Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

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

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

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

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

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

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

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

committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming globally at this point in history.

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

World Council of Churches

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

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

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

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

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

World Communion of Reformed Churches

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Global Christian Forum

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

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

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

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

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

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

National Council of Churches

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

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

Christian Churches Together

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

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

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

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

RCA–Formula of Agreement Relationships

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

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

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

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

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

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

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

Ongoing Work of the Commission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgments

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

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

Respectfully submitted,
Lisa Vander Wal, moderator

REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS TASK FORCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,
John Hubers, moderator