to 1962 and an RCA missionary in Japan from 1963 to 1968. In his retirement, he was
a contract pastor at First Reformed Church in Denver, Colorado.

Mr. Harris died on September 5, 2016. He was 83 years old.

Wilbur Ervin Ivins

Wilbur Ervin Ivins was born on July 27, 1921, in Feasterville, Pennsylvania. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1942. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1945.

Mr. Ivins was licensed by the Classis of Philadelphia in 1945 and ordained by the Classis of Schoharie the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Lawyersville and Sharon, Lawyersville, New York, from 1945 to 1949; Pascack, Park Ridge, New Jersey, from 1949 to 1963; First, Catskill, New York, from 1963 to 1968; and Harlingen, Belle Mead, New Jersey, from 1968 to 1988. He served on the staff at First Church in Albany, New York, from 1989 to 2000. Mr. Ivins as served as a chaplain at Boys Training School in Skillman, New Jersey; as a board member of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the RCA Board of World Missions, and the RCA General Synod Council; and as president of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics.

Mr. Ivins died on September 23, 2016, in Cobleskill, New York. He was 95 years old.

Wilbur Thornton Washington

Wilbur Thornton Washington was born on January 19, 1924, in Palmyra, New Jersey. He began his undergraduate work at Tuskegee Institute in 1942, then studied at West Virginia State College, and graduated from Rutgers University in 1949. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1952. He did additional graduate work at Chicago University and the Pacific School of Religion. He received a D.D. from Central College and New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

Mr. Washington was licensed by the Presbytery of Cleveland in 1953 and ordained by the same presbytery in 1954. He was received by the Classis of Iliana that same year. He pastored the following congregations: Pembroke, St. Anne, Illinois, from 1954 to 1959; Community, Oakland, California, from 1959 to 1969; and First, Jamaica, New York, from 1985 to 1993. He served interim pastorates at Fort Washington Collegiate, New York City, New York, from 1994 to 1997 and Community, Glen Rock, New Jersey, from 1998 to 1999. Mr. Washington also served as a professor at Central College from 1969 to 1980 and at New Brunswick Theological Seminary from 1980 to 1985. He was president of the Particular Synod of the West from 1969 to 1970 and the first African American president of the General Synod from 1988 to 1989. He also served on the World Alliance of Reformed Churches board for the Caribbean/North America area from 1991 to 1992.

Mr. Washington died on October 3, 2016, in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. He was 92 years old.

Eloise Hannah (Boynton) Bosch

Eloise Hannah Bosch was born on August 4, 1919, in Mohawk, New York. She studied at Hope College, from which she graduated in 1941. She also studied at the Biblical Seminary in New York.

Mrs. Bosch was married to Dr. Donald Bosch, a medical missionary in the Arabian Gulf. Together they served on the mission field from 1955 until their retirement in 1983. She
served her working life in Oman as a teacher at the American Mission School in Muscat (the Al Amana School), teaching in both Arabic and English.

Mrs. Bosch died on October 7, 2016, in Oman. She was 97 years old.

James E. Ribbans

James E. Ribbans was born in 1951 in Somerville, New Jersey. He studied at the University of Southern California, from which he graduated in 1975. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1984.

Mr. Ribbans was ordained by the Classis of Raritan in 1984. He began his ministry as associate pastor in Syracuse, New York, from 1984 to 1988. He then served as the coordinator of programs in the Regional Synod of Albany from 1988 to 1990. He also served as pastor at First, Chatham, New York, from 1990 to 2000 and at Spotswood, New Jersey, from 2001 until his death.

Mr. Ribbans died on October 17, 2016, in Spotswood, New Jersey. He was 65 years old.

Elinor Heusinkveld Faber

Elinor Heusinkveld Faber (Ellie) died on November 17, 2016. Ellie was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on November 2, 1922, to Christian and Hilda Gran. After graduation from the University of Minnesota as a registered nurse in 1943, she married Dr. Maurice Heusinkveld. Maurice and Ellie were RCA missionaries to the Arabian Mission from 1946 to 1967, with assignments in Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, and Oman. After Maurice died in 1967, Ellie returned to America and settled in Holland, Michigan.

Stanley Bernard Vander Aarde

Stanley Bernard Vander Aarde was born on September 26, 1931, in Orange City, Iowa. He began his studies at Northwestern Junior College in Orange City in 1949 and completed them at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1953. He received his medical degree from Northwestern University in 1957 and became a fellow of the American Board of Otolaryngology in 1970.

Dr. Vander Aarde served as a medical missionary for the RCA in India from 1961 to 1987. He was in general practice at the Mary Lott Lyles Hospital in Madanapalle, India. After his otolaryngology residence in 1970, he served as director of the Union Mission Tuberculosis Sanatorium and as medical superintendent in the same hospital.

Dr. Vander Aarde died on November 19, 2016, in Orange City, Iowa. He was 85 years old.

Barnabas Roczey

Barnabas Roczey was born on November 24, 1935, in Szendrőlád, Borsod County, Hungary. He studied at the Földes Ferenc Gimnázium in Miskolc, Hungary, and graduated in 1956. He received his theological education at Faith Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1961. He received his S.T.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Mr. Roczey was ordained in 1965 in the Hungarian Reformed Church of Roebling, New Jersey. He served many congregations in the Hungarian Reformed and Presbyterian churches. He was received by the Classis of New Brunswick in 1981 and served as pastor
of the Magyar Reformed Church, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, from 1981 to 2008.

Mr. Roczey died on November 23, 2016, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He was 80 years old.

**John Richard Boender**

John Richard Boender was born on October 30, 1930, in Hospers, Iowa. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1951. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1954.

Mr. Boender was licensed and ordained by the Classis of East Sioux in 1954. He began his ministry as a chaplain in the United States Army, where he served from 1954 to 1956. He then pastored the following congregations: First, Allendale, Michigan, from 1956 to 1961; Harrison, South Dakota, from 1961 to 1966; Salem, Little Rock, Iowa, from 1966 to 1974; Hingham, Wisconsin, from 1974 to 1990; American, Woodstock, Minnesota, from 1990 to 1999; First, Allendale, Michigan, from 1999 to 2000; and Covenant Community, Hudsonville, Michigan, from 2001 to 2003.

Mr. Boender died on December 3, 2016, in Sheldon, Iowa. He was 86 years old.

**Donald Robert Baird**

Donald Robert Baird was born on December 11, 1933, in Jersey City, New Jersey. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1955. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1958.

Mr. Baird was licensed by the Classis of Paramus in 1958 and ordained by the Classis of Columbia the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Philmont, New York, from 1958 to 1962; Massapequa, New York, from 1963 to 1972; Feasterville, Pennsylvania, from 1972 to 1977; Pompton Plains, New Jersey, from 1977 to 1982; and Canajoharie, New York, from 1982 to 1990. He served on the staff of the Particular Synod of Albany, and was associate for congregational evangelism for the General Synod Council from 1990 to 1999.

Mr. Baird died on December 7, 2016, in Laurinburg, North Carolina. He was 82 years old.

**Lee Llewelly Kester**

Lee Llewellyn Kester was born on August 20, 1926, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1947. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1951.

Mr. Kester was licensed by the Classis of Philadelphia in 1951 and ordained by the Classis of Westchester the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Reformed Church of Cortlandtown, Montrose, New York, from 1951 to 1954; Bronxville, New York, from 1954 to 1964; Oradell, New Jersey, from 1964 to 1977; and St John’s, Jersey City, New Jersey, from 1977 to 1987. He also worked as a financial planner for American Express from 1978 to 1995 and served as the president of the Particular Synod of New York from 1959 to 1960.

Mr. Kester died on December 10, 2016, in Brunswick, Maine. He was 90 years old.
Willis Arthur Jones

Willis Arthur Jones was born on May 28, 1938, in El Dorado, Arkansas. He studied at Arkansas College, from which he graduated in 1960. He received his theological education at Austin Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1964. He did additional graduate study at Trinity College, Glasgow University, in 1966.


Mr. Jones died on December 17, 2016, in Inverness, Scotland. He was 78 years old.

Norman Charles Hamm

Norman Charles Hamm was born on March 12, 1952, in Troy, New York. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1974. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1978.

Mr. Hamm was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Schenectady in 1978. He pastored the following congregations: Glen, New York, from 1978 to 1983; Germantown, New York, from 1984 to 1992; Faith, Hazlet, New Jersey, from 1992 to 2000; contract pastor, Keyport, New Jersey, from 1999 to 2000; First Glenville, Amsterdam, New York, from 2001 to 2007; First, Athens, New York, from 2010 to 2015; and Jerusalem, Feura Bush, New York, from 2015 until his death.

Mr. Hamm died on December 18, 2016, in Scotia, New York. He was 64 years old.

Wayne Kiel

Wayne Kiel was born on April 21, 1929, in Jenison, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1963. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966.

Mr. Kiel was licensed and ordained by the Classis of South Grand Rapids in 1966. He served as pastor at Peace, Middleville, Michigan, from 1966 to 1989 and as minister for congregational care at First, South Holland, Illinois, from 1989 to 1995. He served on staff at Gun Lake Community Church for 15 years during his retirement.

Mr. Kiel died on December 19, 2016, in Zeeland, Michigan. He was 87 years old.

Louis Otto Springsteen

Louis Otto Springsteen was born on September 12, 1926, in Jamaica, New York. He studied at Dartmouth College, from which he graduated in 1948. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953.

Mr. Springsteen was licensed by the Classis of North Long Island in 1953 and ordained by the Classis of Orange the same year. He served as pastor at New Prospect, Pine Bush, New York, from 1953 to 1958 and at Trinity, Old Tappan, New Jersey, from 1958 to 1991.
Mr. Springsteen also served as a senior pastor in the pastor-to-pastor program of the Board of Pensions from 1991 to 1994 and as a pastor of calling at Old Paramus, Ridgewood, New Jersey, in 1996. He also served interim pastorates at Old Paramus, Ridgewood, New Jersey, in 1999 and at Saddle River, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, from 1998 to 2000. Mr. Springsteen also served as the stated clerk of the Classis of Greater Palisades.

Mr. Springsteen died on December 22, 2016. He was 90 years old.

**Bernard Daniel Hakken**

Bernard Daniel Hakken was born on December 26, 1926, in Bahrain. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1950. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953.

Mr. Hakken was licensed by the Classis of Holland in 1953 and ordained by the Classis of Zeeland the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Dunningville, Allegan, Michigan, from 1953 to 1954; Forest Home, Muskegon, Michigan, from 1963 to 1969; Everglade, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1969 to 1974; New Life, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1974 to 1978; and First, Sully, Iowa, from 1978 to 1992. Mr. Hakken also served the RCA as a missionary in Manila, Philippines, from 1956 to 1963.

Mr. Hakken died on December 24, 2016, in Wayland, Michigan. He was 89 years old.

**William Howard Jewett**

William Howard Jewett was born on June 7, 1930, at Schenectady, New York. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1951. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1955. Mr. Jewett also received an MBA from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, in 1953.

Mr. Jewett was licensed by the Classis of Schenectady in 1955 and ordained by the Classis of Ulster the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Fair Street, Kingston, New York, from 1955 to 1956; West New Hempstead, Spring Valley, New York, from 1956 to 1969; and Brielle, New Jersey, from 1969 to 1995. Mr. Jewett also served as the president of the Particular Synod of New Jersey from 1977 to 1978 and as the chaplain of the New Jersey Senate for four years under the Byrne administration.

Mr. Jewett died on December 26, 2016, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was 86 years old.

Each spring, the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report on ends policy E-4: Christ’s Kingdom Mission follows.

ENDS POLICY E-4: CHRIST’S KINGDOM MISSION

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities to participate in Christ’s kingdom mission, both locally and globally.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations” (Psalm 67:1-2).

Mission becomes a way of life when we reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in neighborhoods, cities, and throughout the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we boldly give witness to the hope within us and willingly serve others by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in every corner of the world. The RCA’s commitment is to respond with God’s love to meet spiritual and individual needs around the globe. It is envisioning the people of the RCA as a movement of faithful followers who live and love like Jesus as they radically follow Christ in mission together.

Individuals and churches experience transformation as they open themselves to be used by God and reach out in giving and receiving, learning and sharing, and extending the kingdom of God through missional engagement. This means bringing the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the message, mobilizing RCA congregations to connect with global partners for greater kingdom impact, helping resource volunteers for expanding involvement in mission efforts, and extending compassion, mercy, and justice in places of discrimination, poverty, famine, disaster, and injustice. In a world of brokenness and need, we offer help, hope, and tangible expressions of God’s love.

OVERVIEW

Six initiative teams work within the Christ’s Kingdom Mission strategic priority: Local Missional Engagement, which helps congregations express the gospel of Christ in transformational ways in their local community; Global Missional Engagement, which equips congregations to increase their global mission impact; Church Multiplication, focused on reaching the spiritually disconnected with new churches that proclaim the gospel; Volunteer Engagement, which provides opportunities for volunteers of all ages to engage in service for Christ; and Missional Mosaic, focused on equipping congregations for cultural competency and empowering them to advocate on behalf of the marginalized. RCA Disability Concerns also falls under the umbrella of the Christ’s Kingdom Mission strategic priority.

LOCAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Local Missional Engagement helps churches and individuals look beyond the obvious for new ways to bring hope to their communities. Local mission also brings groups of churches together to explore what mutual mission looks like in their context. Effective local mission ministries can transform neighborhoods and cities. The Local Missional Engagement initiative is led by Eliza Bast.
Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

• Launch two high-quality learning communities.
• Launch two local impact areas that mobilize at least three congregations for collective impact on their community.
• Hold six to eight connection events.

Progress

• One Local Missional Engagement leadership community has been completed. Two of the congregations involved in that leadership community are now leading or will be leading a Local Missional Engagement learning community in their area.
  o North Branch Reformed Church in Bridgewater, New Jersey, is now leading a Local Missional Engagement learning community in the New Jersey area that includes six additional churches.
  o Bethany Reformed Church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, launched a Local Missional Engagement learning community in Wisconsin in May 2017, with a goal of engaging six churches.
• Local Missional Engagement is partnering with Church Multiplication for an experiential joint learning community with five church planters in the southwest Michigan and northern Illinois areas, which began in late spring 2017.
• Local Missional Engagement is partnering with churches and civic leaders in Holland Michigan, to form a local impact area focused on addressing the affordable housing crisis for people who have lower incomes in Ottawa County. This project involves churches in the Classis of Holland and the Classis of Zeeland.
• Through the Local Missional Engagement initiative, the RCA was awarded a planning grant from the State of Michigan to develop math interventions for students in the Wyoming, Michigan, area. Local Missional Engagement staff met with local superintendents, district leaders, and educators to help design a math program targeting the students in this low-income area who are struggling to perform at grade level in math. The RCA will submit an application to AmeriCorps for an implementation grant to help support this project over the next three years. Congregations engaged in this effort are primarily church plants in Wyoming.
• In Chicago, 12 RCA and CRC churches are currently participating in a hybrid local impact area and learning community. They are considering a collaboration that would impact the Chicagoland area.
• Local Missional Engagement is looking at starting a local impact area within the state of Iowa in the summer or fall of 2017.
• Five connection events have been completed this year. Local Missional Engagement is currently working on collaborative connection events with the African American Black Council, Church Multiplication, Next Generation Engagement, and Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

• For churches that have engaged in Local Missional Engagement learning and leadership communities:
  o By 12 months after the process, at least 50 percent of congregations will have adjusted ministry plans and begun work with key community partners.
By 18 months, at least 50 percent of congregations will have begun new ministry projects and processes with key community partners and stakeholders.

- In the local impact areas, all churches will have identified their key community partners and stakeholders. Within six months of the process, all churches will have begun to implement their strategy to impact their local community. Within 12 months of the process, all churches will have adjusted resources to appropriately support their area’s focus.
- One leadership collaborative with Local Missional Engagement leaders (pastors and Christian community development leaders) will have launched.
- Local Missional Engagement will develop and launch an experiment lab model for new approaches to local mission in learning and leadership communities.
- 100 RCA congregations will be equipped for increased local missional engagement with tangible missional impact, reflecting sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation.
- 50 congregations will have engaged in substantial and quantifiable local missional engagement, with identified and sustained community partnerships.

GLOBAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

For more than 150 years, RCA Global Mission has been bringing the Word of God to people around the world. Hundreds of missionaries and volunteers have left the comforts of their own communities to be present in distant places, all in an effort to “live and love like Jesus.” We are excited to continue to live out that goal while we more closely engage with congregations.

The Global Missional Engagement initiative is focused on engaging and equipping congregations to serve Christ by serving our international neighbors around the world. Through service, congregations have transformational experiences that equip them to become agents of transformation to the indigenous populations with whom they serve in our global community.

This team, led by Megan Hodgin, is focused on providing clear pathways to help congregations explore their call from God in a global context, to develop the capacity to live out that call, and to develop partnerships with other congregations and missionary organizations in order to carry out God’s call for mission.

