COMMISSIONS

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The Book of Church Order states that “the commission shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2017 edition, pp. 109–110]). The Scripture that has guided our work this year is Isaiah 1:17: “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (ESV).

Mass Incarceration Coalition and Restorative Justice

General Synod 2016 voted to create a mass incarceration coalition composed of members of the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on Christian Unity, the Commission for Women, and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity to submit a report to General Synod every year for the next three years. This is the final report from the coalition.

The coalition identified restorative justice methodology as a useful tool for the church. Restorative justice is an advocacy approach to help victims of crime, those who have committed crime, faith communities, correctional officers, community leaders, and local representatives. Restorative justice methodology has the potential to bring new life and healing to families, formerly incarcerated citizens, citizens involved in criminal behavior, and communities. As an advocacy tool, restorative justice can be used to change laws and policies that relate to criminal and juvenile justice reform. The goals of restorative justice are to hold offenders accountable for crimes or offenses, afford an opportunity to repair the harm that has been done, restore their place in the community, restore safety to the community, and address underlying issues that lead to criminal or offensive behavior. The ultimate goal of restorative justice is to build the social competency of those who have harmed others in the community.

Restorative justice is also applicable to facilitating peaceful resolution to conflicts within the church. The Commission on Christian Action has identified resources and recommendations that can be helpful to churches that desire to know more about restorative justice, how they can be trained, and how they can utilize restorative justice in their church and community settings.

CA 18-1
To list Shalem Mental Health Network and the International Institute for Restorative Practices on the RCA website as resources for congregations that are interested in learning about restorative justice and/or hosting restorative practices for their communities. (ADOPTED)

CA 18-2
To urge RCA congregations to access the restorative justice resources listed in this report and to begin discussions in their local faith community about the use of restorative justice in the church and community; and further,

To post the restorative justice resources in this report on the RCA website for easy access for congregations. (ADOPTED)
Weaponized Drones

In the Reformed tradition, war is always seen as an evil, although sometimes evil requires the use of armed force. Once a decision is made to go to war, there are criteria for carrying out armed conflict that must be met for it to be viewed as just. The CIA has recently been given the authority to use lethal drone strikes more widely and more covertly than prior to 2016. Drone warfare causes an unacceptable number of civilian casualties and allows targeting of unidentified individuals. Drone warfare violates international human rights law and creates long-term hostility toward the United States in affected communities. Drone warfare also directly harms attempts to promote human rights and the rule of law. As people of faith who value all of God’s children, we are deeply concerned that the U.S. lethal drone strikes have only been used in Muslim-majority countries.

Because of the nature of drone warfare, those charged with releasing drone artillery are distanced from the impact and effects of the strike. There is deep concern that by distancing people from kill decisions, drones lower the political and psychological costs of killing. Drones make it easier for politicians and other high-level decision-makers to choose violence and war rather than diplomacy. Using armed drones for targeted killings escalates conflicts.

We call on our leaders to take us off the path of unending war. As people of faith, we advocate the rigorous pursuit of peace, based on upholding dignity and human rights for all, with resources dedicated to this alternative at a level matching that spent on the current drone warfare program.

The Reformed Church in America must commit to educate ourselves on the ongoing issue of U.S. drone strikes around the world, particularly in countries that are not “war zones” as defined in the law of armed conflict or international law. The church must also commit to join our interfaith sisters and brothers in advocating with the U.S. government to follow the paths of justice and diplomacy rather than a path of war and violence.

CA 18-3
To urge congregations, classes, and regional synods to host showings of 30-minute videos and discussion groups provided by the Interfaith Drone Network; and further,
COMMISSIONS

To encourage those concerned about drone warfare to construct a quilt to represent those who have died in drone strikes and to use quilts as a point of discussion about drone warfare; and further,

To invite concerned RCA members to prepare faith-based op-eds and letters to editors for publications. (ADOPTED)

Resources

- Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare, www.interfaithdronenetwork.org
- Drones Quilt Project, dronesquiltproject.wordpress.com

