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
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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<tr>
<th>Book of Church Order Amendments</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Adoption of “Order for Christian Marriage” as Part of Liturgy</td>
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(MGS 2016, R 16-14, p. 84 and pp. 87-102)
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;  

10. *Method of Calculating GSC Membership—BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Sec. 2;  

   **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

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## CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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### NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
#### 2016-2017

#### ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE

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### NEW YORK, NEW YORK
#### 2016-2017

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## ORANGE CITY, IOWA
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## PARAMOUNT, CALIFORNIA
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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]

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<th>Source</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2016</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2015</th>
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<td>Other Income*</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL INCOME</strong></td>
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*Includes investment earnings and fees for services provided to related entities

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.
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>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>Change</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Amounts brought from GSC</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>General Synod Council</td>
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<td>$44.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOBS</td>
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<td>Theological education</td>
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<td><strong>Amounts added during Synod 2016:</strong></td>
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<td>Joint Meeting re Commissioned Pastors R 16-8</td>
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<td>R 17-14</td>
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<td>$52.23</td>
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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 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 BCO set forth in R-51 read:

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 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. ...
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.

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 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

**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.