This initiative has three areas of focus:

1. Church equipping: Developing, implementing, and working with individual congregations and clusters of congregations to provide consulting services, learning communities, and leadership communities that expand the work of RCA congregations around the world in quantity, quality, and impact.
2. Global strategies: The Global Missional Engagement team will collaborate with Global Mission staff to develop strategic goals for RCA mission in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe that have measurable outcomes over the next five years. These goals will lead to ministries of transformation that will bring congregations and indigenous populations closer to Christ.
3. Restructuring: Collaborating with Global Mission staff to develop and identify missionaries and mission partners that will work with our congregations to achieve our strategic goals.
Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Launch one learning community focused on Re:Forming Missions, which will equip a cluster of congregations to discern and implement a mission action plan.
  - By six months after launch, at least 80 percent of participating congregations will commit to deepening their global engagement in at least one of the following ways: committing to a new global partnership, increasing their mission giving, developing or restructuring their mission team, providing an educational opportunity in their congregation, or committing to a vision or mission trip.
  - By 12 months after launch, at least 80 percent of the congregations will have developed and implemented a mission action plan.
- Hold six to eight connection events designed to provide equipping and connect participants to learning communities and direct missional engagement.
  - At least 50 percent of the congregations involved in the connection events will commit to a learning community or new mission partnership.
- Mobilize one church network with three or more congregations who work together to have a collective impact in a global impact area.

Progress

- Two learning communities have been started, equipping six congregations to develop and implement a mission action plan. The members of one learning community will complete their action plans just prior to General Synod. The second learning community will continue the process in the fall of 2017. A seventh congregation began the process of building its mission action plan in April 2017 and will likely complete the process by August 2017.
- Four connection events have engaged 20 congregations in the U.S. and Canada in discussing the transformational impact global mission has at home and abroad.
- One church network has been established with a focus on the strategic impact area in Nicaragua. More than 140 individuals are participating in the network, engaging in online discussions and discernment facilitated by Olivia Holt, an RCA missionary in Nicaragua.
- An immersive global mission experience engaged RCA women in the global mission work of JJ and Tim TenClay in Italy in April 2017. This was a collaborative effort with Women’s Transformation and Leadership. The participants are networked together for continued learning and implementation of ministry initiatives among their congregations.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- 25 congregations will have participated in Re:Forming Missions, and 75 percent of these congregations will have developed and begun implementing their mission action plan.
- Three church networks will have formed, equipping and encouraging groups of churches to collaborate with each other and RCA Global Mission personnel for deep impact in three global impact areas.
- Two immersive global engagement experiences will have been facilitated, introducing participants to a global impact area and equipping them to implement their learning by initiating a global ministry in their own congregation.
- Partnerships will have been established with ten RCA congregations who were not previously engaged with RCA Global Mission.
CHURCH MULTIPLICATION

The RCA continues to start new churches that further the gospel—reaching the spiritually disconnected, bringing them into a community of authentic relationships, and introducing them to the God of grace who transforms lives and eternities.

The RCA fosters a sustainable movement of church multiplication by starting new congregations and missional communities. An environment for church multiplication is created through an intentional system and process, which begins with prayer and empowering through the Holy Spirit. “Then [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’” (Matthew 9:37-38).

A multiplication movement is built on a solid foundation of assessment and evaluation of church planters and church planting locations, and then strengthened through training. It encourages the ongoing ministry of church planters and new churches by providing coaching relationships and networks of planters for learning, support, and accountability. It expands as new congregations reproduce and established churches join in starting new churches.

RCA Church Multiplication reaches out to those not yet found among the churches and Christians who make up the Reformed Church in America (John 4:23, Luke 15).

Seven strategic benchmarks fill out the multiplication vision statement and 15-year strategic plan. We seek to increase both the quantity and the quality of our church plants every year through 2028. One central qualitative benchmark is to organize our new congregations within five years of their launch date; at the time of organization, the church will be thriving, missional, reproducing, self-supporting, and self-governing. Another benchmark is that more than 40 percent of our new plants will be congregations of color or multicultural from the start. More than 50 percent of the growth of these congregations will come from new professions of faith and adult baptisms.

We are thoroughly pursuing a movement, working intensely with the innovators and the most energized partners we can find. Intentional factors include anticipating change and growth, creating pathways for leadership capacity, cultivating the spiritual giftedness of movement leaders, gospel foundations, incarnational practices, and Holy Spirit empowerment. All of these contribute to an expanding, exponential movement, as opposed to the maintenance of current patterns and structures. These culture shifts are in alignment with the global kingdom of God and have encouraged an environment of risk and reward in RCA Church Multiplication.

The Church Multiplication initiative is led by Mike Hayes, Tim Vink, and Randy Weener.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- 22 New Congregation Plans (NCPs) will be approved.
- Organize 14 church plants and/or new sites of already organized churches.
- Launch four learning communities focused on equipping potential parent congregations.
- Launch one MC² leadership community of at least 15 high-capacity parent churches (defined as churches who parent a new church every year, every other year, or every third year).
- Launch one learning community focused on foster parenting and mutual mission.
with smaller churches. This learning community will include ten or more churches.

- Launch one pilot learning community focused on learning to be led and to lead through the Holy Spirit’s presence and power for kingdom expansion. This learning community, called Kingdom Ambassadors, will include 20 or more churches.
- See 100 percent of planters complete a full assessment process, including an initial screening assessment (ISA), church planter profile (CPP), and Multiply Assessment Center, and/or Ridley behavioral assessment tools (or comparable assessments).
- Train six new parent church coaches and work to have 75 percent of all planters paired with qualified coaches.
- Provide Multiply training for 25 planters and to train four new equippers.

**Progress**

- Five of twenty-two NCPs are fully approved. Others are in the process of being approved.
- Four of fourteen church plants have either organized or been started as additional sites of organized churches.
- Three learning communities focused on equipping potential parent congregations have been launched in Iowa, Chicago, and Wisconsin, with several churches in each one.
- We have launched a strong MC² leadership community of at least 15 high-capacity parent churches. Several of these churches have started 4, 8, 14, or even 35 congregations directly in the past two decades, and are individually committed to 5 more, 8 more, even 23 more plants by 2023.
- We launched one learning community with 12 churches (two more than the ten in our goal) focused on the sustainability and multiplication of smaller congregations in their own unique way. The RCA has more than 400 congregations with fewer than 95 people in attendance at worship; these congregations need a pathway of their own to learn, grow, and multiply.
- We launched one pilot learning community focused on learning to be led and to lead through the Holy Spirit’s presence and power for kingdom expansion. The West Michigan pilot group is called Kingdom Ambassadors; 22 churches and more than 250 regular participants of all ages are involved. Exploration of reproducing this 12-month training in California and Iowa is underway now.
- We have used the Multiply Assessment Center, ISA, CPP, and Ridley tools (or comparable tools) with 100 percent of planters.
- We have trained four of the six new parent church coaches, and are on track to have 75 percent of all planters paired with qualified coaches by June 2017.
- We are on track to provide Multiply training to 25 RCA planters and to train four new equippers.

**Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)**

- 100 new RCA congregations will be planted in all eight regional synods, reflecting increased church multiplication momentum and effectiveness.
- 50 congregations will have organized and be thriving, missional, and reproducing.
- 40 intentionally ethnic/multiethnic/multiracial church plants, congregations of color, or congregations led by a female planter will be started.
- 5,000 new disciples of Jesus Christ will be engaged in new church plants.
VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

The Volunteer Engagement initiative is focused on empowering, equipping, and engaging RCA volunteers of all ages in service for Christ through mission volunteer opportunities that have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities in which they serve. We believe that as volunteers serve in the name of Christ, whether in their local community or around the world, their service can have long-term impact on all participants.

This team, led by Stephanie Soderstrom, is focused on supporting congregations and equipping volunteers for service with RCA missionaries and mission partners. We work with volunteers throughout the planning process, providing support in the field and helping ensure effective debriefing and follow-through.

Four areas of focus:

- Mission trips: Working with local, long-term ministries, mission teams can help meet needs, build relationships, and share the hope of Christ. Mission trips are available for teams of all ages.
- Disaster response: When disaster strikes, RCA volunteers can help provide much-needed support in the months and years that follow. Individual and group opportunities are available.
- Individual volunteer opportunities: Opportunities are available for students and adults to serve for a few weeks or up to two years alongside RCA missionaries and partners.
- Church equipping: Working with RCA churches, we will offer resources, training, and equipping processes to help them take their next step in volunteer engagement. These equipping resources will be available to both churches that serve through the RCA and those that do not.

Many RCA churches have been engaged in sending volunteers in mission for years. Our vision is to become value-added for these churches as well as churches that are new to engaging volunteers in mission. Additionally, we will seek to engage individuals, especially the next generation, in dynamic volunteer opportunities and internships that allow volunteers to utilize their unique gifts to contribute to the long-term goals of our mission partners.

Year Four Goals (By June 2017)

The RCA will engage all generations of volunteers in service for Christ through North American and global mission volunteer opportunities that will have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities where they serve.

- Engage 1,250 RCA volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- Support 60 RCA congregations through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities.
- Establish baseline metrics to track volunteer satisfaction and mission partner impact through RCA volunteer engagement experiences.
- Engage 35 volunteers in service through an RCA Local Mission Engagement intensive.
- Send at least three volunteer groups to serve in partnership with the RCA Peace Project in Israel/Palestine.
- Send at least two volunteer groups to serve in partnership with World Vision through their U.S. programs.
Progress

- Engaged 1,155 volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners, as compared to 1,075 in year three.
- Supported 82 congregations through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities.
- Baseline metrics have been established and data is being collected.
- The Local Missional Engagement intensive was postponed due to scheduling difficulties.
- Sent eight volunteer groups to serve in partnership with the RCA Peace Project in Israel/Palestine.
- Three groups were connected with World Vision U.S. programs, though none were able to serve with them.
- In the 2016 calendar year, the Next Generation Missional Engagement fund awarded 76 scholarships. These scholarships totaled $68,430 and benefited 332 young volunteers.

Five-Year Goals (July 2013 to June 2018)

- We will engage 5,000 volunteers with measurable impact on youth and adult participants, sending congregations, and partner communities.
- We will support 200 congregations through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities.
- We will become fully accredited with the Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission and develop tools to help volunteers, congregations, and mission partners align with standards.

MISSIONAL MOSAIC

Misional Mosaic focuses on helping congregations to live more fully into the biblical vision of shalom and the human hope of the beloved community. The initiative is led by Earl James.

The ancient Hebrews spoke the word shalom both at greeting and parting. The word meant “peace,” but conveyed more, including life with complete wholeness wherever one lived, worked, and worshiped.

The beloved community grows naturally out of Jesus’ own hunger for the felt unity of his followers, mirroring the unity he shared with the Father (John 17:20-23). That unity expresses a readiness to engage everyday life in close friendship and to actively take a stand when society and societal systems block access to the abundant life for people and places God created.

Misional Mosaic offers congregations two pathways as they strive for shalom and the beloved community, helping congregations:

- Increase their cultural agility.
- Advocate by addressing public policy.

“Cultural agility” begins with whatever culturally rooted style of communication a person or congregation has and focuses on adapting that style when communicating, negotiating, and building trust with other people, congregations, or groups whose cultures differ from one’s own.
As congregations increase in cultural agility, tangible, sustainable transformations can occur in leadership, outreach, and worship.

In advocacy, congregations come to see and engage public policy matters as simply a third expression of their shared compassion ministries. Many congregations express compassion by “giving a fish.” They see a need and meet a need. Food pantries are excellent examples of “giving a fish” compassion ministry.

Congregations also express compassion by “teaching to fish.” By sharing any particular knowledge, skill, or ability, they assist a person or family in overcoming a particular life challenge that threatens them. Tutoring and financial stewardship ministries are excellent examples of “teaching to fish” ministries.

Not very many congregations ask, “Why do so many people and families need those fish to begin with?” Advocating by addressing public policy results in congregations partnering with others to make tangible differences in everyday life challenges locally or globally for hundreds of thousands of people and to add greater liveliness and focus to the shared life of the congregation itself.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

- Launch three cultural agility learning communities. By April 2017, see at least 50 percent of the congregations involved make a shift in leadership, outreach, or worship with the long-term goal of better reflecting their communities.
- Launch one learning community focused on advocacy. By June 2017, at least 50 percent of the congregations involved have a ministry partnership with a pertinent advocacy group and/or have launched a new congregational advocacy ministry.
- Launch one learning community, in partnership with New Brunswick Theological Seminary, focused on interfaith relations. By September 2017, at least 50 percent of the congregations involved develop a significant new partnership.
- Hold seven connection events designed to provide equipping and connect participants to direct engagement with learning communities and/or direct missional engagement.

Progress

- Four cultural agility learning communities have been launched, two of which are now completed. In March, using the Sankofa journey ministry model, the Synod the Heartland experimental learning community traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit a church that, with its leaders, has been on the cultural agility journey for more than ten years. All the churches have agreed to build a long-term relationship that emphasizes “beloved community warmth” and learning together about increasing the impact of cultural agility within their congregations and in their outreach.
- One advocacy learning community focused on mass incarceration has been launched. A second group of congregations who met at a connection event is close to a decision about becoming an advocacy impact learning community.
- A critical recruitment feature of the learning community in partnership with NBTS was to ensure sufficient numbers of leaders from various faiths would participate. The local interfaith group was not prepared at this time to endorse or participate. NBTS and Missional Mosaic have agreed to revisit this learning community in 2017–2018.
• To date, for this program year, Missional Mosaic has completed five connection events. Participants in these connection events were encouraged to engage in learning communities or in direct impact opportunities. Since tracking of connection events began, Missional Mosaic has completed 25 connection events.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

• Nine cultural agility and advocacy learning communities or advocacy impact teams will have launched, involving 40 congregational teams.
  o At least 50 percent of the cultural agility learning community congregational teams will make a shift in leadership, outreach, or worship with the long-term goal of better reflecting their geographic communities.
  o At least 50 percent of the advocacy learning community teams will form ministry partnerships with pertinent, successful advocacy groups or launch their own congregational advocacy ministries.
• 35 cultural agility and advocacy connection events will have been held, engaging representatives from 200 congregations.
  o At least 25 percent of the cultural agility participants will become directly connected to successful cultural agility groups or their congregations will participate in cultural agility learning communities.
  o At least 50 percent of the advocacy participants will become directly connected to successful advocacy groups or their congregations will participate in advocacy learning communities or impact teams.

DISABILITY CONCERNS

Scripture’s vision of the kingdom is a unifying embrace of the love and grace of Jesus Christ that reaches all people—every race, tribe, people, and language, every disability and special need. Raising awareness and making our churches accessible to people with disabilities establishes a needed foundation, but our own attitudes require even greater transformation, so that ministries to and for people with disabilities grow into ministries with and by people with disabilities. The vision of RCA Disability Concerns is to welcome and engage the gifts of all people in Christ’s ministry—becoming accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves.

The Disability Concerns initiative is led by Terry DeYoung.

Year Four Goals (by June 2017)

• Launch one combined RCA-CRC learning community focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church. By 2019, at least 50 percent of the congregations involved will conduct an accessibility audit, adopt a church disability policy, launch a new disability ministry, develop a new strategic partnership, or make shifts in church staffing or budget.
• Hold three to four connection events designed to raise awareness about advocacy with people with disabilities, provide equipping, and connect participants to learning communities. At least 50 percent of the congregations involved in the connection events will commit to a learning community or appoint a church disability advocate.
• Through the leadership of church disability advocates, 15 churches will conduct an accessibility audit or adopt a church disability policy—with at least five of these congregations removing barriers to full participation.
Progress

- In October 2016, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns hosted a three-day leadership conference in Niagara Falls, Ontario, that equipped 25 RCA disability advocates—enfolded within a larger disability conference cosponsored by Christian Horizons, a faith-based disability service provider in Ontario. One day was devoted exclusively to RCA-CRC advocates and incorporated teaching on a learning community model in local missional engagement that included a conversation with an RCA disability advocate whose church has launched a weekly day program for residents of area group homes.

- In November 2016, RCA Disability Concerns initiated an accessibility survey of all RCA churches to assist in evaluating physical barriers, communication barriers, and inclusive programming. Results of this yearly survey will be added to each participating church’s information in the RCA’s online church search, in part so that potential visitors with disabilities can anticipate if the church will be able to accommodate their needs.

- In February 2017, all church disability advocates in the RCA database were encouraged to facilitate an accessibility audit (identifying and addressing barriers in attitude, communication, and facility design) and/or work with leaders to adopt a disability policy for their church.

- Planning is underway for RCA-CRC Disability Concerns connection events in Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, and Ontario.

Five-Year (June 2013 to June 2018)

- 40 churches will have conducted an accessibility audit or adopted a church disability policy so that substantive changes are made in their welcome of people with disabilities.

- 100 churches will have identified a church disability advocate who is empowered to champion the full welcome and engagement of people with disabilities so that disability awareness is deepened and people with disabilities are engaged.

- 15 churches will have engaged in local mission efforts, volunteer engagements, or public advocacy campaigns that address issues that are harmful in some way to people with disabilities so that people with disabilities can flourish as active community members.