Immigration Reform

As a follow-up to the report to General Synod 2017 related to immigration reform, the commission engaged in a review of action steps taken by our ecumenical partners and other faith communities to determine how the church might speak and act related to the issue of immigration reform. The statements, the scriptural call made by the church in the past, and communication to the president of the United States regarding our stance on immigration have been helpful; however, at this time in our national life, something more is required. Each of our Formula of Agreement partners (PCUSA, ELCA, and UCC) and many other faith communities have strong and bold policy statements regarding immigration. Not only do they have bold policy statements, but they also engage in active advocacy and education on behalf of undocumented immigrants and Dreamers.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) designates the first Sunday in May as Immigrants’ Rights Sunday. The denomination urges its congregations to lift up immigrants on this day to do the following: learn about their concerns, honor their contributions to our country and communities, hear their pain, pray for their well-being, and listen to where God is leading the UCC regarding issues of immigration. Stories about immigrants are included in worship services and ways to advocate for immigrant justice are explored.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America’s Office of Social Justice has a four-pronged approach: educate, worship, advocate, and connect. They conduct “Church Between the Borders” workshops, three-part interactive workshops that spark thought and discussion for Christian groups interested in engaging immigration from a biblical perspective. Participants reflect on the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger and consider what that means in their current context. Additionally, the Office of Social Justice has books, guides, worship resources, preaching resources, a blog, and a website dedicated to immigration reform.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a policy statement that calls for a commitment from both Presbyterians and the government to work toward welcoming immigrants into communities and providing just laws that affect those who live and work in the United States (oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/policy-immigration). Additionally, the PC(USA) has produced a video telling the stories of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients and the uncertainties they live with.

Christian Churches Together makes the following statement regarding undocumented immigrants and DACA: “While immigration is often viewed as an economic, social, or legal issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian and spiritual issue that directly impacts millions of unauthorized immigrants and the entire fabric of our society. The Bible frequently commands us to treat the immigrant justly. Further, every person is created in the image of God and possesses inestimable value. It is therefore paramount that our national
immigration system protects the basic human rights and dignity of all persons. Sadly, our current system fails to meet this test and requires comprehensive reform now” (CCT Statement on Immigration Reform, adopted February 2013, christianchurchestogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CCT-USA-Press-Release-Austin-02-01-13-with-Statement.pdf).

A review of other faith communities and their involvement in the issue of immigration reform and protection of DACA revealed a serious commitment from denominations to support immigration reform and to actively advocate for legislation on behalf of undocumented immigrants. After 20 years, it is time for the Reformed Church in America to join our Formula of Agreement partners and other Christians in making a bold and courageous statement on the issue of immigration reform and in taking active steps to support undocumented immigrants and DACA.

Today, many United States residents live in fear of deportation, and rightfully so. In recent months, husbands, wives, siblings, fathers, and mothers have been arrested while at their jobs, in the streets of our cities, and in their homes. They have been held in detention centers and sent to lands that they no longer call home. Many of these people have worked for less than minimum wage and contributed to building the economy and the growth of the U.S. They have raised their children to love the country. We all have the same dreams for our children. If the church really believes that we are to receive strangers with open hands and hearts, and if the church really believes that we are called to love mercy and do justice as we walk humbly before our God, then the church must also believe that we are called to action beyond our former statements of advocacy, for we live in a time where statements of advocacy must become statements of action.

CA 18-4
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States condemning the separation of immigrant children from their families and strongly supporting immigration reform and DACA; and further,

To urge congregations to encourage their local politicians to enact legislation that supports immigration reform and DACA.

A motion was made and supported to amend CA 18-4 as follows (additions are underlined):

…president of the United States condemning the separation of immigrant children from their families and strongly supporting . . .

A motion was made and supported to cease debate. The president directed that debate continue.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

VOTED: To adopt CA 18-4 as amended.

The final version of CA 18-4 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

CA 18-4
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States condemning the separation of immigrant children from their families and strongly supporting immigration reform and DACA; and further,
To urge congregations to encourage their local politicians to enact legislation that supports immigration reform and DACA. *(ADOPTED)*

