Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Summary of the Commission’s Review of Its Responsibilities

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

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

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

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

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

Recommend Standards for Worship Music

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

Advise the Church with Critiques of Various Versions of the Bible

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Appreciation

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

Respectfully submitted,
Nancy Hoerner, moderator