- 125 churches will have participated in connection events designed to raise awareness about advocacy with people with disabilities, provide equipping, and connect participants to learning communities.

- Three RCA-CRC learning communities focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church will have been established.

- One leadership community will be established for churches that are engaging people with disabilities exceptionally well.

ADDITIONAL GLOBAL MISSION REPORTING

The purpose of RCA Global Mission is to support the growth of the kingdom of God on earth, to foster the presence of the living Christ deeply in the hearts of people, and to advance ministries of compassion, justice, reconciliation, education, economic development, and disaster relief.

The way that Global Mission engages God’s mission in the world has changed. The gospel complements and grows in and with the cultures of the world. Rather than to impose a North American understanding of the church and of ministries of compassion onto other cultures and countries, RCA Global Mission seeks to partner with national churches, indigenous
church planting movements, and local organizations. Its purpose is to build the capacity of in-country organizations to engage in God’s mission in each place. The RCA is no longer exporting its definition of mission. Instead, the RCA is listening to people at the local level as they define God’s mission in their context and is seeking to build capacity in the places where the local people invite the RCA in.

Missionaries from North America are still urgently needed to conduct this capacity-building work. Rather than sending RCA missionaries out to provide direct services, they are sent out to come alongside, to equip, and to train local populations to lead.

Global Mission has also developed a new global mission consulting service for RCA congregations, including the following services:

- Training for mission committees and pastors to develop their own strategy for effective global mission programs.
- Helping RCA congregations evaluate potential mission partners. With the emerging marketplace of independent global mission agencies, there is a need to discern the effectiveness of these organizations. What percent of every dollar goes to their administrative overhead? Are they seeking to empower in-country leaders and movements? How effective are they in achieving their organizational goals?
- Helping congregations add value to and scale up their mission goals.

The Challenge

These are tough times for North American denominational mission programs. Denominational mission programs are experiencing a decline in funding. RCA Global Mission, too, has less income than it did a decade ago. There has been a decline in bequests and designated gifts for mission over the past ten years. As a result, Global Mission ended the 2016 fiscal year with a $430,000 deficit (6.5 percent of the Global Mission budget). In order to balance the budget in 2017, several areas of the budget have needed to be cut, including the elimination of two and a half staff positions in Global Mission. Supervision and administrative overhead have been streamlined. Global Mission believes that it has been able to maintain its effectiveness.

The Vision

The exciting news is that we are living through the greatest growth of Christianity in human history. In parts of Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America, indigenous church planting movements are thriving and local capacity for mission is increasing. It is a joy that RCA churches are able to be a part of this tremendous global growth in the body of Christ. It is an inspiration to realize the incredible work we are supporting throughout the world.

PIM Shares

RCA Global Mission is grateful for the faithfulness of congregations and individuals in their support of the RCA’s ministries overseas. PIM (Partnership-in-Mission) shares pledged by congregations and individuals are the major source of financial support for RCA missionaries and programs, providing mission personnel with adequate resources to fulfill their ministries. Global Mission staff give thanks to God for the faithfulness of RCA congregations and individual members.

General Synod 2016 set the value of a PIM share for 2017 at $6,400; Global Mission is recommending an increase of $300 in the value of a PIM share for 2018. It is also asking
that all congregations consider increasing pledges to RCA missionaries by $300 to address
the increasing costs of doing ministry around the world. That 4.7 percent increase would
add $247,200 to the Global Mission budget, which would close the budget gap.

R 17-37
To set the value of a Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) share for 2018
at $6,700. (ADOPTED)

Global Mission Statistics

The RCA impacts the church of Jesus Christ around the world through the work and witness
of 44 in-country workers employed by RCA global partners and 49 RCA missionaries,
supported by RCA congregations through PIM shares. Together, these 93 mission personnel
serve and relate to 81 national churches and Christian service agencies in 26 different
countries. These mission personnel around the world are supported by the pledges of 460
RCA congregations.

Transitions in Mission Personnel: Retirements

*Jhonny Alicia-Báez*

Jhonny Alicea-Báez retired from RCA Global Mission on December 31, 2016. In 2001,
Jhonny was hired by RCA Global Mission to serve as the supervisor for Latin America.
Jhonny served on the board of Words of Hope and helped bring the RCA into new mission
relationships. In 2007, Jhonny was appointed director of Global Mission, a position he held
for many years.

*Ken and Marcia Bradsell*

After Ken retired from his service with the General Synod Council and the Board of
Benefits Services, he and his wife, Marcia, followed God’s call to serve the Protestant
Church in Oman (PCO). Ken served the church with pastoral leadership of an expatriate
congregation of more than 500 families in the capital city of Muscat. He also served as the
liaison between the PCO and the Omani Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and was
a mentor and guide to other staff members.

*Duncan Hanson*

In 2002, Duncan joined RCA Global Mission staff as the supervisor for Europe, the
Middle East, and India. Duncan led the RCA into a commitment with the Roma of Central
Europe, with the Kurds in the eastern Mediterranean, and with African, Syrian, and Iraqi
refugees in Italy. He also introduced the RCA to a relationship with the Waldensian Church.
Additionally, Duncan helped to resolve a number of serious conflicts and strengthen
partnerships in his region.

*Tom and Liz Stewart*

Tom and Liz witnessed to and served international students on the Oklahoma State
University campus from 1980 to 2016. They ministered through retreats, welcome socials,
host-family events, evangelistic programs, Bible studies, pastoral guidance, one-to-one
witnessing, and gatherings in their home. More than 80 percent of OSU’s international
students return to their home countries after graduation and, by the grace of God, many
students to whom the Stewarts ministered received Christ and became influential witnesses
to their own culture. The Stewarts served in partnership with Mission to Internationals, Inc.
Marlin Vis

Marlin and Sally Vis have been leading educational tours in Israel and Palestine since 2005. In addition to tours of the Holy Land and the biblical history of the old city of Jerusalem, they have been leading tours of the Palestinian territories, helping groups of RCA leaders to understand the nature of the ongoing conflict in the region. Over the past several years, they have also supported programs for Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and summer camps designed to foster peace in the region. Marlin served on the board of directors of World Vision in Jerusalem, and they have supported a network of Christian organizations that provide aid and training to Palestinian Christians. Marlin and Sally’s son, Josh, has replaced Marlin as an RCA missionary leading these initiatives. Sally currently is continuing her work with logistics and administration assistance for the study tours.

R 17-38
Whereas the Rev. Jhonny Alicea-Báez has retired from the RCA Global Mission staff after more than 15 years of service, first as supervisor of Latin America and then as director of Global Mission; and

Whereas the Rev. Ken and Marcia Bradsell have retired from their service with the Protestant Church in Oman, following Ken’s years of service on the General Synod Council and Board of Benefits Services staff; and

Whereas the Rev. Dr. Duncan Hanson has retired from the RCA Global Mission staff after more than 15 years supervising RCA Global Mission personnel and projects in Europe, the Middle East, and India; and

Whereas the Rev. Tom and Liz Stewart have retired from the mission field after more than 35 years of ministering to international students at Oklahoma State University; and

Whereas the Rev. Marlin Vis has retired from the mission field after 12 years of leading educational tours in Israel and Palestine with his wife, Sally;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 211th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 8 through 13, 2017, on the campus of Hope College in Holland, Michigan, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Rev. Jhonny Alicea-Báez, Rev. Ken and Marcia Bradsell, Rev. Dr. Duncan Hanson, Rev. Tom and Liz Stewart, and Rev. Marlin Vis, and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission. (ADOPTED)

New Mission Assignments

Larry Austin has been appointed to work in partnership with the Classis of Central California in the Inside-Out program in Oakland, California. Larry will be working with young men and boys as a chaplain at the Juvenile Justice Center and continuing those relationships after they are released back to their families and communities.
Michael and Carrie Johnson will partner with United World Mission to serve Christians in Scotland and to support church planters throughout Europe with mentoring, training, retreats, and workshops. Their work will include an internship program that will mentor and equip people to serve within the local community and across Europe.

Aaro Rytkönen has been appointed as the new director of the Al Amana Centre in Oman. The Al Amana Centre is dedicated to hosting visiting groups, college- and seminary-level educational programs, and dialogue between Christians and Muslims for the purpose of mutual understanding.

Filipe and Janelle Silva are serving with New Horizons Foundation in Romania, engaging youth through impact groups, camps, service in the community, and a climbing gym. Janelle is developing a ministry to women that will include a women’s center.

Lois Wanyoike is the project leader for Setshabelo Family and Child Services in Botshabelo, South Africa, one of the RCA’s new strategic impact areas. The goal of this strategic impact area is to reduce the number of orphans and vulnerable children and to strengthen families in Botshabelo.

Deaths

Eloise Bosch, former missionary in Oman, died on October 7, 2016. Eloise and her husband, Don, served in Oman from 1955 to 1985. Don was a surgeon at American Mission Hospital and Eloise was a teacher at Al Amana School. The Bosches were beloved by the Omani people. When the Bosches retired, Oman’s ruler gave them Omani citizenship and provided them a home near Muscat. Eloise epitomized what a missionary should be: caring, committed, creative, and imaginative. For many decades, Eloise has been a model of what it can mean to follow Christ. The Reformed Church in America, the people of Oman, and indeed, the people of the whole world, are poorer that she is gone but richer that she was with us.

Elinor Heusinkveld Faber (Ellie) died on November 17, 2016. Ellie was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on November 2, 1922, to Christian and Hilda Gran. After graduation from the University of Minnesota as a registered nurse in 1943, she married Dr. Maurice Heusinkveld. Maurice and Ellie were RCA missionaries to the Arabian Mission from 1946 to 1967, with assignments in Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, and Oman. After Maurice died in 1967, Ellie returned to America and settled in Holland, Michigan.

Marilyn Tanis Franken died in July 2016. Marilyn and her husband Darrell served as RCA missionaries in Bahrain for eight years from 1963 to 1968. Marilyn was a nurse at the American Mission Hospital and Darrell was pastor of the National Evangelical Church in Bahrain. The daughter of Edward Tanis, Marilyn graduated from Central College with a BS in 1954, having become a registered nurse at Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines in 1953. She worked as a nurse and nursing instructor in Iowa before moving to Bahrain in 1955 to serve as a volunteer nurse at the American Mission Hospital. She returned to the United States in 1958, but her experience inspired a lifelong passion for mission service. During the first Gulf War in 1991, Marilyn served again as a Red Cross volunteer, this time in Kuwait. The Kuwait City Hospital had a staff of 300 before the war began, but only 24 staff members were left to treat the people of Kuwait during the war. Marilyn received a medal from the Department of Defense for her sacrificial service during that war.

A copy of the remarks made to the General Synod by director of Global Mission Doug Leonard is available from the RCA Archives upon request.
Report of Words of Hope

Words of Hope is an international media ministry founded by supporting classes of the Reformed Church in America. Words of Hope’s mission is to build the church in the hard places by equipping indigenous Christian churches and ministries to proclaim the gospel, especially through the use of media.

The areas where Words of Hope does ministry are difficult to reach with the gospel, either because of poverty, geography, persecution, or social antagonism toward Christianity. Words of Hope partners with existing Christian organizations in these hard-to-reach countries and equips them to more effectively minister in their own language and context, among their own people.

Currently, Words of Hope’s regions of ministry include Albania, the Arab world, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Niger, North America, South Sudan, Tibet, Turkey, and Uganda. Each ministry field requires its own unique media outreach approach. Depending on the variety of resources and preferences in a given region, an assortment of radio programs, CDs, DVDs, text messages, Internet, Skype, Facebook, print materials, and satellite television are used to proclaim the gospel.

Some notable highlights from Words of Hope’s ministry in the past year include the welcoming of a new president to lead the ministry, the start of daily devotional distribution in Uganda, and the expanse of outreach into five new tribal languages in the country of Niger.

Jon Opgenorth has succeeded David Bast as president of Words of Hope. “I am confident that God has called Jon to this role,” said Bast. “I am excited to see how God will use him to lead Words of Hope in new and wonderful ways to advance God’s kingdom and build Christ’s church in the world’s hard places.”

Opgenorth comes to Words of Hope from Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa, where he served as senior pastor for 18 years. “My heart has been part of the Words of Hope family for many years,” Opgenorth said. “When I was ten I had a providential encounter with former Words of Hope president Dr. Bill Brownson. On a sabbatical I traveled to Uganda with the Rev. David Bast. And recently I served a number of years on the board. In these ways, I sensed God’s preparation for this new chapter,” he said. “I look forward to leading Words of Hope in the great work of proclaiming salvation in Jesus in the hard-to-reach places of the world.”

Opgenorth received a bachelor of arts in religion from Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, and a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He has a proven track record in fundraising, team building, and vision casting. He has also traveled extensively, most recently to Uganda, where he ministered with Words of Hope Uganda’s Titus Baraka.

The Words of Hope daily devotionals are now being printed and distributed in Uganda. In Uganda, good Christian materials are hard to find and expensive to buy. The Words of Hope devotional now provides Ugandans with theologically sound teaching. The booklets are available at a nominal fee that is charged to readers who can afford it or waived for those who cannot. The first print run of 10,000 copies was distributed across the country in all 13 dioceses that partner with Words of Hope. The original Words of Hope daily devotionals are contextualized by Ugandan editors to better apply to their own local readership, and devotional covers and ad pages are changed in order to direct Ugandan readers to Words
of Hope radio programming and church services within the country. The next print run of devotionals will include devotional submissions written by local Ugandan writers that will coordinate with themes being addressed in Ugandan churches.

In the strongly Muslim country of Niger, Words of Hope has been producing good news broadcasts for ten years in French, the national language of education, and in Hausa, the more commonly spoken native tongue. Now, because of partnership with Back to God Ministries International, Words of Hope has been able to start new language broadcasts in the country that are designed to foster church plants. In addition to being able to reach further in the languages of French and Hausa, programs will now be produced in five additional heart languages: Zarma, Kanuri, Tubu, Fulfulde, and Gourmantché.

Words of Hope is deeply grateful for the support of RCA churches that continues to allow this outreach ministry to grow. In 2016, contributions from RCA congregations totaled $584,405, an increase from 2015. We celebrate this increase in giving, knowing that these dollars are allowing people to be introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thank you for proclaiming hope to the refugee, the orphan, the oppressed, the impoverished, and the imprisoned. Thank you for sending the gospel out to the ends of the earth.
Report of the Church Growth Fund

The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. (CGF) is a nonprofit corporation that functions under the supervision of the RCA General Synod. The CGF supports the work of the denomination by making affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings and other properties used in their ministries. The CGF loan programs offer unsecured loans of up to $100,000 and secured borrowing of up to $5 million.

As a primary source of funding for loans, the CGF sells interest-bearing investments called savings certificates. The CGF offers two types of savings certificates:

1. Term savings certificates, which are available in maturities from one to ten years.
2. Demand savings certificates, which allow the investment of additional funds and the redemption of amounts in the certificate (subject to the limits described in the CGF offering circular).

To further support the denomination, the CGF contributes a portion of its earnings annually to the General Synod Council (GSC), which awards the funds as grants to support RCA church planting. In 2014, as a way to support Transformed & Transforming, the CGF began making additional contributions to the GSC for the Next Generation Missional Engagement Scholarship Fund. This fund provides scholarships to youth and young adults age 25 and under to cover the cost of mission trips and mission internships, disaster response work, vision and study tours, and missional training experiences.

More specific information on CGF loans and how to invest in savings certificates is available on the CGF website at www.rca.org/cgf.

Assets

In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016 (FY16), assets grew by $6.8 million (9 percent) to $79.3 million. CGF assets at the end of FY16 consisted primarily of $53 million in loans and cash and investments of $27.3 million. Loans during FY16 increased by $4 million (8 percent) as the CGF funded $10 million in new loans to 16 churches and received principal payments of $6 million from existing borrowers.

The U.S. economy continued its steady growth in FY16, and the overall financial health of CGF church borrowers is strong. As a result, there have been few delinquent loans in the CGF portfolio, and the CGF has maintained its record of never experiencing a loan principal loss. We continue to have a few church borrowers who find repaying their loans challenging; the CGF works in partnership with these congregations by restructuring debt repayment terms to ensure viable continuance of their ministries.

Savings Certificates

At the end of FY16, savings certificate investment was at $35.8 million, representing an increase of $5.3 million (17 percent) over the previous year. Savings certificate investors continue to recognize both that they receive a favorable return on their funds and that their investment supports the mission of the CGF. The CGF primarily uses funds received from investment in savings certificates to make loans to RCA congregations throughout the United States, its territories, and Canada.

CGF savings certificates are state-regulated securities. Currently, the CGF is authorized to sell savings certificates in 30 states, which are listed on its website (www.rca.org/cgf).
Rates of interest paid on savings certificates, along with other information on the CGF and how to invest in savings certificates, can also be found on the website.

Earnings

In FY16, the CGF had net earnings of $1,954,840 before making its annual contribution to the GSC for church multiplication grants and mission scholarships. Net earnings in FY16 increased by $960,025 (96 percent) from the previous year as a result of loan growth and gains in its investment portfolio through fixed income and equity markets, which strengthened during the year.