**Resources**

- *Minutes of the General Synod (MGS) 1987*, p. 79
- *MGS 1993*, p. 86, pp. 88–89, p. 96
- *MGS 1995*, p. 90
- United Church of Christ immigration webpage, [www.ucc.org/justice_immigration](http://www.ucc.org/justice_immigration)
- CRCNA Office of Social Justice immigration resources, [justice.crcna.org/immigration](http://justice.crcna.org/immigration)
- Interfaith Immigration Coalition, [www.interfaithimmigration.org](http://www.interfaithimmigration.org)
- Detention Watch Network, [www.detentionwatchnetwork.org](http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org)
- Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service, [www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org)
- International Detention Coalition, [www.idcoalition.org](http://www.idcoalition.org)
- Migration Policy Institute, [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org)
- American Immigration Council, [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org)
- Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., [www.cliniclegal.org](http://www.cliniclegal.org)
- Human Rights First, [www.humanrightsfirst.org](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org)

**Gun Safety**

In our 2017 report to the General Synod, the Commission on Christian Action determined to study the issue of gun violence in collaboration with the Commissions on Theology, Unity, and Race and Ethnicity and the Commission for Women and issue a report at General Synod 2019. However, in light of the bloodiest Valentine’s Day in the modern history of the United States, the commission would be remiss if it did not speak to the horrific and senseless killing of 17 innocent young people in a Florida high school. It is urgent that the church act now! It has been 41 years since the Reformed Church in America spoke in favor of gun control and adopted three resolutions; these can be found on the RCA website (www.rca.org/guncontrol). The church cannot and must not rest on its laurels of the past when children, youth, young adults, men, and women are daily losing their lives to gun violence. Seventeen young, vibrant, promising lives were snuffed out on Valentine’s Day, and the Reformed Church in America has been essentially silent. Our youth deserve the church to stand up for them, to stand with them, to speak out against evil that will harm them, and speak for laws that will keep them safe. If the youth of North America cannot turn to the church for safety, where can they turn?

As of March 14, 2018, data from the Gun Violence Archive reveals that the United States has experienced astonishing levels of gun violence this year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total gun violence incidents</td>
<td>10,804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total deaths by guns</td>
<td>2,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total injuries by guns</td>
<td>4,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children killed age 0-11</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teens killed age 12-17</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed in mass shootings</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officers shot/killed</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspects killed by police</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the Gun Violence Archive, gun incidents have shown a progressive increase every year. That being the case, the U.S. can expect to outpace the 61,536 gun incidents of 2017.

Statistics can make our eyes glaze over, but understanding the pain involved for each of these families can only lead us to grieve like Rachel,

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15).

While the CCA will work in collaboration with our fellow commissions to offer specific and targeted recommendations for General Synod 2019, we urge the church today to walk along with our youth, to hear their voices, and to support their work. The young people of the U.S. have started a movement for righteousness and justice. The Reformed Church in America must listen to the prophetic voices of the young and act on behalf of our children and all North Americans. The church must no longer point to the past statements it has made about gun control. Now is the time for this denomination to act—to act with courage, to act boldly, to act justly, and to act as Jesus would act.

CA 18-5
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting gun safety; and further,

To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for gun safety.

A motion was made and supported to amend CA 18-5 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting strategies to reduce gun violence; and further,

To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for common-sense actions to reduce gun violence.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt CA 18-5 as amended.

The final version of CA 18-5 as amended and adopted reads as follows:
CA 18-5
To direct the general secretary to write a letter to the president of the United States strongly supporting strategies to reduce gun violence; and further,

To urge local churches to contact their politicians to advocate for common-sense actions to reduce gun violence. (ADOPTED)

Resources

- Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, faithsunited.org
- PC(USA) gun violence policies, studies, and resources, www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/peacemaking/gun-violence-resources
- The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, www.esgv.org
- Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, www.bradycampaign.org
- Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, www.lcav.org
- Violence Policy Center, www.vpc.org
- Gun Violence Archive, www.gunviolencearchive.org

Civil Discourse

The commission has been deeply disturbed by the malicious national discourse that has come forth in our society and among our leaders. As Christians, we are taught to “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). We seek to live out our call and commission to be in the world as ambassadors for Christ, and we realize the importance and power of our words as individuals and as a body. Throughout Scripture, God speaks to us of the value of our words, and we hear the call to words of grace and truth.

- Jesus was Word made flesh; he came with grace and truth.
- Proverbs 12:18 teaches, “Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”
- James 1:19-20 reminds us, “… let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Ephesians 4:25 and 29 and Colossians 4:6 give similar reminders about our speech.

