The Acts and Proceedings of the 212th Regular Session of the GENERAL SYNOD

Convened on the campus of Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI
June 7–12, 2018

2018 Acts & Proceedings
Vol. XCVIII
RECENT OFFICERS OF GENERAL SYNOD

A list of presidents, from the first in 1794 to 1955, can be found on pages 308-311 of the 1956 Minutes of General Synod. The list of presidents from 1956–1978 can be found on page i of the 2002 Minutes of General Synod. The list of presidents from 1979–2010 can be found on page i of the 2010 Minutes of General Synod.

PRESIDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Election</th>
<th>From</th>
<th>Place of Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011—</td>
<td>The Rev. Lisa Vander Wal</td>
<td>New York ............... Grand Rapids, MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012—</td>
<td>The Rev. Thomas Smith</td>
<td>Iowa............................ Palos Heights, IL</td>
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<td>2013—</td>
<td>The Rev. Carl Boersma</td>
<td>South Dakota.............. Pella, IA</td>
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<td>2014—</td>
<td>The Rev. Gregory Alderman</td>
<td>California................ Pella, IA</td>
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<td>2015—</td>
<td>Elder Evan Vermeer</td>
<td>Iowa...................................... Palos Heights, IL</td>
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<td>2016—</td>
<td>The Rev. Daniel Gillett</td>
<td>Michigan..................... Palos Heights, IL</td>
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<td>2017—</td>
<td>Elder Lee DeYoung</td>
<td>Michigan..................... Holland, MI</td>
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<td>2018—</td>
<td>Elder James Nakakihara</td>
<td>California .............. Grand Rapids, MI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

STATED CLERKS

The Rev. John A. Ingham................................................................. 1932–1942
The Rev. Marion de Velder.............................................................. 1961–1968

GENERAL SECRETARIES

The Rev. Marion de Velder................................................................. 1968–1977
The Rev. Donald Poest (interim) ..................................................... 2017–2018
The Rev. Eddy Alemán ....................................................................... 2018–
PERMANENT COMMISSIONS, BOARDS, AND AGENCIES
2017–2018

*Indicates serving a final term

GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL

Ned Beadel .......................................................... 2018  RSFW
Charles Contreras ................................................. 2021* RSA
Gary De Witt ......................................................... 2018* RSA
Lee DeYoung .......................................................... 2019* P, GS
Andrea DiPace ......................................................... 2018* RSMAm
Stephanie Doeschot .............................................. 2021* RSMAm
Anna Jackson ......................................................... 2021* RSMAm
James Kuplic .......................................................... 2020* Ex officio
David Landegent ................................................... 2021* Ex officio
Benjamin Lin .......................................................... 2020* Ex officio
Eric Moreno ........................................................... 2018 Ex officio
James Nakakihara ..................................................... 2020* Ex officio
Sharon Palms .......................................................... 2018* Ex officio
Donald Poest (interim general secretary) .................. 2018* Ex officio
Barbara Pimentel ................................................. 2020* Ex officio
Erma Rolle .............................................................. 2020* Ex officio
George Rounds ....................................................... 2021* Ex officio
Andres Serrano ....................................................... 2019* Ex officio
Kenneth Shepard .................................................... 2020* Ex officio
Willie St ................................................................. 2019* Ex officio
Ervin Sparapani (ELCA ecumenical, non-voting) ....... 2021* Ex officio
Cora Taitt ............................................................... 2019* Ex officio
Wai Choon Tan ......................................................... 2018* CPAAM
Michael Van Buren ................................................ 2019* RSGL
Clare VanDis ........................................................ 2020* RSH
Nancy Van Heerde, moderator ................................ 2019* PP, GS
Cynthia Veldheer DeYoung ..................................... 2019* PP, GS
Vacancy ................................................................. 2020* PP, GS
Vacancy ................................................................. 2021* PP, GS

RACIAL/ETHNIC COUNCILS

AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew
Hellen Harvey
Jeffery Hough, chairperson
Dwayne Jackson
Regina Reid
James Steward

COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Carlos Corro, president
Luis Perez
Alberto Salazar Gaviria
Andres Serrano
COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Daniel Kim
Stephen Kim
Paul Lee, ex officio
Shi Yang Lin
Lynn Min
Kyunghoon Suh
Chanthala Sythavongsa
David Theonugraha, president
Gerri Yoshida