Ministry Grants

In 1999, the CGF began contributing a portion of its earnings to the GSC to be used for grants to new church plants in support of the RCA’s ten-year goal, Our Call. Though Our Call is now complete, the CGF has maintained its support of RCA church planting initiatives that are continuing through Transformed & Transforming. Since 1999, the CGF has contributed $4.8 million to support RCA Church Multiplication; those funds have provided grants for 255 church plants. In FY16, the CGF contributed $352,000 for church plant grants.

In FY16, the CGF also contributed $50,000 to the GSC to be used for the Next Generation Missional Engagement Scholarship Fund. The CGF has given a total of $150,000 in support of this program and has committed an additional $150,000 of financial support over the next three years.

Financial Strength

One measure of the financial strength of an entity is its level of net assets, also known as capital or equity. As of September 30, 2016, the CGF had capital of $43.3 million, which represents its accumulation of earnings and contributions received over its years of operations.

The funds received from savings certificates are used by the CGF primarily to make loans to RCA churches. The ability of the CGF to repay savings certificate investors is related to its level of capital, its net earnings, as well as repayment of the loans funded from certificate investment dollars. CGF loans are typically secured by first mortgages on church facilities. The CGF follows strict guidelines to make sure congregations can sustain such loan payments. While past performance is no guarantee of future events, the CGF has never experienced a loss of principal on any loan. No CGF savings certificate investor has ever experienced a loss of investment or missed receiving an interest payment.

Financial Highlights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY 2015</th>
<th>FY 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total assets</td>
<td>$72,466,423</td>
<td>$79,300,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net assets (capital)</td>
<td>$41,792,681</td>
<td>$43,345,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>Savings certificates outstanding</td>
<td>$30,571,483</td>
<td>$35,851,661</td>
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<td>Number of churches with loans</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dollar amount of loans outstanding</td>
<td>$49,028,419</td>
<td>$53,091,170</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of loans funded in year</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dollar amount of loans funded in year</td>
<td>$7,685,435</td>
<td>$10,080,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net earnings before church multiplication grants</td>
<td>$994,815</td>
<td>$1,954,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to GSC for ministry grants</td>
<td>$400,000</td>
<td>$402,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Future CGF Activity

The CGF will continue to follow its primary mission of providing affordable-rate loans to RCA churches for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings used in ministry. The CGF has also set as a goal the ability to contribute increasing amounts to the GSC for ministry grants to support the growing church planting initiative and the anticipated popularity and requests for next generation missional scholarships. Other ministry grant programs consistent with the CGF’s mission are also under consideration.

To meet the goal of larger contributions to the GSC, the CGF needs to increase earnings, which can be done primarily through growing its loan portfolio. A larger loan portfolio needs to be funded primarily from the sale of savings certificates.

The CGF will continue to implement marketing programs as a way to create a greater awareness within the denomination of the organization, its products, and how borrowing churches and investors can benefit through them.
Report of the Board of Benefits Services

The Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and incorporated and approved by Act of the Assembly of the State of New York on April 16, 1923.

The General Synod has delegated to the Board of Benefits Services the responsibility to manage and administer the retirement and insurance programs required by the Reformed Church in America Book of Church Order (BCO) Formulary No. 5 and the assistance programs, and to also ensure the availability of appropriate group life insurance benefits, group long-term disability benefits, and other programs or services related to the financial and physical wellbeing of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.

The board met in Chicago, Illinois, on October 12–13, 2016, and again in Orlando, Florida, on March 13–14, 2017. The volunteer board consists of at least nine but not more than seventeen members, including pastors and professionals from business, finance, investments, and law. Board membership also includes the officers of General Synod and the general secretary.

Review of Ends and Executive Limitations

The Board of Benefits Services, like the General Synod Council, utilizes the principles of policy governance to conduct its work and to guide its oversight and supervision of its executive director in the fulfillment of the purposes (“ends”) it was established to accomplish by the General Synod.

Key to its use of the principles of policy governance is the responsibility to state clearly the reasons the Board of Benefits Services exists. In policy governance the reasons are stated as “ends.”

Two board work groups reviewed and proposed revisions to the BOBS governance policies to reflect the constitutional amendments approved by General Synod 2016. The following updated ends policies were approved in the October meeting:

1: Manage and administer the retirement programs required by BCO Formulary No. 5.
   1.1: Participants and eligible participants have a means to wisely set aside funds at a rate commensurate with other church plans.
   1.2: Participants and eligible participants have a means to convert accumulations into retirement income choices, including guaranteed lifetime income options.

2: Manage and administer the insurance programs required by BCO Formulary No. 5.
   2.1: Reasonable health insurance benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants through our partnership with Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). Recognizing that the partnership with RBA is a board decision, the executive director is tasked with the following end: “Advocate for the purposes of 2.1 and monitor and report the effectiveness of current partnership with RBA to the board.”
3: Manage and administer the Reformed Church in America–funded assistance programs.
   3.1: Active and retired participants and spouses might have access to an assistance fund that may be available based on demonstrated need and is limited by available funds.

4: Ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits.
   4.1: Reasonable life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants.

5: Provide other programs or services related to the financial and physical wellbeing of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.
   5.1: Participants and eligible participants have access to and are encouraged to use information and educational resources that allow them to make timely financial decisions regarding their retirement and their health-, life-, and disability-related benefits.
   5.2: Investigate, and if appropriate, ensure availability of programs or services related to multidimensional wellness and wellbeing.

Review of Services and Ministries

Fidelity Investments and Fund Management

In a continual effort to improve administrative process and drive down the cost of administration, staff and Fidelity have been inviting churches to transmit funds electronically through a Fidelity online portal instead of manually by check. This process has been available since September 2015. Currently, only 30 percent of our churches have enrolled in the system and only 15 percent of our churches have logged into the portal. Online remittance of funds is a crucial step in reducing administrative fees and being able to be a desirable customer for other recordkeepers. Full cooperation from treasurers is needed to make this transition successful.

In collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC), in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement programs. BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants. Lockton Advisors, our investment consultant, remains a valuable asset as it continues to monitor the investment options and administrative expenses associated with the retirement plans. We are currently working with Fidelity to transition a number of funds to their lower-cost equivalent. Reasons for the lower-cost fund availability varies by fund. It is estimated that participants invested in these funds at the current level of investments will save $20,000 per year collectively. Effective January 1, 2017, we implemented a fee reduction for our participants from 29 basis points to 28 basis points. This represents a decrease of 30 percent in the past five years.

After one year of availability, 25 participants are enrolled in the Portfolio Advisory Service at Work (PAS-W) program through Fidelity. PAS-W is an optional service that provides professional management of a participant’s plan account for an advisory fee of 0.50 percent, billed quarterly. Fidelity’s investment consultants create an investment strategy
that aligns with the personal goals of an individual and will monitor those investments and
adjust the strategy based on the market or life changes of the participant. This investment
service is optional. Enrollment campaigns are held annually to allow a participant to enroll
at a discounted price to test the program.

In order to improve security and reduce fraud, Fidelity is rolling out a two-factor
authentication (TFA) for participants performing certain high-risk transactions (password
and user ID requests, rollover requests, etc.) on netbenefits.com.

At our request, a project was initiated with Fidelity to allow employee contributions to be
elected on a percentage basis as well as a fixed dollar amount.

New participants continue to enroll online through the Fidelity NetBenefits website. In
addition, current participants can change their employee contributions and list and update
beneficiaries directly on the Fidelity website.

RCA 403(b) Retirement Correction Project

Staff continued to collect the necessary information from RCA employers for the 403(b)
correction project. By housing the Retirement Security Form alongside the Consistorial
Report Form, the necessary information for 2016 has been collected so staff can complete
the contribution verification process. BOBS staff appreciate the cooperation of treasurers
and consistory members in providing this information.

As reported in prior years, the correction project was initiated in 2012 to audit the
participation and payment of the required employer contributions related to the retirement
accounts of eligible ministers under call or contract. Many employers were out of
compliance with the plan document and the Book of Church Order and had not contributed
the required 11 percent of compensation to eligible RCA ministers’ retirement accounts.

As a result of the correction project, over $1 million has been added to the retirement
savings accounts of RCA ministers. Nine churches have reported they will not contribute
the outstanding funds to the 403(b) accounts of their pastors and significantly more churches
have not responded to the requests for payment or have only provided the basic information
requested by staff to perform the review.

Contributions will be verified through an annual review process and ministers, churches,
and classes will be made aware of missing contributions.

A growing concern is the lack of response from the churches who are not providing the
requested data so staff can verify the contributions to the accounts of the ministers. Several
discussions between the Board of Benefits Services and the Commission on Church Order
have taken place since October 2016 to determine what can be done to get churches to
respond. Further discussions between GSC staff, the Commission on Church Order, and
BOBS board members raised the added question of who is ultimately responsible for
making the contributions and who is potentially liable if the contributions are not made. The
plan document states responsibility for making contributions lies with the church employer.

The review of church compliance (adoption agreement, contributions, life and LTD
insurance coverage) on a per-classis basis continues. All of the classes have received
reports that outline which churches are not in compliance and which churches have missing
contributions or adoption agreements or have failed to pay the insurance premiums on
behalf of their pastors. The regional synods have been copied on this communication. Staff
feel confident that we have made reasonable efforts to collect these contributions.
The correction project will be rebranded as the retirement contribution verification project in 2017. The formal review and data gathering will be done once every three years for a select group of churches who have fulfilled their obligations by faithfully paying the correct amount each year. This will lessen the burden for staff as well as treasurers and volunteers. Treasurers and ministers have tools available online to self-verify, certifying that the right amount of contributions has been remitted for any given year. Furthermore, in the annual BOBS fall newsletter, ministers are reminded to verify that they received the accurate amount of retirement contributions for the year by using the tools available on the benefits webpage. Upon request by a minister or treasurer, staff will perform the formal review.

To participate in the 403(b) plan, employers need to complete and submit an adoption agreement to the Benefits Services office. This is a compliance document that can allow a consistory some flexibility in defining the terms of its participation in the RCA 403(b) retirement program. The agreement recognizes the RCA 403(b) plan as the retirement plan of the employer. If an employer submits funds on behalf of its ministers, the board recognizes this action as evidence that the employer has adopted the agreement. Staff will continue to request adoption agreements from employers as required by the plan. The adoption agreement should be completed annually, or whenever there are staff or contribution changes. The agreement can be downloaded from the church treasurers’ page on the RCA website, www.rca.org/resources/church-treasurers-and-administrators.

Reallocation Project

The Board of Benefits Services’ non-qualified retirement plan holds funds for 1,838 participants, with a market value of nearly $250 million as of December 31, 2016. This plan was closed to new participants and contributions as of December 21, 2004. The plan has advantages and disadvantages. Staff feels that the potential disadvantages are compelling enough to open the opportunity for participant funds to be transitioned out of the RCA retirement plan and into the 403(b) retirement plan.

Following approval by the 2015 General Synod, the legal plan document of the RCA retirement plan was amended to allow the reallocation of participant funds from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) retirement plan. The Board of Benefits Services implemented a process in the summer of 2015 to reallocate retirement savings from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) plan. This reallocation was a two-step process that required participants to provide relevant information to confirm their eligibility and determine the amount that could be reallocated for the 2014 tax year. Staff worked closely with Fidelity Investments in the process, and the review was completed in strict compliance with the IRS 415(c) rules. Participation was optional.

This process took place again in the summer of 2016, for tax year 2015, for eligible participants in the retirement program. In September 2016, $6,159,535 was reallocated from one plan to the other.

In June 2017, the Reallocation Project will be offered to participants in connection with the 2016 tax year.

Insurance Programs

The Board of Benefits Services continues to collaborate with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) regarding the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). The RBA board is made up of RCA and CRCNA representatives. Nancy Degood, vice president of human resources at Universal Forest Products in Grand Rapids, Michigan, joined the RBA board as an RCA representative, replacing Denise Ratcliffe. Nancy has
more than 25 years of human resources experience, and for most of those years has been deeply involved in employee benefit programs.

RCA and CRCNA entities are eligible to participate in RBA benefit offerings by agreeing to the Terms of Participation. The terms require that entities enroll all eligible full-time staff in the health insurance (unless the staff member has coverage through a spouse or parent or has retiree health insurance) and that members be enrolled in the basic life insurance of $175,000. Part-time staff are eligible to participate as well. Optional benefit offerings include dental, vision, and supplemental life; however, participants cannot enroll in the supplemental benefits without purchasing medical and life insurance coverage. RBA does not provide long-term disability insurance for clergy.

RCA ministers who are not enrolled in medical insurance through the RBA are enrolled in the group life and long-term disability insurance offered and administered through the Board of Benefits Services. In providing these benefits for eligible ministers, churches have access to an affordable group plan that allows them to easily fulfill the requirements of Formulary No. 5 of the *Book of Church Order*.

Churches are billed quarterly for the BOBS policies. Reminders are sent to the church and the classis when an invoice is not paid by the due date. If payment is not received, a notice of cancellation is sent to the minister and the treasurer. Currently, almost 400 eligible RCA ministers are enrolled in the group basic life insurance and 735 are enrolled in group long-term disability insurance plans administered through the Board of Benefits Services.

The loss of coverage is a violation of the *Book of Church Order* and puts employers out of compliance. More importantly, this loss of coverage puts the participants at financial risk, should an uncovered insurance event happen. We continue to work with the classes to ensure proper insurance coverage is available and provided to all eligible RCA ministers. A summary of ministers without life and long-term disability insurance is communicated to each classis stated clerk prior to termination of the policy.

Last year, five separate overtures were brought to General Synod requesting that General Synod instruct the Board of Benefits Services to provide a mechanism by which specialized transitional ministers may keep their denominational life and accidental death and dismemberment insurance between assignments.

In response to the overtures, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business made the following recommendation, which was adopted by the 2016 General Synod (*MGS 2016*, R 16-34, p. 168):

To instruct the Board of Benefits Services to continue developing a mechanism by which specialized transition ministers (formerly called specialized interim ministers) and ministers who are between calls or contracts may keep their denominational life and accidental death and dismemberment insurance; and further,

To investigate how our Formula of Agreement partners are dealing with the issue.

In response to this recommendation, phone contact was made with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)), the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In addition, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) were contacted.
Life insurance for employees enrolled in benefits through each of these five entities terminates as of the last day of employment or as of the last day of the month in which employment is terminated. This is standard for most group life insurance plans. The group life and long-term disability plans administered through BOBS provide extended group coverage for ministers without charge, including specialized transitional ministers.

As reported to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business at the 2016 General Synod, Reliance was able to extend our policy to cover ministers for up to three months after an assignment ends, provided that the premiums are paid for by the church where the minister was most recently assigned. This coverage went into effect on May 1, 2017.

The PC(USA) has a separate self-insured transitional participation coverage program that is billed to the member directly. Each dollar paid out in life benefits is paid directly by the PC(USA). Participation in this program requires a written letter from a classis showing proof that the individual is actively seeking to serve in a new church. If approved for coverage, the minister is able to extend his or her group life insurance coverage for up to two years. Due to the financial risks, the Board of Benefits Services is not able to offer coverage via a self-insured plan at this time. Actual life insurance payments made by Reliance on eight separate claims over the last five years totaled more than $1.1 million.

We spoke again with our insurance broker, who reiterated that our plan is unique in that we are able to provide three months of additional coverage to a participant who is not actively working.

We requested quotes from two separate brokers for BOBS’ life and long-term disability policies. At this point, only one insurance company is able to provide us with competitive rates for life insurance coverage for our clergy. Each of the companies we have formally heard from have declined to provide a quote for our long-term disability insurance due to our industry.

The Board of Benefits Services remains committed to providing group life and long-term disability insurance at a competitive rate for eligible RCA ministers. We continue to seek ways to expand the coverage.

Retiree Chaplains Ministry

Twenty-seven retiree chaplains are employed by the Board of Benefits Services to call and visit more than 1,000 retired pastors and surviving spouses across the U.S. and Canada each year. The retiree chaplains see each retired pastor once per year and call them at least three times per year. This ministry attempts to keep retired pastors and their spouses connected to the RCA after a life of service and provides a resource for those who are experiencing significant medical, financial, or emotional needs. Retiree chaplains play a key role in the assistance program. They know the needs of the retirees, are able to identify those who might have a need and, at the request of staff, will contact the applicant or a family member to clarify the extent of the need. The annual retiree chaplain meeting took place April 27–28 in Holland, Michigan.

Assistance Program

Financial assistance grants are awarded each year to eligible ministers and their surviving dependents. Assistance may be granted for housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, higher education for children of deceased ministers, funeral grants to surviving spouses, and retirement contributions for disabled ministers. Matching grants are available for emergency needs of active RCA ministers and for the medical insurance premiums of
full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church. The assistance program provided more than $375,000 in grants to nearly 50 recipients in 2016.

Each year, grant recipients express their gratitude by sending a note of thanks to the staff. One recent thank-you note said:

I humbly acknowledge receipt of the Denomination’s kind check that has been sent to me on the occasion of the death of my husband.

