Report of the Commission on History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**R 17-51**

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

Providing for the Future

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

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

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

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

Reacting to the Present While Learning from the Past

The Perceived Need for Definitive Decisions

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

Ministerial Supply and Misunderstood Crises

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

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

MINISTERIAL SUPPLY, 1900–2010: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

A “Serious Condition”: 1901–1906

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

The state of ministerial supply was called a “serious condition” by the Committee on Education, Academies, and Colleges in its report to the General Synod of 1903. The committee noted that “the number of those enlisted for work in the Kingdom of God is far too small.” The situation was seen by the committee as “an index to the spiritual life of the Church” and its primary cause was to be found in “a prevailing worldly and materialistic spirit, which acts as a dry-rot in the life of the Church.”⁵ Accordingly, the committee urged pastors and consistories to “use prayerful effort in the direction of placing before the minds of promising and consecrated young men in their congregations, the claims of the Christian ministry.”⁶

Increasing Ministerial Supply: 1907–1912

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

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

A New Challenge: 1913–1921

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From Shortage to Surplus, Again: 1926–1935

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The question of ministerial supply appears relatively quiet in the synodical record for the next decade, returning again in 1983 when the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations recommended that the Office of Human Resources, among other things, “assess the
potential opportunity for professional ministry likely to become available in the RCA between 1985 and 1990.”43

In its report to the 1984 General Synod, the Office of Human Resources noted, “Initially, this study only underlines what we have known for years; namely, that we produce more clergy than we can possibly assimilate in the parish.”44 Rather than a shortage, the problem was having an abundance of ministers to support adequate employment and movement of ministers.

To what and for what are we recruiting? A theological education does not guarantee life-time employment. It is important to be honest with the person who professes interest in ministry; and while we do not wish to impede the moving of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life, we should also indicate that prospects for employment in a church are not without limits.45

It was also noted that the number of churches who cannot afford a full-time minister was increasing and there must be an openness to recognizing ministry beyond full-time parish ministry as this will not be a reality for many ministers or people entering the ministry.46 Furthermore, the General Synod of 1984 considered a proposal that was, in essence, the commissioned pastor but with a different name. This was rejected, among other reasons, because it “would make the present over-supply of ministers even worse.”47

Indeed, in 1980, there were 930 churches and 1,240 non-retired active ministers.48 This surplus of ministers did not decrease in the following decade, but in fact increased, as there were 960 churches in 1990 and 1,438 non-retired active ministers in the same year. The number of churches increased approximately 3.23 percent during the decade from 1980 to 1990, while the number of ministers increased approximately 16 percent during the same period.

Small Decrease: 1990–2000

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

Ministerial Surplus and Perceived Shortage: 2000–2010

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

To instruct the General Synod Council to do an impact study regarding the potential lack of ministry leadership in the Reformed Church in America in the next five years and determine possible courses of action to provide qualified leadership for all areas of ministry in the Reformed Church in America.49

The committee’s reasoning was that “Current statistics indicate that all areas of RCA ministry will be facing an urgent need to find qualified leaders in the next five years.”50 At the time, however, no further data was presented to support such a claim.
In 2001, both the president of General Synod and the general secretary made reference to a survey that came out of this study which showed that 182 congregations, “almost 20 percent,” were without a full-time minister, and that for more than one-third of those churches, resource limitations provided little prospect of being able to call a full-time minister in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the report continued to project retirements and new minister projections, and estimated that there could be upward of “29 percent of our churches without full-time ordained pastors. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are teetering on the edge of a full-blown crisis.” In the interpretation of the data, the term “clergy shortage” was used as a basis for arguing that the preaching elder designation, already in existence, was insufficient and a new designation was needed. The general secretary, in his report to the General Synod, used the same data to argue that there was an insufficient number of ministers to fulfill the need, and with the “plans to start 182 new churches over the next ten years” more ministers would be needed in order to fulfill the need that was to come.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Celebrating the Reformation

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,
James Hart Brumm, moderator

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2 MGS 1901, p. 1067.
4 MGS 1903, p. 350.
5 Ibid., pp. 350-351.
The term “non-retired active ministers” includes RCA ministers of all designations except retired or inactive ministers.


Board of Education Report, 1933; p. 3.

Ibid., p. 6.