COMMISSIONS

CHRISTIAN ACTION

Jane Brown ................................................................. 2020
Scott DeLeeuw .......................................................... 2019
Sophie Mathonnet-Vanderwell ................................... 2020*
Seung-Ryeo (Salome) Ryew ........................................ 2018*
Patricia Sealy, moderator ........................................... 2019*
Emra Seawood .......................................................... 2018*
Reginald Smith (Reformed ecumenical observer) .............. 2020
Robin Suydam ............................................................ 2019
Kim Winchell (ELCA ecumenical observer) ................. 2020
Vacancy ................................................................. 2018
Vacancy ................................................................. 2020

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION

Lindsey De Kruif, moderator ........................................ 2018
Kent McHeard ........................................................... 2019*
Bethany Popkes .......................................................... 2018
Jane Schuyler ............................................................ 2019*
Pamela Van Beek ........................................................ 2020
Vacancy ................................................................. 2018
Vacancy ................................................................. 2020

CHRISTIAN UNITY

Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew ............................................... 2018
Kathryn Davelaar Guthrie ........................................... 2018
Donna Field ............................................................... 2020
Michael Hardeman ................................................... 2020*
Sun Jong Ju ............................................................... 2019
James Payton (ecumenical) ......................................... 2020*
Monica Schaap Pierce (on behalf of interim general secretary) Ex officio
Dena Robins ............................................................... 2018
Lisa Vander Wal, moderator ....................................... 2019*
Jodie Wu ................................................................. 2020*
### CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Robert Fretz ................................................................. 2019  
Dorene Horstman ...................................................... 2018  
Sarah Palsma, moderator ........................................... 2020*  
Drew Poppleton ......................................................... 2018  
Dennis TeBeest ........................................................... 2019  
Vacancy ........................................................................ 2019  
Vacancy ........................................................................ 2020

### CHURCH ORDER

Philip De Koster .......................................................... 2018  
Linda Gold ................................................................. 2018  
Joshua Scheid ............................................................. 2020  
Larry Schuyler, moderator ......................................... 2019*  
Jennifer Van Regenmorter .......................................... 2020

### HISTORY

James Brumm, moderator ............................................. 2018*  
Lynn Japinga ............................................................. 2019  
Andrew Klumpp ......................................................... 2020  
Steven Pierce ............................................................. 2020  
Douglas Van Aartsen ............................................... 2019*  
Matthew van Maastricht ......................................... 2018*

### JUDICIAL BUSINESS

Stephen Breen ............................................................ 2020  RSH  
Arthur Casey ............................................................ 2019*  RSA  
Paul Janssen ............................................................. 2018  RSMAt  
Russell Paarlberg, moderator ..................................... 2018  RSMAm  
Thomas Terpstra ....................................................... 2019  RSFW  
Kendra Van Houten .................................................. 2020  RSNY  
John (Jack) Van Slambrouck ...................................... 2019*  RSGL  
Barry Wynveen ........................................................ 2018  RSC

### NOMINATIONS

Gregory Alderman ...................................................... 2019  RSFW  
Carl Boersma, moderator ......................................... 2018  RSH  
Israel Camacho .......................................................... 2019*  CHM  
Micheal Edwards ....................................................... 2018  RSNY  
Rainey Enjady ............................................................ 2020  
Daniel Gillett .............................................................. 2018*  PP, GS  
Rebecca Hudak .......................................................... 2019  RSA  
Robert Montgomery ................................................ 2018  RSC  
Carol Mutch ............................................................... 2020  RSMAt  
Thomas Paarlberg .................................................... 2019  RSGL  
James Steward ........................................................... 2020  AABC  
Cary Winn ................................................................. 2020*  RSMAm  
Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu ................................................ 2018*  CPAAM
RACE AND ETHNICITY

Douglas Banks ................................................................. 2019
Karla Camacho ................................................................. 2018
Richard DeBruyne, moderator ........................................... 2020*
June Denny ......................................................................... 2020
Rafael Garcia ....................................................................... 2018
Jo Anna Lougin ................................................................. 2018
Kyunghoon Suh ................................................................. 2019
Vacancy ............................................................................. 2020

THEOLOGY

Jill Carattini ....................................................................... 2018*
Jaeseung Cha .................................................................... 2019*
Tony Chapman .................................................................. 2019*
Ronald Citlau ..................................................................... 2020
Laird Edman, moderator .................................................. 2020*
Mark Husbands .................................................................. 2020*
Kristen Johnson .................................................................. 2018
David Komline .................................................................... 2019
Suzanne McDonald (Reformed ecumenical observer) ............ 2020
William Russell (ELCA ecumenical observer) ....................... 2020
Stephen Shaffer .................................................................. 2019
John Young ....................................................................... 2018*

WOMEN

Blaine Crawford .................................................................. 2018*
Susan Hetrick ...................................................................... 2020*
Kristen Intelisano ................................................................ 2018
Dwayne Jackson ................................................................... 2019
Dierdre Johnston .................................................................. 2019*
San-Yi (Shirley) Lin, moderator ........................................... 2018*
Jessica Nunez ...................................................................... 2020
Maudelin Willock ............................................................... 2019*