Thank you for your kind words of sympathy. He was loved by many and the outpouring of sympathy I have received is almost overwhelming. 66+ years in the Ministry is a Life well lived for and with God. My faith, family and a lifetime of beautiful memories will bring me much comfort in the days and months ahead.

Another spouse thanked the RCA by saying:

Please relay our gratitude to the proper group (BOBS or another). We are thankful for this assistance. Stan is doing well again here at home after spending the week of his 90th birthday in the hospital recovering from a slight stroke. He has an exercise schedule and is, I believe, getting stronger in his feet and legs so that he can continue to walk with a walker and not have to use a wheel chair for mobility. Again, thank you for your help.

Four primary sources of income for the programs have been identified: administrative fees from the RCA retirement plan, assessments, contributions, and endowments. The donor’s intended purpose for each endowment has been researched and documented.

1. **Administrative fees (RCA retirement plan)**: Expenses for the retiree chaplains program and the assistance program that are not covered through assessments, contributions, and endowments are covered by the administrative fees charged to the plan as noted in Article V, Section 5.4 of the plan document.
2. **Assessments**: In 2017, assessments designated for the assistance fund were increased from $1.50 to $2.00 per member.
3. **Contributions**: Any donation to BOBS that is not specified for another fund is deposited into this fund to be used for the assistance program.
4. **Endowments**:
   - **Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Fund**: Beginning in 2017, the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
   - **Frank Williams Fund**: This endowment specifies that the interest shall only be used to aid ministers who have special emergency needs. This has traditionally been used to provide assistance to active RCA ministers, on a matching-funds basis with the consistory, other RCA employer, or classis of membership.
   - **Stillwell Trust**: The interest can only be used to fund the assistance program. Beginning in 2017, the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
   - **Restricted legacies and assistance funds**: These are board-restricted funds to be used for assistance. In 2017, the Children’s Fund (formerly the Orphan’s Fund) was rolled into the assistance fund, expanding the coverage to include the provision of higher education grants for dependent children of deceased RCA ministers of Word and sacrament.
   - **Van Brunt Trust**: The distributions from this trust are made each quarter to the assistance fund.
A board-restricted endowment fund has been established with the reserves from the medical plan that was managed by the Board of Benefits Services. Future earnings from the fund will be used for assistance and the creation of a multidimensional wellbeing program. Budgets are being planned so that the assistance fund and the retiree chaplains program will eventually be fully funded by assessments, contributions, and earnings from the various endowment funds.

**Wellbeing**

At the October board meeting, the board discussed moving forward with investigating the offering of a multidimensional wellbeing program.

Caring for the emotional health of our pastors has been an ongoing need in the denomination for a number of years. An employee assistance program (EAP) will be put in place that will reach our pastors nationwide. EAP programs typically offer free short-term counseling sessions for mental health, marital, substance abuse, financial, and work-related issues.

The second area to be prioritized will be financial wellness. Participants will be engaged through educational opportunities that will provide tools for budgeting, managing debt, saving responsibly, and turning savings into retirement income.

**Communication**

The Board of Benefits Services hosted retirement workshops and one-on-one meetings with a Fidelity planning and guidance consultant for participants located in Pella, Iowa; Chicago, Illinois; and Wichita, Kansas. Along with the staff- and Fidelity-led workshops, participants were able to register for a 30-minute, face-to-face consultation to review their investment choices and to manage their retirement savings goals. A Fidelity planning and guidance consultant was on site in Holland, Michigan, from June 7 to 9, 2017. Participants attending General Synod and those in West Michigan were invited to register for an opportunity to meet one on one with a consultant.

Participants will be able to take part in a number of webcasts in 2017. The webcasts and campaigns will address topics such as America Saves Week, PASW discount, Social Security planning, managing debt, Medicare, and beneficiary designations. A number of age-specific, targeted mailings and quarterly check-ins will also provide participants with relevant information, depending on the age of the participant.

The newsletter continues to be created and distributed to participants either through print or digitally. The newsletter is housed on the benefits page of the RCA website (www.rca.org/benefits).

The benefits page of the RCA website is an evolving resource for ministers, treasurers, consistories, and stated clerks. Information available includes minimum standards for medical insurance, newsletters, housing allowance letters, a calculator for imputed taxes, life and long-term disability insurance highlights, beneficiary and address change forms, retirement plan documents, investment performance updates, and links to Fidelity and the RBA.

Compliance-related documents (e.g., adoption agreements, retirement plan investment changes, etc.) are reviewed either by the RCA's general counsel or Board of Benefits Services' external attorneys at Conner and Winters prior to distribution to employers, supervising entities, and participants.
Participants are encouraged to contact retirement@rca.org with any questions.

Finance and Annual Audit

Please see the report of the Office of Finance on pages 51-62.

Board and Staff Transitions

The Board of Benefits Services expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Denise Ratcliffe and Evan Vermeer, who completed their board terms at the end of June 2017. The board is also grateful for the faithful service of Thomas Bos, Neal Busker, and Virgil Dykstra, who completed their employment as retiree chaplains in 2016.
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 this refugee issue and the people who are most affected by it; and further …

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

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

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

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

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

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,
Patricia Sealy, moderator
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, Colombia, 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.christianchurchestoogether.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

Advise 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).
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 BCO be drafted:

The Commission on Theology commends the Commission on Church Order to join us in recommending a change to the BCO so that commissioned pastors may be selected as delegates to General Synod and regional synod. Our recommendation to CCO is that the proposed definition of 16-24 be set aside and the current BCO text (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 1 [pg. 58, 2016 edition]) be retained.

Furthermore, we commend the Commission on Church Order construct a change to the current BCO statement (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 9) that reads, “The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate.” We recommend that it be amended to read: “The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, and 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.” (additions underlined)

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 Book of Church Order. The General Synod has called for an overall review of the place of commissioned pastors in our polity and an application of this understanding to the text (MGS 2014, R-56, p. 267). How do we apply this understanding of “elder” to the role of commissioned pastor as set forth in the BCO? We begin by looking at what has been said about the office of elder in the RCA.

Understanding the Office of Elder in the Reformed Church

“The BCO is far more than a manual of definitions and procedures—it is decidedly not an ecclesiastical version of Robert’s Rules of Order. A foundational principle of Reformed governance is that government builds on doctrine, order on confession. We might think of the BCO as the agent that the church uses to live out in practical day-by-day existence its evangelical faith” (Faithful Consistories, pp. 3-4).

“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.
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.

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 and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers 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 member of a classis committee, 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 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. 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. 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. The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor

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

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

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

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

Sec. H—

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 classis 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 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. 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. 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 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 who has served five years 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 7145). 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. 3. 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—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 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 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 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.

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—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 I, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter I, 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 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 in a specialized ministry 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 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 2e 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
Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees
Summarizing Team

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 covenental 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
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 Dordt (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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶

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. 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. 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{30}

Asking ministers to retire who had reached the age of 70 was one suggestion for addressing the problem of ministerial oversupply.\textsuperscript{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).

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<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 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Churches</th>
<th>Ministers</th>
</tr>
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<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. 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.” 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. 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.

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.” 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. 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).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 3</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
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</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 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
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

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2. MGS 1901, p. 1067.
4. MGS 1903, p. 350.
5. Ibid., pp. 350-351.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ibid., p. 351.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Seventy-fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1907; p. 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Seventy-eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1910; p. 3.</td>
</tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Board of Education Report, 1910; p. 3.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Board of Education Report, 1919; p. 5.</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td><em>MGS 1923</em>, p. 209.</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td><em>MGS 1923</em>, p. 209.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>The One Hundredth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1931; p. 11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Eighty-ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1921; p. 11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Board of Education Report, 1931; p. 11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The One Hundred and First Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1932; p. 6.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Board of Education Report, 1932; p. 7.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>The One Hundred and Second Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1933; pp. 7-8.</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>The One Hundred and Third Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1934; p. 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The One Hundredth and Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1938; p. 8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The One Hundred and Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1939; p. 20.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Board of Education Report, 1939; p. 20.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Report on the State of Religion, 1950; p. 239.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td><em>MGS 1969</em>, p. 319.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td><em>MGS 1973</em>, p. 141.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Ibid., 141.</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Ibid., 140.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td><em>MGS 1984</em>, p. 203.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The term “non-retired active ministers” includes RCA ministers of all designations except retired or inactive ministers.


Ibid.

MGS 2001, p. 35.

Ibid., p. 35.

Ibid., p. 36.

Ibid., p. 44.

MGS 2002, p. 35.


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
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 Surrrett Jr., Gerri Yoshida (secretary), Jo Anna Lougin (vice moderator), Karla Camacho, and Kyunghoon Suh. Alina Coipel Robinson serves as staff to the commission.


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

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

Official Responsibilities of CORE

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

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Toward a Multicultural Future Freed From Racism

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

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

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

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

General Synod 2014 adopted two recommendations from the R-91 Task Force on White Privilege (MGS 2014, pp. 113-114):

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 be done for the RCA to be a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic 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 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 Consistory 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 \textit{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.
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 distinctly 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
Report of New Brunswick Theological Seminary

“… let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith …” —Hebrews 12:1-2

The words of the author of the book of Hebrews remind New Brunswick Theological Seminary, the oldest educational institution in the RCA and the first graduate school of theology in the United States, that the race we run together is a marathon rather than a dash. As we enter our 233rd year of service, we remain as committed as ever to a vision that gathers the rich diversity of God’s people into a community of faith and learning. The author of the above text also reminds us that we are not alone, but walk with Jesus, who leads us and supports us with his constant presence of grace.

Strategic Visions

New Brunswick Theological Seminary has just completed a ten-year strategic plan that has radically changed our physical campus as well as our identity. In the past decade, we have sold more than half of our property, which has provided the resources to build a new seminary building and parking lot in the center of a major state university. Our most recent ten-year strategic plan began with four important questions: How can we build a debt-free, technologically smart, ecologically sensitive building in the middle of the city of New Brunswick? What does it mean to be the only seminary in the United States to be located in the heart of a state university? Who will be called to our classrooms, since we are surrounded by the languages and ethnicities of the world within 50 miles of our doors? When our seminary is filled with older students who are often bivocational or second career, how can we make NBTS not only multiethnic, multilingual, and multidenominational, but also multigenerational? We know that these questions represent some of the important concerns we must face if we are to follow the call and command of Jesus to go into all the world. We have been only partially successful in meeting the challenges, and so we have spent the past two years imagining a new strategic plan that will lead us through the next five years. At the January 2017 meeting of the Board of Trustees, the following plan was adopted, as we look forward to adopting a series of measurable goals and objectives to put flesh on this inspiring skeleton of dreams.

Mission

Called by Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, New Brunswick Theological Seminary participates in God’s own laboring to fulfill God’s reign on earth.

Rooted in the Reformed tradition and centered in its trust of God’s sovereignty and grace, the seminary is an intercultural, ecumenical school of Christian faith, learning, and scholarship committed to its metro-urban and global contexts.

Our mission is to educate persons and strengthen communities for transformational, public ministries in church and society. We fulfill this mission through creative, contextual, and critical engagement with texts, traditions, and practices.

Vision

New Brunswick Theological Seminary will become a seminary known for producing effective leaders who put their faith into action, engage in theological reflection, confront conflict in healthy ways, participate in holistic, innovative ministry, and continue to grow in their faith. Our successful metro-urban program will become a sought-after experience
for ministerial formation both locally and internationally, utilizing in-class and distance learning models.

Consequently, by 2022, we envision that NBTS will be:

- Increasingly accessible, locally and globally, through the judicious use of technology.
- Better equipped to be a global resource for the development of metro-urban ministry.
- Effectively connected programmatically to other graduate schools, especially Rutgers and St. John’s Universities.
- Richly diverse through intentionally inviting and welcoming under-represented people into our community.
- More affordable through a dramatic increase in scholarship aid.

**A Successful Campaign**

In January of 2014, the seminary initiated an $8 million comprehensive campaign, the largest in our history, to grow our endowments and increase our capital budget so we can imagine a mission that stretches another two centuries into the future. We are deeply thankful that at the end of 2016, three years into the campaign, we surpassed our goal! We are grateful to old and new friends who have given sacrificially so we can share this good news and imagine new ways to follow Jesus in mission, both locally and globally.

The campaign has assisted us in committing more than half a million dollars for the refurbishment of the historic Gardner Sage Library. This project will include the cleaning and restoration of the brick exterior, and the replastering, repainting, and recarpeting of the interior. In addition, the James Suydam statue, which stood for almost 100 years in front of Suydam Hall, and then, following that building’s demolition, next to the winding entrance driveway to the old seminary, has been relocated to the front of the library and is accessible by an inscribed brick walkway.

**Educational Offerings**

The seminary offers three degrees as approved by the Association of Theological Schools, our accrediting agency: a master of arts in pastoral care and counseling and a professional master of arts in congregational leadership; a master of divinity degree, and a doctor of ministry degree with three different foci and cohorts: pastoral care and counseling, transformational preaching, and metro-urban ministry. We are also grateful to offer a two-year certificate program in theological studies in both Spanish and English.

**Global Networks and Experience**

This past year, the seminary nurtured a growing number of global experiences for our students and faculty. In June of 2016, the seminary was again involved in a learning experience in the Netherlands, which this past year focused on the migration of peoples and the response of the gospel. A dozen students and professors attended the ten-day lecture series. The seminary, through the leadership of Paul Fries, began traveling to the Netherlands every other year in 1974, an experience now led by Allan Janssen.

In the fall of 2016, Jaeseung Cha spent a portion of his sabbatical teaching at the Global Institute of Theology in Korea, which provides doctoral education at no cost for 35 students from countries experiencing dramatic growth in the Christian faith but which have very limited access to Christian theological institutions. It is expected that Virginia Wiles from
NBTS will teach at the institute in May and June 2017.

In December 2016, a group of seven students and one professor spent a moving and profound time in Muscat, Oman, participating in a Christian-Muslim dialogue. All of the participants described the experience as life changing.

In February 2017, 14 students and one professor attended the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference in Richmond, Virginia, which exposed the class to sermons, conversations, and lectures at a venue and event that often draws more than 10,000 participants. Of the 200 seminary students in attendance, the 15-member delegation from NBTS was the largest.

Through a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation some years ago, the seminary has moved to establish a Center for Global Education, which nurtures global networks and relationships in order to expose our students for years to come to the global church and multifaith environments.

**Presidential Transition**

Gregg Mast was called to his role as president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 2006 and has just completed more than 11 years of remarkable leadership. As of the writing of this report, the presidential search committee is moving toward its goal of recommending a single candidate to succeed Dr. Mast for consideration by the Board of Trustees at its April meeting. We have every hope and expectation that we will be able to introduce to the General Synod our new president when it meets in June at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

**A Resolution of Gratitude for Dr. Gregg A. Mast**

R 17-63
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Gregg A. Mast has served New Brunswick Theological Seminary as its president since 2006, and has served on the faculty as the John Henry Livingston Professor of Theology during that same time, leading the seminary into a new era in its long and distinguished history; and

WHEREAS Dr. Mast has guided the seminary through the reconfiguration of its campus, including a new seminary building and upgrading its historic library, while at the same time putting the institution on a solid financial basis to support an innovative future; and

WHEREAS under Dr. Mast’s leadership, the seminary has become truly diverse in both race and gender, not only in its student body but in its faculty, staff, and board; and

WHEREAS Dr. Mast has encouraged and led the seminary in its goal of becoming an anti-racist institution, a project that includes not only students and faculty but staff and board; and

WHEREAS Dr. Mast has served the Reformed Church in America as a General Synod professor, offering to the church his wise counsel and genuine love; and

WHEREAS Dr. Mast has been not only a faithful and supportive...
colleague to faculty and staff, but also a friend whose care and concern have touched all who have served and studied with him;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, in its 211th regular session, meeting June 8 through 13, 2017, in Holland, Michigan, expresses its deepest gratitude to Dr. Mast for his service to the seminary and to the church, and offers its prayers for a fulfilling retirement along with his wife, Vicki.

AND BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that Dr. Gregg A. Mast be declared a General Synod professor emeritus as of June 14, 2017. (ADOPTED)
Report of Western Theological Seminary

The mission, identity, and vision statements of Western Theological Seminary guide its life together:

Mission Statement

It is the purpose of Western Theological Seminary to prepare Christians called by God to lead the church in mission.

Identity Statement

Western Theological Seminary is an evangelical and ecumenical community of faith and learning in the Reformed tradition that serves the church of Jesus Christ. In covenant with the Reformed Church in America, Western equips men and women for Christ-centered, biblically based, theologically integrated, culturally competent, mission-oriented Christian leadership.

Vision Statement

By 2020, Western Theological Seminary will be a nationally recognized center that forms leaders to empower, renew, and plant congregations and ministries that participate in God’s ongoing redemptive work in the world.