In collaboration with the Commission for Women, we share the following clarion call to the church:

Speaking Christian

As Christians, we believe that in the beginning, when God spoke words, worlds were created. We believe that when the Word was made flesh, a new world was born. Words hold the capacity to create worlds and words hold the capacity to destroy worlds; to affirm and dignify humanity and to destroy and demean humanity.
In public discourse today, it’s not too far of a stretch to suggest that the adjective “civil” has been dropped from our discourse. Instead, we find ourselves inundated with half-truths and misleading truths. We listen to speech that demeans human beings created in the image of God. We hear words that denigrate and objectify women as sexual objects and that separate the world into “winners” and “losers,” “us” versus “them.” With these words being spoken, it is no wonder we find ourselves in the world that we do. Words create worlds and words destroy worlds.

As Christians participating in this discourse, our speech should be filled with truth, not half-truths or falsehoods. We should also speak compassionately, giving the benefit of the doubt to those who disagree with us and recognizing the image of God in the person we are addressing. We should speak beautifully, not using language in a utilitarian way but in ways that evoke God’s kingdom that has drawn near. And we should speak courageously, amplifying the voices of those unheard and challenging the voices that claim ultimate authority.

Words create worlds. May we, as Christians today, speak truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, and courageously, giving witness to the God to whom the whole world belongs.

If we desire change in the world, we must be the change we desire to see. The commission invites the church to reflect on and discuss “Speaking Christian.”

1. Which of these four “speak” words (truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, courageously) especially catches your ear? Why do you think that is?
2. How might each of these ways of speaking influence how you speak in a way that reflects Christ?
3. Where or with whom do you need to speak more truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, or courageously?

To aid the church to further deepen Christ-honoring action through our listening and words, we suggest resources that can grow us in speaking truthfully, compassionately, beautifully, and courageously. “Speak, Lord, we your servants are listening.”

CA 18-6
To encourage congregations to use “Speaking Christian” as a tool for discussion and reflection, and to ensure that our speech is gracious, seasoned with salt, and respectful of all we encounter.

(ADOPTED)

Resources

- Social statements of the ELCA, www.elca.org/socialstatements
Environmental Justice

Out of concern for environmental justice, the commission has identified a liaison to the Creation Care Guiding Coalition. This coalition will give a full report on the Care of Creation Ministry Project. The CCA liaison will work with the coalition to educate, equip, and mobilize RCA congregations and people to protect, restore, and rightly share God’s creation and to serve as a bridge to identify issues of justice that the commission might address.

Expedient Christian Action

The commission has struggled with the inability of the church to act on critical social issues in a timely manner. We are called to engage the world around us, to name destructive systems that bind and blind our neighbors with the chains of injustice and oppression. These are the things the church is called to act against and to take swift action on. When the processes of the church cause a delay in our ability to take such action, there often arises a perception of inaction, unwillingness, or silence. We are called to preach deliverance to those who are held in bondage to oppressive systems, to remove the scales from the eyes of those who cannot see the injustices committed against them, and to liberate those who have been oppressed and beaten by the empire. The church is not called to be silent, inactive, or unwilling. The work of justice is hard, and it is work that often calls for immediate response. The work of justice is hard, and yet it is the work of our worship of the Lord.

Our present system of investigation, deliberation, presentation, and approval of the body of Christ is sometimes cause for recommendations to become irrelevant. An example is the need for the commission to speak to the issue of the mass killing in Florida now, rather than to wait until a full report on gun safety is completed and presented and voted on in 2019. Often social crises arise during the liturgical year that should not wait for the General Synod to meet; however, there is no other mechanism for such crisis to be brought to the church for action. As a church committed to social justice, it is imperative to act on critical social issues expediently. As we have watched in the past month, young people from all over the U.S. have taken swift and bold action in light of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. They organized quickly, and they activated a well-developed plan to rebut the slowness, inability, and lack of desire of the government to act to ensure the safety of our children. These young people are truly living the moral imperative of the gospel to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). They have put all else aside for the sake of saving the lives of children and youth in days to come. The church, too, must figure out a rapid response to issues that critically impact our society, our personhood, but more importantly, the church of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to bring the transforming light of God’s kingdom into the lives of individuals, communities, and society in the larger sense. The Holy Spirit does a quick work in the lives of God’s people; this is something for the church to emulate in times of social crisis.

Respectfully submitted,
Patricia Sealy, moderator