AGENCIES

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES

Norma Coleman-James ....................................................... 2018*
Lee DeYoung ....................................................................... 2018*
Jack Doorlag ....................................................................... 2020
Karen Feeney ...................................................................... 2018*
Pamela Foster ....................................................................... 2018*
Mark Kamper ....................................................................... 2019*
Nelson Murphy .................................................................... 2020*
James Nakakihara .............................................................. 2019*
Robert Nykamp, president .................................................. 2019*
Donald Poest (interim general secretary) ............................. Ex officio
Jason Schnelker ................................................................... 2020*
Douglas Struyk .................................................................... 2020
Nancy Van Heerde ............................................................. 2018*
CHURCH GROWTH FUND

Rod Douma .......................................................................................... 2018
Larry Koops .......................................................................................... 2019
Nicole Kouba .......................................................................................... 2020
Mary Linge ........................................................................................... 2020*
Jillisa Teitsma (on behalf of interim general secretary) ......................... Ex officio
Gregory Robinson ................................................................................. 2019*
Diane Smith Faubion ............................................................................. 2018
Anthony Vis, president ........................................................................... 2020*

MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY

Dustin DeVriend ..................................................................................... 2020
Vladimir Diaz-Ochoa ............................................................................. 2019
Carol Jones ........................................................................................... 2019*
Bradley Lewis, moderator ..................................................................... 2019
Jacob Marvel .......................................................................................... 2019
Frances Nelson ....................................................................................... 2020
Donald Poest (interim general secretary) .............................................. Ex officio
Felix Theonugraha ............................................................................... 2018*
Nancy Van Heerde ................................................................................ 2019* GSC
David Wulkan ......................................................................................... 2018
# A Guide to RCA Alphabetese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbr.</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AABC</td>
<td>African American Black Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAR</td>
<td>Approved Alternate Route</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCO</td>
<td>Board of Benefits Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCA</td>
<td>Commission on Christian Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCDE</td>
<td>Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCO</td>
<td>Commission on Church Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>Christian Churches Together in the USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCU</td>
<td>Commission on Christian Unity</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Commission on Christian Worship</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFW</td>
<td>Commission for Women</td>
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<tr>
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<td>The RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc.</td>
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<td>Council for Hispanic Ministries</td>
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<td>Commission on Judicial Business</td>
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<td>Commission on History</td>
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<td>CON</td>
<td>Commission on Nominations</td>
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<td>Commission on Race and Ethnicity</td>
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<td>COT</td>
<td>Commission on Theology</td>
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<td>CRCNA</td>
<td>Christian Reformed Church in North America</td>
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<td>General Synod Council</td>
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<td>MFCA</td>
<td>Ministerial Formation Certification Agency</td>
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<td>MGS</td>
<td>Minutes of General Synod</td>
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<td>NBTS</td>
<td>New Brunswick Theological Seminary</td>
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<td>NCCC</td>
<td>National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA</td>
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<td>PFCC</td>
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<td>Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>World Communion of Reformed Churches</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTS</td>
<td>Western Theological Seminary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. **Formation of the Synod**
   - Roll Call of General Synod ................................................................. 1
   - Opening of Synod .................................................................................. 11
   - Worship .................................................................................................. 11
   - Privilege of the Floor ............................................................................ 13
   - Seating of Delegates ............................................................................. 13
   - Minutes and Journal .............................................................................. 13
   - Approval of the Schedule and Agenda .................................................. 14
   - Advisory Committee Membership ........................................................ 14

II. **Agenda of General Synod**
   - Disposition of Communications .......................................................... 15
   - Presentation and Referral of New Business .......................................... 15
   - Report of the Interim General Secretary .............................................. 17
   - Report of the President ........................................................................ 24
   - Report of the General Synod Council Serving as the Executive Committee of the General Synod ................................................................. 38
   - Overtures and New Business ................................................................ 115
   - General Synod Council Reports .......................................................... 161
   - Report of the Church Growth Fund ...................................................... 221
   - Report of the Board of Benefits Services .............................................. 224
   - Commissions ......................................................................................... 233
   - Seminaries and Colleges ...................................................................... 324

III. **Close of General Synod**
   - Election of Officers ............................................................................. 366
   - Adjournment ........................................................................................ 366