Our New Day

In the summer of 2016, the Our New Day capital campaign was formally launched following the approval from the Board of Trustees at their spring meeting. The $25 million campaign has two distinct projects: new construction and extensive renovation of the seminary building and growing Western’s endowment. Great progress was made in raising the necessary funds for both projects. In last year’s report to the General Synod, $8.2 million had been committed to the building project and another $4.5 million to the endowment project. At the time of this writing, more than $13.8 million of the $15 million goal has been committed for the building project. For the endowment, nearly $9 million of the $10 million goal has been secured through cash and planned gifts, bringing total campaign funds raised to more than $22.7 million. The seminary is being readied for a construction start date following the conclusion of the 2016–2017 academic year. Departments displaced during construction will be relocated to the library.

Financial Support

Western Theological Seminary enjoyed another strong year of giving in 2015–2016. Overall giving to the seminary reached nearly $6 million with more than $2 million in gifts to the building project of the Our New Day campaign.

Enrollment

Western Theological Seminary experienced an increase in overall enrollment. During the 2016–2017 academic year, a total of 286 students were enrolled: 95 candidates in the residential master of divinity (M.Div.) program, 69 candidates in the distance learning M.Div. program, and 23 in the Newbigin House cohort. There were 103 RCA candidates enrolled in all M.Div. programs. The most significant growth occurred in the master of arts program, with enrollment increasing from 24 to 41 students. Six students enrolled in the new Graduate Certificate in Disability Ministry (GCDM) program. Students were
also enrolled in the doctor of ministry program, master of theology program, Graduate Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry program, and as nondegree students.

Seminary News

The Van Raalte Fellowship

The Van Raalte Fellowship is a new partnership between the seminary, 3sixty ministries (a community development nonprofit), Pillar Church, and All Saints Anglican Church. The two-year fellowship allows students to earn internship credit, participate in a mentored peer group, and worship with Pillar Church and All Saints Anglican Church while helping connect the churches with opportunities for justice in the city of Holland. This year’s Van Raalte Fellows are first-year students Alisha Riepma, Katie Alley, and Leah Wielenga.

The Luxcast

The seminary launched a new audiovisual podcast series entitled the Luxcast. The series engages topics like music, writing, justice, theology, food, drink, and more. Its debut episode in September 2016 featured Rawee Bunupuradah, a 2017 WTS M.Div. graduate, who is planting a church in Bangkok, Thailand. Other notable guests in Season 1 include Lisa Sharon Harper, Marilyn McEntyre, and Justo González. The Luxcast is available in both mp3 and mp4 formats. Viewers can subscribe to the video version through YouTube or to the audio version on iTunes or Android podcasting apps.

Henry Luce Foundation Grant

In November 2016, Western Theological Seminary was awarded a $425,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. Established by Henry R. Luce, cofounder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., the Luce Foundation offers grants in five program areas, including one whose focus is theology. WTS was among six institutions selected from a large field of competitors to receive an inaugural grant from the Luce Fund for Theological Education. The seminary’s approved project, Enabling Theological Education: Preparing the Next Generation of Christian Leaders—Presence, Intention, and Dimension for Ministry to, with, and by People with Disabilities, will expand Western Theological Seminary’s pioneering work in disability and ministry.

Celebrating 25 Years of Community Kitchen

The Community Kitchen, a ministry partnership between WTS and Community Action House, celebrated 25 years of serving meals to those who struggle with hunger in Holland. It is estimated that over the past quarter century, over 750,000 meals have been served by volunteers who have given 130,000 hours of their service. The idea for the Community Kitchen originated in 1991 in a class co-taught by WTS professors George Hunsberger, Chris Kaiser, and Tom Boogaart, along with local pastor Andy Fierro. The seminary’s capital campaign includes a thorough updating of the Commons where the Community Kitchen is housed.

Partnership with Newbigin House of Studies

For a number of years, Western Theological Seminary has partnered with Newbigin House of Studies of City Church San Francisco to provide a one-of-a-kind theological education focused on church planting in city centers. This partnering between a seminary and a church was unique in the world of theological education, and we’ve seen much fruit as a result
of it. Our partnership agreements expired with the conclusion of the 2016–2017 school year, and Western has decided not to enter into another contract with Newbigin House for several reasons. Our commitment to equipping church planters remains strong, as well as our commitment to focusing on preparing men and women to lead churches located in the heart of great cities. However, we believe both Western and Newbigin House have evolved organizationally over the years since we began this arrangement, and many of the needs we originally looked to Newbigin to provide are adequately being met in-house. Our understanding is Newbigin House will continue to offer classes, and we are open to having our students participate in those classes.

Seminary Events

Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture

Western held the sixth annual Leonard F. Stoutemire lecture in multicultural ministry in September 2016. This year’s lecturer, Charles Amjad-Ali, is the Martin Luther King Jr. professor emeritus for justice and Christian community and former director of the Islamic Studies Center at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Born in Pakistan, Amjad-Ali is an international expert on Islam and Christianity. He teaches regularly in Pakistan and lectures throughout Europe and the United States. He has written many articles on the intersections of Islam and Christianity throughout church history and argues for a radically grace-filled approach to Christian-Muslim relations. While on campus, Amjad-Ali was interviewed for an episode of the Luxcast.

The goal of the annual Stoutemire lecture is to equip seminarians, faculty, staff, alumni/ae, and local congregations with resources for increased intercultural competence for greater effectiveness in Christian ministry.

Installation of Dr. Padilla

In conjunction with the Board of Trustees’ October meeting, Western celebrated the installation of Alvin Padilla, academic dean and vice president of academic affairs. The service was held at Third Reformed Church and participants included Justo González, who was the guest preacher for the event.

Bast Preaching Festival

The theme of the 2016 Bast Preaching Festival was “Proclaim: Celebrating God’s Word through Preaching,” and the festival featured Frank A. Thomas, the Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller professor of homiletics and director of the Academy of Preaching and Celebration at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. Indicative of his great love of preaching, an updated and revised version of They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching, considered by many to be a homiletic classic, was released in August 2013.

The Big Read

Western became a partner organization with The Big Read–Holland Area in 2016. The Big Read builds literacy by bringing the community together around one book and the shared experience of reading and discussion. Brother, I’m Dying, by award-winning author Edwidge Danticat, was the featured book of The Big Read. Over the first two weeks of November, more than a dozen Big Read activities were planned, including an interactive immigration workshop held at WTS.
Celebrating Women in Church Leadership

Western hosted the third Celebration of Women in Church Leadership event. The vision of this annual event is to celebrate women’s stories and empower women as leaders.

Osterhaven Lectures

This year’s Osterhaven Lectures were entitled “Sola Scriptura? Scripture and Tradition” to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Three scholars—one Protestant, one Eastern Orthodox, and one Roman Catholic—reflected on the Reformation notion of sola scriptura. Edith Humphrey, John Thompson, and Daniel Keating were the lecture participants.

141st Commencement

On May 8, 2017, Western celebrated its 141st commencement by graduating a total of 58 candidates in all degree programs: master of divinity, master of arts, master of theology, and doctor of ministry. Miroslav Volf, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, gave the commencement address in addition to a public lecture at WTS in the afternoon. Commencement Day was also Alumni Day at the seminary. Samuel Solivan, class of 1976, was honored as this year’s distinguished alumnus.

Faculty and Staff Appointments

Alvin Padilla was appointed academic dean and vice president of academic affairs effective July 1, 2016, after an extensive search. Most recently, Padilla served as dean of the Hispanic ministries program and professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He succeeds Leanne Van Dyk, who resigned her position in June 2015 to accept the presidency at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

Travis West was appointed assistant professor of Hebrew and Old Testament effective July 1, 2016.

David Komline was appointed assistant professor of church history effective July 1, 2016. Komline served as visiting professor at WTS during the 2015–2016 academic year.

Dawn Boelkins was promoted to associate professor of biblical languages effective July 1, 2016.

Duane Loynes was appointed visiting assistant professor of theology and director of the doctor of ministry program effective July 1, 2016. Loynes served as faculty fellow at WTS during the 2015–2016 academic year.

Doug Honholt was hired as director of development in August 2016. Honholt also served as a WTS trustee from 2013 to 2016.

Rayetta Perez was appointed director of administration and human resources effective July 1, 2016. Perez came to the seminary in 2000 to provide administrative support to the office of the president.

Grace Miguel Cipriano was hired as interim associate director of formation for ministry in August 2016. Miguel Cipriano graduated from WTS in May 2016.

Pat Dykhuis, registrar and financial aid administrator, retired in January 2017 after nearly 24 years of service. She is succeeded by Tiffany Nordé.
LuAnne Van Slooten, administrative assistant to the advancement department, retired in June 2016. Van Slooten served in her role since 1999. She is succeeded by Tamara Buikema.

**Celebrating Faculty Accomplishments**

Chuck DeGroat, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling, has written *Falling into Goodness: Lenten Reflections*, six weeks of daily readings for Lent. Find it at www.createspace.com/6805899.

Kristen Deede Johnson’s book *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Brazos Press, 2016) was chosen for *Christianity Today*’s 2017 Book Awards. These awards are given to books that are most likely to shape evangelical life, thought, and culture. Johnson, associate professor of theology and Christian formation at WTS, coauthored the book with Bethany Hanke Hoang of International Justice Mission’s Institute for Biblical Justice.

J. Todd Billings, Gordon H. Girod research professor of Reformed theology, developed a video series on interpreting Scripture in the Reformed tradition. Created in response to a recommendation approved by General Synod 2016, the series is designed for discussion on a congregational or classis level. The videos can be found at www.rca.org/resources/alighttomypath.

Ben Conner’s book, *Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*, was named one of the 11 books every youth leader should read by Kindred Youth Ministry. Conner is associate professor of Christian discipleship at WTS.


**Trustee Appointments**

Five new members joined Western’s board of trustees effective July 1, 2016.

Eddy Alemán is the director of strategic leadership development and the coordinator of Hispanic ministries for the Reformed Church in America.

Sandra DeYoung is a retired dean from the College of Science and Health at William Patterson University in Wayne, New Jersey.

Chris Crawford is the director of national client relations at Risk Placement Services, Inc. in Itasca, Illinois.

Lisa L. Vander Wal is pastor of Lisha’s Kill Reformed Church in Schenectady, New York. She served as president of the RCA’s General Synod in 2012.

Carol Van Andel is the executive director of the David and Carol Van Andel Family Foundation in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Trustees Kent Dale, Scott DeBlock, Amy DeKruyter, Donna Lowry, and Doug Struyk completed their terms of service on June 30, 2016.

Trustee Doug Honholt concluded his term of service in August 2016 when he was hired as the director of development following the departure of Mike LeFebre.
Petitions Approved by the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Lisa Braunius.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Bryant Brozik.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Phillip Quinn.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Ross Hoekstra.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Michael Tubergen.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Emily Holehan.

The board of trustees approved a petition from the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for Stacey Duensing.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Eric Nichols.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Anna Gordon.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Jeffrey Hoos.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Stephen Kohl.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Andrew LaTeer.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Nicole Martin-St. Victor.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Joshua Westhouse.

The board of trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Jeremy Zoet.
Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

General Synod exercises oversight of ministerial formation and the standards for preparation for ministry through its two seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA).

The MFCA possesses a deep commitment to developing faithful, educated, and evangelical Reformed leaders. Its purpose is the preparation of men and women for the ministries of Christ and his church, most specifically those called to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The MFCA Board of Trustees has the following as its mission statement:

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) exists to strengthen the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) to specific groups of candidates and working cooperatively with partners inside and outside the RCA to broaden opportunities for diverse ministerial formation.

Board Interpretation: By the authority delegated to it by General Synod, the MFCA board, certification committee members, and staff continue to accomplish this mission by:

- Awarding the CFM to RCA candidates graduating from non-RCA seminaries (via Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care, RCSC) or pursuing an approved alternate route (AAR).
- Through the RCSC and AAR certification committees and staff, evaluating the progress of candidates and their continuation in and completion of the process leading to the CFM, as their achievements dictate.
- Periodically ensuring that the RCA Standards for Preparation for Ministry are upheld in the oversight of the CFM and are reviewed, with recommendations made to the appropriate RCA body if the MFCA board believes changes would be appropriate.
- Providing graduate-level courses designed to meet the standards for the CFM.
- Collaborating with and providing counsel to congregations and classes in the care and nurture of candidates for the ministry who are seeking the CFM through the MFCA.
- Interpreting and advocating for the work of the MFCA to the larger church.

Given the continuing significant changes in the RCA and its official goals as expressed by Transformed & Transforming, current church climate, and changes in technology and the contexts of pastoral education, the MFCA will adapt and broaden its methods of accomplishing this mission and will seek to work with all the partners God provides to accomplish this work, with special emphasis on the following:

- Adapting its operations and programs as necessary to embrace a multiracial future freed of racism.
- Arranging for instruction in Korean and Spanish to ensure that talented candidates of all backgrounds can pursue appropriate pastoral education.
- As appropriate, given our polity, working with classes and institutions to enhance educational opportunities for commissioned pastors and others and to encourage a seamless transition to study for the ministry of Word and sacrament where possible.
By permission and approval of the General Synod Council (GSC), the MFCA Board of Trustees operates under policy governance. The board stays abreast of the MFCA program through the monitoring reports of the director, and there have been intentional efforts to focus on visioning and policy development.

**Enrollment and Other Statistics (as of January 27, 2017)**

There are currently 86 candidates enrolled in the CFM process; 25 (29 percent) of whom are in the Approved Alternate Route (AAR).

Enrollment in the MFCA continues to cluster in the Eastern part of the U.S. Eighty-six percent of candidates reside east of the Rocky Mountains. More than 67 percent (67.4 percent) are east of the Mississippi.

Just over 23 percent (23.3 percent) of MFCA candidates are female. This is a significant increase from last year (16.4 percent).

Forty-eight percent of AAR candidates represent a racial/ethnic minority group. More than 41 percent (41.9 percent) of all our candidates represent racial/ethnic minority populations.

**Proceedings with the Classis of New York**

At the October 2016 meeting of the Board of Trustees of the MFCA, the board voted to grant a CFM to Chad Tanaka Pack, a candidate of the Classis of New York. This decision was based on the board’s understanding of the scope of the CFM and the board’s role in granting the CFM. The granting of the CFM in this case upheld the February 2015 decision of the board that “Sexual orientation and the issues surrounding it are matters that are left with the classis. The MFCA expects each classis to walk with candidates around sexual orientation and the agency will treat all candidates with respect and sensitivity in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.”

In November 2016, the Classis of New York examined Chad Tanaka Pack for licensure and ordination, sustaining him in his final exams and declaring him a licensed candidate for ministry. An ordination date of January 15, 2017, was set by the classis.

As news of this decision of the MFCA Board of Trustees and the proceedings of the Classis of New York reached the broader church, some ministers, elders, and commissioned pastors sent words of affirmation and others expressed clear opposition. During this time, communications with General Synod officers and members of the Classis of New York were also exchanged.

At the request of board members in response to communication received from General Synod officers and others throughout the denomination, the MFCA board met in a special session on January 6, 2017.

Through extensive discussion and conversation together, the board concluded that covenantal relationship was at stake within the board, between the board and the Classis of New York, and within the denomination at large. It was also made clear that in our October meeting and still now, there are different understandings among board members regarding our role as an agent of General Synod (what this means and the implications of our actions) and in our understanding of the role and scope of the CFM.

With the hope of continuing important conversations throughout the denomination and to ensure that the decision of the MFCA is consistent with its responsibilities, the board voted
to rescind its decision to award the CFM to Chad Tanaka Pack. This decision was reported to the Classis of New York on January 6, 2017.

Future Vision for the Agency

The MFCA Board of Trustees continues to dedicate significant time to discussing the future of the agency. We are grateful for the work of the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) in taking up the important work of seeking clarity and consistency in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry among the three theological agents. We are hopeful that this ongoing conversation among the agents and throughout the denomination will strengthen the work of classes and agents in coordinating and supervising candidates for the ministry.

We continue to engage in discussion around various structural options for the agency and the financial resources to sustain this important work of robust ministerial formation.

Budgets and Finances

The MFCA finances have been under strain for a number of years and the program continues only because there have been reserves to draw from. The 2016 budget was more than $50,000 in the red. The 2017 budget will potentially balance thanks to a special allotment of $32,000 provided by General Synod 2016. The PFCC will deliberate about future finances and infrastructure for theological education and the theological education assessment.

Cooperative Efforts

The MFCA has entered into several cooperative efforts this past year. One such effort is with Pine Rest Hospital and the DeVos Family Foundation. Along with Calvin Theological Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary, the MFCA is assisting in the development of parish-based clinical pastoral education (CPE) programs throughout North America. Participants from the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the RCA will engage CPE at various locations in North America. Karl Van Harn of Pine Rest will be facilitating the program.

Bylaw Corrections and Changes

Each year, the MFCA board of trustees reviews its bylaws. This year, a misprint was noted in Article II, Section 5b. The section reads:

b. Determining whether ministry candidates who have received the degree of Master of Divinity or its academic equivalent from a Non-RCA Seminary meet minimum competencies as determined by the standards for the preparation of ministry established by the General Synod and designed as indispensable for the proper exercise of the ministerial office of the church.

It appears that “designed” in Article II, Section 5b of the MFCA bylaws should instead be “designated.” Accordingly, a non-substantive, editorial correction has been made to change “designed” to “designated.”