IV. **Financial and Statistical Reports**
   - Supplement A ....................................................................................... 367
   - Financial and Statistical Reports .......................................................... 370
   - General Synod Council ......................................................................... www.rca.org/financials
   - Board of Benefits Services .................................................................. www.rca.org/financials
   - RCA Church Growth Fund, Inc. .......................................................... www.rca.org/financials
   - RCA Endowment Fund ........................................................................ www.rca.org/financials
   - RCA Fund ............................................................................................ www.rca.org/financials
INDEX OF RECOMMENDATIONS
AND GENERAL SYNOD ACTIONS

Christian Action
CA 18-1 ................................................................. 233
CA 18-2 ................................................................. 233
CA 18-3 ................................................................. 234
CA 18-4 ................................................................. 236
CA 18-5 ................................................................. 239
CA 18-6 ................................................................. 240

Church Order
CO 18-1 ................................................................. 257
CO 18-2 ................................................................. 259
CO 18-3 ................................................................. 261
CO 18-4 ................................................................. 263

Christian Discipleship and Education
DE 18-1 ................................................................. 242
DE 18-2 ................................................................. 242
DE 18-3 ................................................................. 243
DE 18-4 ................................................................. 244
DE 18-5 ................................................................. 244

GSC as Executive Committee of General Synod
EC 18-1 ................................................................. 39
EC 18-2 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-3 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-4 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-5 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-6 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-7 ................................................................. 40
EC 18-8 ................................................................. 41
EC 18-9 ................................................................. 41
EC 18-10 ............................................................... 50
EC 18-11 ............................................................... 50
EC 18-12 ............................................................... 51
EC 18-13 ............................................................... 52

Finance
F 18-1 ................................................................. 65
F 18-2 ................................................................. 65
F 18-3 ................................................................. 65
F 18-4 ................................................................. 66

Global Mission
GM 18-1 ............................................................... 216
GM 18-2 ............................................................... 217

History
H 18-1 ................................................................. 277
H 18-2 ................................................................. 284
H 18-3 ................................................................. 289
Leadership
L 18-1 .................................................................................................................. 182

Overtures and New Business
OV 18-1 ........................................................................................................... 115
OV 18-2 ........................................................................................................... 116
OV 18-3 ........................................................................................................... 117
OV 18-4 ........................................................................................................... 118
OV 18-5 ........................................................................................................... 120
OV 18-6 ........................................................................................................... 122
OV 18-7 ........................................................................................................... 125
OV 18-8 ........................................................................................................... 125
OV 18-9 ........................................................................................................... 126
OV 18-10 ........................................................................................................ 127
OV 18-11 ........................................................................................................ 128
OV 18-12 ........................................................................................................ 128
OV 18-13 ........................................................................................................ 130
OV 18-14 ........................................................................................................ 132
OV 18-15 ........................................................................................................ 133
OV 18-16 ........................................................................................................ 139
OV 18-17 ........................................................................................................ 142
OV 18-18 ........................................................................................................ 143
OV 18-19 ........................................................................................................ 144
OV 18-20 ........................................................................................................ 145
OV 18-21 ........................................................................................................ 148
OV 18-22 ........................................................................................................ 149
OV 18-23 ........................................................................................................ 152
OV 18-24 ........................................................................................................ 153
OV 18-25 ........................................................................................................ 154
OV 18-26 ........................................................................................................ 154

Nominations
N 18-1 .............................................................................................................. 299
N 18-2 .............................................................................................................. 300

Race and Ethnicity
RE 18-1 .......................................................................................................... 303

Responses to Referrals from General Synod
RF 18-1 ........................................................................................................... 86
RF 18-2 ........................................................................................................... 88
RF 18-3 ........................................................................................................... 88
RF 18-4 ........................................................................................................... 97
RF 18-5 .......................................................................................................... 100

Theological Education
TE 18-1 .......................................................................................................... 322
TE 18-2 .......................................................................................................... 331
TE 18-3 .......................................................................................................... 333
TE 18-4 .......................................................................................................... 355

Theology
TH 18-1 .......................................................................................................... 314
# REGIONAL SYNOD OF ALBANY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MINISTERS</th>
<th>ELDERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason Fulkerson</td>
<td>Doris Neese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classis of Albany</td>
<td>Darleen Westervelt</td>
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<td>Rick Behan</td>
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<td>James Brumm</td>
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# REGIONAL SYNOD OF CANADA

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<tr>
<td>Gail Hughes</td>
<td>John Bassingthwaite</td>
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<td>Classis of British Columbia</td>
<td>Arlene Si</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walter Opmeer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>David Tsai</td>
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# REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FAR WEST

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philip Assink</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carole Barber</td>
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<td>Fabio Sosa</td>
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# REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE FRESHWATER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MINISTERS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard DeBruyne</td>
<td>Lorena Serrano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classis of California</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ned Beadel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juno Smalley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Spence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ELDER</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ELDERS  
Susan Davis  
Eric Moreno  

Classis of Cascades  
MINISTERS  
Jonathon Austin  
Marcus Roskamp  

ELDERS  
Larry VanderLeest  
Mark Van Kommer  

Classis of Central California  
MINISTERS  
Dustin DeVriend  
Jordan Hall  

ELDERS  
Glenn Spyksma  
Benjamin Sweet  

Classis of the City  
MINISTERS  
Tuck Bartholomew  
Jonathan Gundlach  

ELDERS  
Michael Ehrenfried  
Joshua Stamper  

Classis of Rocky Mountains  
MINISTERS  
Eric Carpenter  
Bradley Kautz  

ELDERS  
Joel Kraai  
Harry Ness  

Classis of the Southwest  
MINISTERS  
James Poit  
Randal Wieland  

ELDERS  
June Denny  
Wayne Ribbens  

REGIONAL SYNOD OF  
THE GREAT LAKES  

Judith Nelson  

Classis of Great Lakes City  
MINISTERS  
Christopher DeBlaay  
Andrea DeWard  
Thomas Elenbaas  
Mark Kleinheksel  
Tanner Smith  

ELDERS  
Matt Eling  
Larry Kleymeer  
Walter Rozeboom  
Jerry Slagh  
Mary Stetler  

Classis of Holland  
MINISTERS  
Lindsay Bona  
Kevin Kleinheksel  
David Lantz  
Leigh Van Kempen  

ELDERS  
Jane Dalman  
Lois Maassen  
Sally Tapley  
Edward Zuidema  

Classis of Muskegon  
MINISTERS  
Mark Bush  
Stephen VanderWoude  

ELDERS  
Ronald Morse  
Aileen Redeker  

Classis of Northern Michigan  
MINISTERS  
Frederick Eschenburg  
Thomas Jasperse  

ELDERS  
Bruce Deckinga  
Diane Swan
ROLL OF GENERAL SYNOD

Classis of North Grand Rapids
MINISTERS
Nancy Claus
William Norden

ELDERS
Linda Cline
Margaret Taylor

Classis of Southwest Michigan
MINISTERS
Michael Brinks
Kevin Hart
Jason Zimmer

ELDERS
Vicki Ackerman
Donald Van Landegent
John Medema

Classis of Zeeland
MINISTERS
Audrey Edewaard
Dustyn Keepers
Bryan Kunz
Michael Van Buren
Jeremy Visser

ELDERS
Shirley Berens
Glenn Emmert
Dean Nevenzel
Dale Ringerwole
Thomas Van Kley

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE HEARTLAND

Timothy Breen

Classis of Central Plains
MINISTERS
Randy Blumer
David Henion

ELDERS
David Beukelman
Regina Brannock

Classis of Dakota
MINISTERS
Gary Hegstad
Jared Lee
Carl Van Voorst

ELDERS
Eugene Poelstra
Jerry Schilling
Duane Wolbrink

Classis of East Sioux
MINISTERS
Elizabeth Brown Hardeman
Michael Hardeman
David Van Kley

ELDERS
Mark Bloemendaal
Derek Brower
Brandon Morrow

Classis of Minnesota
MINISTERS
Luke Baehr
Joshua Johnson
Joel Vander Wal

ELDERS
Darold Friese
Randy Landhuis

Classis of Pleasant Prairie
MINISTERS
Kent Landhuis
Brett Vander Berg

ELDERS
Larry Sailer
Bernard Schnell
Classis of West Sioux
MINISTERS
Stephen Breen
Daniel DeVries
Travis Else
Dustin Sperlich

ELDERS
Wendell De Beer
Scott Eldridge
William Noack
Dave Roskam

REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA
Robert Wierenga

Classis of Chicago
MINISTERS
Marjorie Vander Wagen
Steve Young

Classis of Illiana-Florida
MINISTERS
Robert Grysen
Alan Salwei

ELDERS
John Hines
William Nyeholt

Classis of Illinois
MINISTERS
Grant Mulder
Cary Winn

ELDERS
Gary Geerts
Rick Guemmer

Classis of New Thing
MINISTERS
Dennis Colton
Jason DeVries
Aaron Klein

ELDERS
Charles Contreras
Dennis Peters
Glenn Sterrett

Classis of Wisconsin
MINISTERS
Andrew Lickel
Kevin Van Wyk
Bradley Veenendaal

ELDERS
Brad Bruner
Steven Floyd

REGIONAL SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTICS
Christopher Heitkamp