The board also revisited its membership at its meeting March 2, 2017, and decided that it would be prudent to reduce its membership to improve role clarification and efficiency. The board proposes the elimination of two voting members and that the general secretary or his or her designee be a member ex officio and without vote. This is the same manner in which the general secretary serves on the boards of New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
and Western Theological Seminary. The board also suggests that anyone designated by the general secretary be a member of the General Synod Council rather than a GSC staff member but does not propose that this be included as a formal requirement in the MFCA bylaws.

The board noted that the seminaries do not have General Synod professors serving on their board as members (voting or otherwise); they attend only as guests representing the faculty. The MFCA may nominate its own General Synod professors. Accordingly, it recommends that if the expertise of professors from the RCA seminaries and MFCA is required by the board, they be invited as per the provision for consultants in the MFCA bylaws (Article III, Section 5).

The removal of two voting members would result in nine voting members on the MFCA Board of Trustees.

For the foregoing reasons, the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency has approved the following amendments to its bylaws and now makes the following recommendation to the General Synod:

R 17-64
To approve the following amendments to Article III, Sections 1 and 2 of the Bylaws of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency of the Reformed Church in America (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

Article III
Structure; Membership of Board of Trustees

Sec. 1. The Agency shall be governed by the Board. The Board shall consist of eleven [nine] voting members, each of whom shall be a confessing member in good standing of the RCA. Voting membership of the Board shall include at least three people who are not ordained to the office of Minister of Word and sacrament, at least two people who are ordained to the office of Minister of Word and sacrament and serving an RCA congregation, at least one Minister of Word and sacrament who is engaged in specialized ministry such as Clinical Pastoral Education supervision or chaplaincy, one General Synod professor from an RCA seminary, the General Secretary of the RCA or his or her designee, and one GSC member recommended by the GSC, and the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America or a representative of the general secretary appointed by the general secretary, either of whom shall serve ex officio and without vote. The presidents of the RCA seminaries are not eligible to be on the MFCA Board.

Sec. 2. Each Trustee (other than the general secretary or his or her designee) shall be nominated by the General Synod’s Commission on Nominations (in consultation with the Agency and, in the case of the GSC member recommended by the GSC, in consultation with the GSC) and elected by the General Synod. The General Synod professor from an RCA seminary will be restricted to one term, and the term of the Trustee who is a GSC member recommended by the GSC shall be coterminous with his or her term on the
The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-64.

The board also rewrote the membership criteria of the certification committees and shares the changes with the 2017 General Synod for information. These changes have no effect on the bylaws of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.

The MFCA does its work through two certification committees. The Reformed Candidates’ Supervision & Care (RCSC) Certification Committee works with candidates completing the Master of Divinity degree at a Non-RCA seminary and who are seeking a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry toward ordination as an RCA Minister of Word and sacrament. The Approved Alternate Route (AAR) Certification Committee works with candidates that are seeking the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry toward ordination as an RCA Minister of Word and sacrament, but not earning a Master of Divinity degree from an accredited seminary.

Each certification committee will consist of seven—six members and the director. All members will be confessing members in good standing of an RCA congregation/classis and include two Elders, two General Synod Professors and three—two Ministers of Word and sacrament. At least one member, and no more than two, shall be an active member of the MFCA Board of Trustees. The faculty of New Brunswick Theological Seminary and the faculty of Western Theological Seminary will each nominate one General Synod Professor. At least one Minister of Word and sacrament will serve in a local parish and one will be in specialized ministry. The third Minister of Word and sacrament may be chosen from the faculty of an RCA college or a Non-RCA seminary. The director will convene and moderate each committee. Each certification committee will be a “standing committee.” The committees will perform a self-evaluation annually and review each person’s membership and availability to serve.

Nomination of General Synod Professor

The MFCA Board of Trustees, meeting in regular session on October 29, 2016, at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, unanimously approved nominating Chad T. Pierce to the office of General Synod professor in the Reformed Church in America. Pierce has had substantial involvement with candidates in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process by teaching for both the MFCA and Western Theological Seminary for the past seven years and serving on the Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care Certification Committee for five years.

The board invites the 2017 General Synod to consider the following nomination:
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has served in Christian higher education for 12 years and has been an ordained minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America since 2002; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has been committed to growing in his own theological education at Calvin College (BA), Jerusalem University College (MA), Western Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and Durham University (Ph.D.); and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has served as a professor of New Testament at Central College in Pella, Iowa, a college of the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has been an adjunct faculty member of Calvin College, Kuyper College, and Western Theological Seminary for 12 years; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has served as an ordained minister of Word and sacrament in both the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, where he has supervised and mentored students in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has served the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency of the Reformed Church in America through regular teaching in the field of biblical languages, evaluating case studies, and serving as a member of the Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care Certification Committee; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has been an active member of classes in the Reformed Church in America, including serving on the student care committee of Zeeland Classis and serving as president of Central Iowa Classis; and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce has served on the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee, formerly called the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group, and has been the moderator of this group for six years;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 211th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Holland, Michigan, from June 8 to 13, 2017, declares the Rev. Dr. Chad T. Pierce a General Synod professor. (ADOPTED)
Certificates of Fitness Awarded

The Board of Trustees awarded 21 Certificates of Fitness for Ministry, 17 through the RCSC process and four through the AAR process.

Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care (RCSC)

Shawn Lee Abbas  
Classis of Dakota
Chad Phillip Blake  
Classis of California
Timothy S. Bowyer  
Classis of the City
Ryan Walter Cogswell  
Classis of Schenectady
Carlos Armando Corro  
Classis of the City
Joshua James DeKok  
Classis of Dakota
Cory Dean Grimm  
Classis of Minnesota
Eric D. Hodges  
Classis of Queens
Russell Howard Jacobson  
Classis of California
Justin Daniel Karmann  
Classis of New Brunswick
Jared Michael Lee  
Classis of Dakota
Sung Su Lee  
Classis of Queens
Mark Everett Lohman  
Classis of California
Cody Michael Miller  
Classis of the City
Matthew Philip Rose  
Classis of Zeeland
Robert Vernon Schuller  
Classis of California
Dustin Jay Sperlich  
Classis of Dakota
Benjamin James Videtich  
Classis of Great Lakes City

A Certificate of Fitness for Ministry was awarded to Chad Tanaka Pack on October 29, 2016, and rescinded on January 6, 2017.

Approved Alternate Route (AAR)

Jose Dario Camilo-Gonzalez  
Classis of Central California
Michael Jon Daling  
Classis of Zeeland
Luis Antonio Ruiz Jr.  
Classis of Holland
Daniel Toot  
Classis of Great Lakes City

Alternate Means and Petitions

Reduction in 24-Month Requirement: The board approved a request from the Classis of Great Lakes City on behalf of Yakuv Gurung to substitute a period of time to make up any deficiency in the 24 months of being in the CFM process.
Report of the Professorate

It was John Calvin who first recognized four offices in the church: minister, teacher, elder, and deacon. In the office of the professorate, the Reformed Church in America is one of the few denominations in the world which has maintained this fourfold ministry in our life and mission. Elected and installed by the General Synod, General Synod professors remain amenable to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, striving at all times and in all ways to fulfill our calling faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully.

The Book of Church Order describes General Synod professors in this way: “The office of General Synod professor is to offer, collectively and individually, the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole, and to represent the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1; 2016 edition, p. 70). There are presently nine General Synod professors: Drs. Cha, House, Janssen, and Mast from New Brunswick Theological Seminary; Drs. Bechtel, Brown, Brownson, and Boogaart from Western Theological Seminary; and Dr. Kors from the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency. Each professor was nominated by a theological agent of the General Synod. They exercise a substantial and continuing role in preparing candidates for ministry in the RCA under the authority of their nominating agency.

The professorate has met twice in the past year. Our fall meeting was held September 30–October 1, 2016, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Our spring meeting was held on March 24–25, 2017, at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

Part of our collective calling is to facilitate theological reflection throughout the church so that our witness as a church may be more faithful and effective. One of the ways we lived into this calling this year was by engaging with General Synod president Dan Gillett in a rich discussion of a Reformed understanding of the nature, purpose, authority, and interpretation of Scripture. We welcomed this opportunity, which came at President Gillett’s invitation and in response to a recommendation from the General Synod of 2016 (MGS 2016, R 16-18, p. 87). While this discussion took place at our September meeting, it laid the groundwork for continued reflection in our March meeting regarding the centrality of Scripture, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the unity and diversity of the church in the Holy Spirit. As a body and as individuals, we continue to look for ways to help the RCA deepen our life and witness in light of these crucial themes.

We have been active this year, as always, in matters of theological education and the formation of persons for ministry. We spent significant time reviewing a paper on the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, discussing its role and scope as well as clarifying the roles and interaction of the various agents of the General Synod that grant the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. We are represented on the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) and share with that group the task of evaluating the RCA’s eight Standards for the Preparation for Ministry. We are also represented on the committees of the MFCA that recommend the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to, respectively, students at non-RCA seminaries and candidates pursuing the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) to ordination. We also set and evaluate the written examinations for the AAR candidates.

In response to an invitation from Monica Schaap Pierce, the RCA’s ecumenical associate, we contributed feedback on an ecumenical statement on justification: the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). This request came at the behest of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (of which the RCA is a member), and is symbolically
connected to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We were glad to respond and hope that our insights have added a uniquely RCA voice to this important ecumenical conversation.

As a body and as individuals, we mark with sadness and appreciation the upcoming retirement of our friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Gregg Mast. It is impossible to overstate Dr. Mast’s positive and enduring contributions to the professorate, to New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and to the RCA as a whole. We will miss him but pray God’s abiding blessings on him and his family in all the years ahead. Well done, good and faithful servant!

In all of this work, we continue to explore new possibilities for our collective role. We are grateful for having been charged with this call and are deeply sensible of our responsibility to the church. We solicit your prayers and your advice, and we are committed to engaging conversation at all levels of the RCA’s life and work.

Respectfully submitted,

Carol Bechtel, moderator, together with the entire professorate, including:
Tom Boogaart
Tim Brown
Jim Brownson
Jaeseung Cha
Cornelis Kors
Renée House
Allan Janssen
Gregg Mast
Report of Central College

“The greatest among you will be your servant.” —Matthew 23:11

“Central has a deep and abiding commitment to service.” —Mark Putnam, president of Central College

Central College, founded in 1853, is a private, residential four-year liberal arts college in Pella, Iowa. Central values its long-standing, covenantal relationship with the Reformed Church in America—a relationship that has endured for 100 years. Central is known for its academic rigor and strength in global experiential learning, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), sustainability education, athletics success and tradition, and leadership and service.

Service is one of the backbones of a Central education—a value shared with the Reformed Church in America and central to the Christian tradition. One person can truly make an impact that is felt by the community, and Central encourages students to serve and to take an active role in promoting social justice in a variety of ways, both locally and around the world.

100 Years with the RCA

This year, Central celebrated 100 years of relationship with the Reformed Church in America. In 1916, Central College was nearly lost but was saved when the RCA purchased the college from the Baptist Convention of Iowa.

The college marked the anniversary in a number of ways. A special celebration on September 30, 2016, during Homecoming’s Heritage Day featured a reception in Central’s chapel courtyard, followed by a worship service in the chapel. Tony Campbell, associate general secretary and director of mission engagement for the Reformed Church in America, delivered the morning message at the Heritage Day worship service. At the Heritage Day luncheon, Nathan Busker (’89), pastor of Ponds Reformed Church in Oakland, New Jersey, delivered a keynote address. Marjorie Postma Vander Wagen, a member of the 50-year reunion class of 1966, provided an invocation.

Today, Central’s relationship with the RCA connects students to missions and internship opportunities, and many RCA members contribute to Central’s future as part of the board of trustees. Reformed churches across the country support students through the Journey Scholarship Fund. RCA students can also receive the Heritage Award. Meanwhile, hundreds of Central graduates serve as leaders in RCA congregations, also supporting Central’s students and mission in their turn.

Campus Ministries and Missions

Campus Ministries students play an active role in leading activities on campus, such as Bible studies, worship, and organizing many service events throughout the year. Central students serve through a number of mission trips. In October 2016, students returned to Grace Covenant Ministries in Kentucky to support needy families with donations. In January 2017, students again traveled to south Texas to build houses, assist elementary education teachers in the public schools, and feed the poor. During spring break, two mission trips took students to Robert, Louisiana, where they worked with World Renew to participate in flood relief, and to Gretna, Florida, where they worked with impoverished community members. Each May, students partner with Many Hands for Haiti for a mission trip to Haiti.
Campus Ministries students also planned activities for Angel Tree children in the Des Moines area, hosted at Meredith Drive Reformed Church and Bethany Reformed Church in Des Moines. The Campus Ministries Justice Team partnered with Water to Thrive to raise money to build a well in Africa. Various fundraisers were held throughout the year. Students have also been tutoring at-risk kids in a rural school district in Marion County.

Service

Service is part of the fabric of Central College, and this year, 412 students participated in service-learning activities. The college worked with 89 community partners, more than 20 of which explicitly state expression of faith as part of their mission or affiliations.

Service Learning

Supporting Central’s many opportunities for meaningful service, the college maintains close relationships with more than 120 community partners in the region. More than 45 academic courses across 15 departments include semester-long components in service learning, and Central provides transportation to ensure every student can participate. Many students also complete custom-designed service opportunities, using their unique skills to enhance community partners’ work in specific ways, such as grant writing, research, managing websites, and planning events.

Service at Central

A key aspect of a Central College education, service is integrated into many courses and programs on campus. Central has been recognized for a commitment to service by being named to the Honor Roll with Distinction in three categories for the 2015 President’s Award for Community Service by the Corporation for National and Community Service (released in 2016). Central earned the honor for each category entered: general community service, education, and interfaith community service.

General Community Service and Civic Engagement

School Visits: Central provides college visits for children and youth who are served by nonprofit community partners. This is part of the college’s goal to increase college access to students who represent diverse socioeconomic and cultural perspectives.

Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week: Last November, the college collaborated with several community partners to host Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week on campus. Activities included the Oxfam Hunger Banquet, held in collaboration with Oxfam America, a global organization working to right the wrongs of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The banquet was an interactive meal for which participants’ food quantity and quality was determined by the luck of the draw. Facilitated reflection helped all in attendance consider the impact of hunger as well as personal and collective responsibility to address the world hunger crisis. Other activities included fresh produce drives for local food pantries and the creation of food information cards for Pella Community Food Shelf.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service: “Let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24) provided the theme for this year’s MLK Day observance. Along with a convocation and other MLK Day activities, the college sponsored a water purification kit assembly event with Safe Water International Ministries (SWIM). The college assembled 100 kits to be distributed worldwide.

All-Campus Service Day: Central College Service Day was held April 11, 2017. Each year
on Service Day, classes are cancelled so students, faculty, and staff can work together on projects that address community-identified needs.

**Student Athletes:** Central’s student athletes are active in service. SAAC (Student-Athlete Advisory Council) hosted blood drives in the fall and spring, as well as a canned food drive, a toiletry drive, and an outerwear clothing drive throughout the year. Athletic teams come together to support these activities, and individual teams participate in numerous additional service projects.

**Exploring Post:** Central launched Exploring Post 1853 for high school students in Marion County. Exploring is a vocational reflection experience affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America that is for both girls and boys. Post 1853 is a collaborative venture with Central College faculty, students, and staff as the lead organization, supported in a variety of ways by community partners, including Partnership for Excellent Educational Resources for STEM (PEERS). The post will provide experiences for youth that build awareness and skills within the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math.

**Social Justice**

A commitment to social justice is an expression of the belief that all of our neighbors—both near and around the world—should be treated with compassion.

**MLK Visit Anniversary**

This year, Central marked the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech at Central College. On March 22, 1967, he spoke at Central about the power of positive change through courageous individuals. Central celebrated this anniversary in March with a full week of activities, including educational events with Jacqui Patterson, director of the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program.

**Racial Equality Workshop**

Central hosted a workshop on racial equality on September 20 as part of the college’s Learning for Justice series. Jennifer Harvey, professor of religion at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, presented “Charting Shifting Water: Race (and Whiteness) in the College Environment.” Harvey focuses on encounters of religion and ethics with race, gender, spirituality, justice, and other social issues.

**Water Week**

Senior Katie Gatzke organized Water Week, October 24–28, to shine a light on how lack of clean water harms people around the world. The week featured speakers and educational events as well as fundraisers and interactive activities.

**Social Justice in the City Course**

A faculty-led program during summer 2016 functioned as an immersive hybrid between a service-learning class and an internship program, all focused on social justice. The eight-week program took students out of the classroom and into the day-to-day work of organizations throughout Des Moines to learn about social justice in the real world. Organizations included Children and Family Urban Movement (CFUM), Youth Emergency Services & Shelter of Iowa (YESS), Des Moines Social Club, Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Iowa, and the Altoona Police Department.
Iowa Campus Compact

Central enjoys a close affiliation with Iowa Campus Compact, an organization committed to providing leadership for the civic mission of higher education. In 2016, President Mark Putnam was named to the board of directors. Putnam will serve a three-year term, helping the nine-member board set direction and vision for the statewide association. Also in 2016, Keith Yanner, professor of political science, won Iowa Campus Compact’s Engaged Campus Award for Civic Mission Leadership. The award recognizes Yanner’s leadership and efforts toward the organization’s mission.