Classis of Delaware-Raritan
MINISTERS
Ryan Nace
David Ruisard

ELDERS
John Lane
Linda Santa Lucia

Classis of Greater Palisades
MINISTERS
Robert Miller
Debbie Rundecker

ELDERS
Patrick Finucane
Rick Vander Wende

Classis of New Brunswick
MINISTERS
Ursula Cargill
David Groeneveld

ELDERS
Ann Hays
Gordon Wich

Classis of Passaic Valley
MINISTERS
Andrew Kadzban
Carolyn Keith

ELDERS
Rosa Funes
Delores Shiver
ROLL OF GENERAL SYNOD

REGIONAL SYNODE OF NEW YORK

Stephen Dambra

Classis of Brooklyn
MINISTER
Melody Meeter

ELDERS
Sheila Friend
Michael Schroder

Classis of Mid-Hudson
MINISTERS
Nickolas Miles
Dianna Smith

ELDERS
Ruth Ellen Nielson
John Young

Classis of Nassau-Suffolk
MINISTERS
James Eastland
Vicky Eastland

ELDERS
David Philips
Donald Spruck

Classis of New York
MINISTERS
Sharon Atkins
Patricia Singletary
Kelvin Spooner

ELDERS
Imeh Akpan
Sheila Moses
Debra Thomas

Classis of Orange
MINISTERS
James O’Connell
Stanley Seagren

ELDERS
Daniel Forger
Peter Newman

Classis of Queens
MINISTERS
Michael Johnson
Marianne Lin

ELDERS
Chung Wei Lee
Sung Su Lee

Classis of Rockland-Westchester
MINISTERS
Donald Hoover
Thomas Johnston

ELDERS
Jeffrey Chu
David Walker

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSORS

Carol Bechtel
James Brownson
Jaeseung Cha
Chad Pierce
Allan Janssen
CORRESPONDING DELEGATES

INTERIM GENERAL SECRETARY
Donald Poest

GENERAL SECRETARY EMERITUS
Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

COMMITTEE OF REFERENCE
Ned Beadel
Charles Contreras
Gary De Witt
Lee DeYoung
Andrea DiPace
Stephanie Doeschot
Anna Jackson
James Kuplic
David Landegent
Benjamin Lin
Eric Moreno
James Nakakihara
Sharon Palms
Barbara Pimentel
Erma Rolle
George Rounds
Andres Serrano
Kenneth Shepard
Willie Si
Cora Taitt
Wai Choon Tan
Michael Van Buren
Clare VanDis
Nancy Van Heerde
Cynthia Veldheer DeYoung

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Scott DeLeeuw
Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education
Bethany Popkes
Commission on Christian Unity
Lisa Vander Wal
Commission on Christian Worship
Sarah Palsma
Commission on Church Order
Larry Schuyler
Commission on Judicial Business
Paul Janssen
Commission on History
James Brumm
Commission on Nominations
Carl Boersma
Commission on Race and Ethnicity  
Karla Camacho  
Commission on Theology  
Laird Edman  
Commission for Women  
Susan Hetrick  

ADDITIONAL COMMISSION DELEGATES  
Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education  
Anne Elzinga  
Commission for Women  
Suzanne Katerberg  

REGIONAL SYNOD EXECUTIVES  
Regional Synod of Albany  
Abigail Norton-Levering  
Regional Synod of Canada  
Marijke Strong  
Regional Synod of the Far West  
Bruce Bugbee  
Regional Synod of the Great Lakes  
John Messer  
Regional Synod of the Heartland  
Thomas Smith  
Regional Synod of Mid-America  
Wayne Van Regenmorter  
Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics  
Stephen Eckert  
Regional Synod of New York  
Amy Nyland  

REGIONAL SYNOD WOMEN  
Regional Synod of Albany  
Megan Hodgin  
Regional Synod of Canada  
Florence Dekker  
Daysi Simbana  
Regional Synod of the Far West  
Alexa Caballero  
Karla Camacho  
Regional Synod of the Great Lakes  
Jami Alferink  
Laurel Kempkers  
Regional Synod of the Heartland  
Debra Rensink  
Heather Van Leeuwen  
Regional Synod of Mid-America  
Laureen Guemmer  
Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics  
Norma Coleman-James  
Aleta Shepler
Regional Synod of New York
Clare Houston
Susanah Wade

REGIONAL SYNOD YOUTH
Regional Synod of Albany
Jacob Ettkin
Regional Synod of Canada
Lee Moltzahn
Regional Synod of the Great Lakes
Karsten Weeldreyer
Regional Synod of Mid-America
Marah Phillips
Regional Synod of New York
Emily Landsman

GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSOR
Cornelis Kors

ECUMENICAL DELEGATES
Christian Reformed Church in North America
James Payton
United Church of Christ
James Moos
Karen Georgia Thompson
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Robina Winbush
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Kathryn Lohre
Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger
Mai-aiki Kadade

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE PEOPLE
General Synod Council Mission Observers
Jeremy and Susan Beebout
Joshua and Erika Bode
Chris and Ren Briggs
Olivia Holt and Phil Iekel
John and Lynn Hubers
Tom and Aichatou Johnson
Bradley Kautz
Jennifer Lucking
Bob and Kelly Oliveira
J.P. Sundararajan
Richard and Donna Swart
Chuck and Jean Van Engen
Mark and Miriam Vellinga
Joshua and Nicoly Vis
Marlin and Sally Vis
Lois Wanyoike
Global Mission Guests
*Presbyterian Church in Manaus, Brazil*
Pr. Jose Joao de Moreira Mesquita and Lucilla de Sa Mesquita
Pr. Francisco Chaves dos Santos and Maria Losangela Barreto Garcia Santos
Pr. Djard Cadais de Morael and Maria do Rosario Silva de Moraes
Thiago Tavares de Oliveira and Lia Raquel Barbosa Dantas

Parliamentarian
Russell Paarlberg

Seminarian Seminar Leader
Tim TenClay

SEMINARIAN SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

**New Brunswick Theological Seminary**
Vivian Campbell
Thomas Giglio
Cheryl Miller

**Western Theological Seminary**
Anna Gordon
Laurel Pals
Kim Pavlovich
Trey Tirpak

**Ministerial Formation Certification Agency**
Rodrigo Cano
Mark Westerfield
The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America convened in its two hundred twelfth regular session on the campus of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Thursday, the seventh of June, A.D. two thousand eighteen, at 3:00 p.m., Eastern time.

FORMATION OF THE SYNOD

OPENING OF SYNOD

The General Synod was opened by president Lee DeYoung on Thursday afternoon, June 7, 2018. The president introduced the vice president, parliamentarian, general secretary, and meeting recorders and recognized others in attendance as corresponding delegates or seminarian seminar attendees. The president presented a brief orientation regarding how the General Synod will conduct its business. The parliamentarian explained parliamentary procedures to the General Synod. The president explained how reports are presented to the General Synod. The general secretary explained certain procedural matters, including ways to access the General Synod workbook electronically and the method of reviewing the journal of actions.

On Friday, June 8, 2018, Dr. Cheryl Brandsen, Calvin College provost, welcomed the delegates and other General Synod attendees.

WORSHIP

On Thursday evening (June 7, 2018), the delegates gathered at 7:00 p.m. in the Chapel on the campus of Calvin College for a joint opening worship service with synod delegates from the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The service was led by a worship team composed of Sheryl Beerens, Lydia Brown, Miriah Brown, Tabitha Brown, Rev. Wayne Coleman, Miranda Craig, Rev. Jonathan Gabhart, Rob Housman, Melissa Johnson, Lana Anne Langelier, Ahava Lefabre, Johanna Mason, Rev. Liz Testa, and Angela Wagenveld. The Word was preached by Rev. Jenna Brandsen and Rev. Jon Brown. The sacrament of communion was shared, with Revs. Brandsen and Brown serving as co-celebrants. An offering was received for RCA/CRC Disability Concerns to support the full participation of people with disabilities in learning communities hosted by RCA/CRC Disability Concerns.

In addition to the joint opening worship celebration, delegates worshipped in area churches on Sunday morning (June 10, 2018) and participated in a joint Sunday evening worship service with synod delegates from the Christian Reformed Church in North America at the DeVos Center for Arts and Worship at Grand Rapids Christian High School. The Sunday evening service was led by a worship team composed of Andy Bast, Anna Gabhart, Rev. Jonathan Gabhart, Rev. Andy Kadzban, Anna Langholz, Rev. Noah Livingston, Johanna Mason, and Jeremy Simpson. Rev. Ruth Boven served as liturgist, Lee DeYoung led the pastoral prayer, Dr. Michelle Loyd-Paige offered praise dance, and Susanah Wade read Scripture. The Word was preached by Dr. A.K. Lama. The sacrament of communion was shared, with Rev. Dr. Carol Bechel and Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary serving as co-celebrants. An offering was received for the newly launched Arabic-language media ministry of Back to God Ministries International (CRC), Words of Hope (RCA), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt—Synod of the Nile.
On Friday, Saturday, and Monday mornings, worship was conducted jointly with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. On Friday morning (June 8, 2018), the Word was preached by Rev. Anna Jackson; other worship leaders included Evelyn Bennally, Lee DeYoung, Anna Gabhart, Rev. Jonathan Gabhart, Rev. Noah McLaren, and Rev. John Tenyenhuis. On Saturday morning (June 9, 2018), the Word was preached by Rev. Tom Bonhof; other worship leaders included Leonor Caballero, Lee DeYoung, Anna Gabhart, Rev. Jonathan Gabhart, Rev. Andy Kadzban, Rev. Noah McLaren, and Rev. Dr. Patricia Singletary. On Monday morning (June 11, 2018), worship leaders included Rev. Jenna Brandsen, Lee DeYoung, Anna Gabhart, Rev. Jonathan Gabhart, Rev. Noah McLaren, Linda Miles, Rev. Nick Miles, and Rev. Dayna Vreeken.