Financial Aid

Community service scholarships are an important way to recognize incoming students’ service accomplishments. Currently, 174 students are receiving more than $200,000 in Community Service Awards. These scholarships are based on prospective students’ past community engagement and their expression of future plans for engagement in and after college. Central also recognizes the importance of welcoming students who have national service experience. The Segal Americorps Education Award is matched for incoming students, and current students have the opportunity to earn an education award as part of the AmeriCorps State program—the Iowa College AmeriCorps Program (ICAP).

Conclusion

Central works to equip and inspire students to lead lives in which service and compassion are integral. To this end, Central’s relationship with the RCA, both overall and through individual churches, is invaluable. The college is immensely grateful for the prayers, gifts, and support that help to fulfill the mission of preparing future leaders.
Report of Hope College

Hope College is a four-year liberal arts college where academic excellence and vibrant Christian faith integrate in a supportive and welcoming community. Hope offers an academically rigorous, coeducational, and residential education to 3,200 undergraduate students from more than 40 states and 45 countries. Affiliated with the Reformed Church in America since the college was founded in 1866, Hope College is known for its invitational, ecumenical Christian atmosphere, friendly campus community, and outstanding academic and cocurricular offerings.

Hope’s beautiful campus is located just steps from downtown Holland, Michigan, a city of 35,000 enriched by an ever-growing diverse population. Located on the scenic shores of Lake Michigan and Lake Macatawa, the area features white-sand beaches, parks, miles of hiking and biking trails, and a historic downtown. Holland has been recognized by a host of organizations, including by Forbes Magazine as one of the top five cities in the U.S. with the lowest crime rate; by Money Magazine as one of the nation’s top five places to retire; by A.G. Edwards as one of the top ten cities on its Nest Egg Index; and on the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index as the number two happiest, healthiest place to live in America.

Enrollment and Innovation

Hope College has been blessed with a strong student enrollment. The student body continues to increase in geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity, a goal set forward in the Hope for the World: 2025 strategic plan. However, Hope is not immune to the enrollment challenges facing all higher education institutions. The college-age student population is in decline across the country; this is especially true in Michigan and other Midwest states from which the majority of Hope students originate. Hope has approached these challenges with a steadfast commitment to providing a liberal arts education within the context of the historic Christian faith and infusing the college with innovation in the academic and cocurricular programs. One example of this is an increase in scholarships available for students from the RCA as well as legacy students, whose parents or grandparents are Hope graduates.

Commitment to Christian Formation

Hope College is committed to being an ecumenical community, welcoming students, faculty, and staff into a vibrant experience of faith formation and intellectual engagement with the historic Christian faith. Hope’s invitational approach to supporting students in the exploration and development of faith is shared by faculty and staff, many of whom engage with their students on matters of faith and vocation. Three times weekly, Dimnent Memorial Chapel is filled to capacity for chapel, a time of sharing songs of worship, prayer, and Holy Scripture. On Sunday evenings, students, faculty, and staff are again welcome at Dimnent Memorial Chapel, where they gather around Christ’s table for Holy Communion. Recognizing that Hope students come from a variety of faith traditions, the college has established covenant partnerships with several local congregations to ensure that students have access to different denominational and liturgical worship opportunities and learning experiences. In recent surveys, 83 percent of Hope students indicate that they are satisfied with the services they receive to explore and grow their Christian faith, and 74 percent of our recent graduates indicate that Hope has equipped them to understand Christian theological perspectives as part of their critical thinking about complex issues.
Academic Excellence and Graduate Outcomes

Hope College has long been home to superb faculty and staff, a fact the campus community has come to appreciate greatly. Thanks to the dedication of faculty and staff to our students, Hope continues to be included among 40 institutions featured in the college educational guide, originally by Loren Pope, entitled *Colleges that Change Lives*. It has been gratifying for employees to see their dedication recognized among the best liberal arts colleges in the nation in the annual rankings compiled by *U.S. News & World Report*, which has placed Hope in the top 20 among all national liberal arts colleges for “Best Undergraduate Teaching.” Hope is honored to be one of only 286 colleges and universities in the country with a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa; the Hope students selected for membership in this academic honor society are among the brightest and most well-rounded students in the country. Hope students and graduates are also highly competitive for national merit awards and fellowships, such as the prestigious Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship, the National Science Foundation graduate fellowship program, Lilly fellowships, and Fulbright awards.

Hope consistently has the highest graduation rate among private colleges in Michigan. Our graduates are experiencing success as well; 95 percent of last year’s graduates were satisfactorily employed or in graduate school within six months of completing their degrees. Ninety-four percent of those who went on to graduate studies were accepted to their first- or second-choice graduate school.

Artistic and Athletic Excellence

Hope College was the first private, liberal arts college to hold national accreditation in art, dance, music, and theater. Last year, the college’s department of dance sent its H2 Dance Company, a pre-professional repertory dance company, to Edinburgh, Scotland, to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It was a tremendous experience for Hope students to be selected to perform in this international festival, the largest art festival in the world, which featured talent from 49 countries performing in thousands of shows in over 300 venues.

In addition to the broad-based and active program of intramural athletics, Hope competes successfully in Division III of the NCAA. At Hope, the athletic program is housed in the kinesiology department, where many coaches also serve as faculty. This increasingly unique commitment to maintaining the connection between the academic and athletic program has distinguished Hope as a leader in Division III athletics. Over the past academic year, Hope made NCAA Division III Tournament appearances in women’s cross country, women’s soccer, volleyball, and women’s and men’s basketball, and earned Michigan Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) titles in five sports. Hope students have also received several individual honors, including athletic all-American honors, all-region athletic honors and all-MIAA athlete awards, and two College Sports Information Directors of America Academic All-American honors.

Financial Strength

Undergirding Hope College’s strengths in enrollment and academics is a commitment to careful financial stewardship. Hope ended the last fiscal year with a balanced operating budget as it has done for over five decades. The college’s careful stewardship was recognized for the second time in a row by *U.S. News & World Report*, which ranked Hope the #1 national liberal arts college for efficient management of financial resources. At a time when the cost of college is on the minds of families and political candidates alike, Hope’s culture of stewardship allows us to keep our tuition and other costs well below those of our peers of comparable quality.
Physical Campus

Hope has been blessed with several new facilities that support our curricular and cocurricular programs. We are eager to complete construction on the Jim and Martie Bultman Student Center this spring and fill it with student life and activities in the 2017–2018 academic year. As we look to the future and consider how to support and maintain Hope’s attractive and high-quality facilities, the college is engaging in a campus master plan study to identify where the college should focus its resources to meet future demands on facilities and infrastructure for the next 10 to 20 years. This process will result in a road map for the campus for both short-term and long-term projects to ensure that decisions regarding new construction, renovations, and infrastructure improvements are made within a larger, long-term context.

Honoring the Reformation

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is the focus of the 2017 Presidential Colloquium. The colloquium will offer several lectures, panels, and concerts to explore the broader influence of the Reformation over time, as well as how the world has changed because of it. The colloquium will commence in the spring semester and continue into the fall, in coordination with events taking place at churches throughout the Holland and Zeeland communities and at Western Theological Seminary.

Serving the Community

Hope students have a heart for service. The college is home to several programs that engage students in outreach, mentoring, and volunteer opportunities. Hope students provide thousands of volunteer hours to local nonprofit organizations, including the Children’s After School Achievement program, in which Hope students mentor and tutor more than 150 first- through fifth-graders who are at risk of falling behind and potentially dropping out of school. This spring, hundreds of Hope students participated in the 18th annual Dance Marathon fundraising event for Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital. In the 17 years from 2000 through 2016, Hope’s Dance Marathon has raised a total of more than $1.74 million in support for children receiving treatment at the hospital and their families.
Report of Northwestern College

Mission

Northwestern College is a Christian academic community engaging students in courageous and faithful learning and living that empowers them to follow Christ and pursue God’s redeeming work in the world.

Felipe Silva (’12) Receives CCCU Young Alumni Award

Felipe Silva, a 2012 NWC graduate, was named the 2017 recipient of the Young Alumni Award from the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU). The award is given to individuals who have graduated within the last ten years and have achieved uncommon leadership or success in a way that reflects the values of Christian higher education. President Christy introduced Felipe at the awards ceremony at the CCCU’s 41st annual Presidents’ Conference in Washington, D.C., the last week in January.

Felipe and his wife, Janelle (’11), have been working in Romania for the New Horizons Foundation since 2013. New Horizons partners with Northwestern to offer the Romanian study abroad semester, for which Janelle previously served as administrator. Now Felipe directs Fara Limite Sala de Catarare (No Limit Climbing Gym) in Vulcan, Romania, and Janelle serves as its administrator. The Silvas use rock climbing to help impoverished youth learn lessons about trust, discipline, courage, persistence, confidence, problem solving, and teamwork.

Felipe, who majored in religion, minored in sociology, played soccer, and was an assistant resident director at Northwestern, credits his campus experience for greatly influencing his life and direction. “Everything came together with faith as the focus of my life. I got my vision for Christian community development and the tools to work where I am working today. It was not just the academic part of my education that made the biggest impact, but the great example I saw in many of the staff I encountered in my college years.”

What an honor to see one of our own being recognized for his service! Felipe and Janelle are excellent examples of Northwestern’s mission. Their passion for the people of Romania is inspiring, and they are bringing honor to the Lord and to Northwestern College through their service.

Science Building to be Ready by Fall 2018

As of March 1, $22.2 million had been raised toward the goal of $24.5 million for a new health and natural sciences facility, and plans were being made to begin construction in the spring. The 61,000 square foot building is slated to be in use by the fall of 2018.

The new building will bring the biology, chemistry, and nursing departments under one roof, add a greenhouse, and increase the number of classrooms and labs available for learning and research.

Growing Master of Education (M.Ed.) Program

Northwestern’s M.Ed. program, which began in 2015 and already has 160 students enrolled, is adding a fourth track: special education. Classes in the new program will begin this summer.
Offered entirely online and designed to be completed in two years or less, the M.Ed. program also includes tracks in early childhood, master teacher, and teacher leadership. The program has been named among the nation’s most affordable by www.bestmastersdegrees.com and www.affordableschools.net.

**Northwestern Launches Bridge Scholars Program**

Northwestern College is launching a new program, Bridge Scholars, that offers scholarships and campus learning and leadership opportunities for students from historically underrepresented populations.

The Bridge Scholars program is under the direction of Rahn Franklin, Northwestern’s director of multicultural student development. Franklin hopes to have a Bridge Scholars cohort of about ten students in each class year at Northwestern for an eventual total of around 40 Bridge Scholars on campus.

“Our classrooms and campus life will be further enriched as students from diverse backgrounds join us in pursuing God’s redeeming work in the world,” says Franklin. “The Bridge Scholars program encourages multicultural students on our campus to thrive academically and socially and to develop as leaders. As they thrive, the whole institution does.”

Bridge Scholars will meet for courses, discussion, mentoring, and experiential learning, all aimed at developing the ability of each student to be a campus leader and advocate for an inclusive campus and curriculum. Bridge Scholars will be “ambassadors of reconciliation,” helping Northwestern to exhibit the values expressed in the college’s Vision for Diversity (www.nwciowa.edu/about/vision-for-diversity).

The Vision for Diversity establishes that reconciliation between people—particularly between people separated by racial prejudice—is not simply a good social goal; it’s part of what it means to follow Jesus in this world. Northwestern hopes the Bridge Scholars program is another way to attract more diverse people to campus and equip them to become transformative leaders in college and, ultimately, throughout their lives.

**NWC’s Leadership Conference and Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit**

Northwestern will host the third annual Northwestern Leadership Series conference June 8–9. Staff in graduate and adult studies and the Franken Center put together an amazing lineup of speakers, including keynote presenters Wess Stafford (former president and CEO of Compassion International), Ann Bilbrew (Chicago pastor and social worker), and Shelly Vroegh (2017 Iowa Teacher of the Year). New in the conference schedule this year is a teacher leadership track that enables educators to earn graduate or licensure renewal credit.

The June leadership conference is just one professional development event on campus this summer as Northwestern will also be a satellite site for the world-renowned Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit, which will take place on August 10 and 11. This is a wonderful opportunity for Northwestern not only to partner with another organization interested in Christian leadership but also to develop further in our individual and college-wide calls to be Christlike servant leaders.

**NWC Website in Spanish**

In response to parent requests, Northwestern now has several web pages that are in Spanish. The public relations and admissions offices worked together along with several Spanish
instructors to provide webpages for prospective students and families. The Spanish-language pages can be accessed in a variety of places, most easily from the main webpage in the upper righthand corner under “Español.”

Northwestern also plans to provide student interpreters from the translation and interpretation program for families who may request that service for their campus visit. Often, when parents need translation, it’s provided by their student, leaving the student unable to enjoy and focus on his or her college visit. While practically these additions are helpful for our Spanish-speaking prospective students and families, they are also another reflection of Northwestern’s desire to live more fully into our Vision for Diversity.

**NWC’s Paid Parental Leave**

Northwestern College has established a new policy offering six weeks of paid parental leave to full-time and three-quarter-time employees upon the birth or adoption of a child. The benefit is available after 12 months of employment and can be used by the birth mother, birth father, adoptive parents, or an employee acting in place of a parent.

Northwestern is offering paid parental leave as a result of requests from faculty and staff to offer a benefit beyond what is available under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which is government mandated but not required to be paid. With increasing costs of health coverage and the expenses of adopting a child, it’s one more way Northwestern supports families.
CLOSING

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Lee De Young, General Synod vice president, was elected General Synod president. James Nakakihara, elder delegate from the Classis of California, was elected General Synod vice president.

CLOSE OF GENERAL SYNOD

WORSHIP SERVICE AND ADJOURNMENT

The closing worship service was held at the Dimnent Chapel and began at 10:41 a.m. on Tuesday, June 13, 2017. The service was led by Daniel Gillett, president, and a worship team including Kristin Baron, Julia Cosgrove, Mark Poppen, and Katy Sundararajan. The Word was preached by John Paul Sundararajan. An offering was received in support of Casa delle Culture in Scicli, Italy. James Brumm, corresponding delegate from and moderator of the Commission on History, and Nicole Romero, seminarian seminar participant, read the necrology report. The sacrament of communion was celebrated, with Donald Poest and Lee DeYoung (interim general secretary and General Synod vice president, respectively) serving as co-celebrants. Lee DeYoung and James Nakakihara were installed as General Synod president and vice president, respectively. Closing prayer was offered by Lee DeYoung.

The closing worship service concluded at 11:53 a.m. Thus, the 211th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America adjourned at 11:53 a.m. on Tuesday, June 13, 2017.
### SUPPLEMENT A: CHANGES IN CHURCH STATUS/NAME
#### JANUARY 2015 THROUGH JUNE 2016

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<th>Date</th>
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11/16, disbanded First Reformed Church of Rocky Hill
Rocky Hill, New Jersey

11/16, disbanded Hawarden Community Church
Hawarden, Iowa

11/16, disbanded Trinity Reformed Church
(dba Westnedge Hill Community Church)
Kalamazoo, Michigan

12/16, disbanded Danboro Reformed Church
(dba Pleasant Ridge Church)
Danboro, Pennsylvania

12/16, disbanded Clancy Street Fellowship
Grand Rapids, Michigan

1/17, disbanded Bethel Reformed Church
Exeter, Ontario

2/17, disbanded Han Ma Um Reformed Church
Paramus, New Jersey

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11/16, merged Bethel Reformed Church,
Chicago, Illinois,
merged with
First Reformed Church of Berwyn,
Berwyn, Illinois,
becoming:
CrossRoads Community Church
Chicago, Illinois

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3/16, dba name change The Turning Point
Norco, California
legally remains
Church on the Hill

10/16, name change Iglesia Comunitaria Cristiana Emanuel
Ceres, California
formerly
Iglesia Cristiana Emmanuel de Riverbank

12/16, dba name change Fellowship Church
Holland, Michigan
legally remains
Fellowship Reformed Church
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FINANCIAL REPORTS

Recent audited financial statements for the General Synod Council, RCA Fund, Endowment Fund, Church Growth Fund, Board of Benefits Services Insurance Fund, Board of Benefits Services General Fund, and Board of Benefits Services Retirement Fund are available at www.rca.org/financials. For questions about the statements, please contact the treasurer at 616-698-7071; 4500 60th St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512; or jteitsma@rca.org. The financial statements and audited reports from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary are available from the seminaries. Copies are also housed in the RCA Archives.

As a matter of public record, copies of audited financial reports are always available by calling the treasurer’s office at 616-698-7071, ext. 1874, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time), Monday through Friday. These financial reports are now available online at www.rca.org/finance. Audited financial reports are also housed in the RCA Archives.

2016 STATISTICAL TABLES

Statistical tables containing data from the Consistorial Report Form from 2000 to 2016 are available online at crf.rca.org/public.