The closing worship service was held at the Chapel on the campus of Calvin College on Tuesday, June 12, 2018. It began at 10:30 a.m. and included the installation of the Rev. Eddy Alemán as general secretary and James Nakakihara and the Rev. EJ de Waard as General Synod president and vice president, respectively. The Word was preached by the Rev. Ken Korver. The sacrament of communion was celebrated, with the Rev. Eddy Alemán and James Nakakihara (newly installed general secretary and General Synod president, respectively) serving as co-celebrants.

Participants in the portion of the service for the installation of the Rev. Eddy Alemán as general secretary included Lee De Young, Rev. Dr. Jill Ver Steeg, Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom-Grier, Rev. Dr. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Rev. Don Poest, Kathryn M. Lohre (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), Carlos Malavé (Christian Churches Together), Dr. Jim Payton (Christian Reformed Church in North America), Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson (United Church of Christ), Dr. Monica Schaap Pierce, Rev. Dr. Andrés Serrano, and Lorena Serrano.


An offering was received for RCA Global Mission’s strategic impact area in Brazil to support the efforts of the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPManaus) to plant churches and prepare missionaries to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to people living both in the city of Manaus and along the Amazon River. Closing prayer was offered by the Rev. Andy Bossardet.

Meetings of the General Synod were opened and closed with prayer by the following persons:

**Thursday, June 7**
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Lee DeYoung, General Synod president
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — Marianne Lin, Classis of Queens

**Friday, June 8**
- Morning Closing Prayer — Mark Kleinheksel, Classis of Great Lakes City
- Afternoon Opening Prayer — Terry DeYoung, GSC coordinator for Disability Concerns
- Afternoon Closing Prayer — Lindsay Bona, Classis of Holland
Evening Opening Prayer — R. Scott Greenway, president, Christian Reformed Church in North America
Evening Closing Prayer — Carol Bechtel, General Synod professor

Saturday, June 9
Afternoon Opening Prayer — Bradley Lewis, Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
Afternoon Closing Prayer — Marjorie Vander Wagen, Classis of Chicago
Evening Opening Prayer — Stephen VanderWoude, Classis of Muskegon
Evening Closing Prayer — Donald Bruggink, general editor, RCA Historical Series

Sunday, June 10
General Synod participants worshipped in area churches
Evening Closing Prayer — Ruth Boven, pastor, LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Monday, June 11
Morning Closing Prayer — Thomas Smith, Regional Synod of the Heartland
Afternoon Opening Prayer — Suzanne Katerberg, Commission for Women
Afternoon Closing Prayer — Juan Rivera, Classis of the Americas
Evening Opening Prayer — Laurel Pals, seminarian seminar participant
Evening Closing Prayer — Karla Camacho, Commission on Race and Ethnicity

PRIVILEGE OF THE FLOOR

So that the parliamentarian, speakers who have received official invitations from the General Synod Council, and General Synod Council executive staff may respond to questions for clarification and participate as requested by the General Synod president in presentations to the General Synod and in other activities that appear on the agenda, the General Synod:

VOTED: To grant privilege of the floor to the parliamentarian, speakers who have received official invitations from the General Synod Council, and General Synod Council executive staff.

SEATING OF DELEGATES/DECLARATION REGARDING QUORUM

The general secretary informed the synod that there were no irregularities and all delegates could be seated. The possible membership of General Synod was 240, with enrolled membership at 234, therefore, a quorum was declared present.

MINUTES AND JOURNAL/TELLERS

The Acts and Proceedings of the 211th regular session of the General Synod were read by title.

VOTED: To approve the minutes of the meeting of June 8–13, 2017, the procedure for approving the journal of actions.
The Rules of Order were read by title, and it was indicated that copies were available online.

Cora Taitt and Clare VanDis (Committee of Reference members), Carl Boersma (corresponding delegate from the Commission on Nominations), and all Seminarian Seminar participants were appointed as tellers.

**APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND SCHEDULE**


In addition to the prescribed agenda, the schedule provided for the following presentations, forums, programs, or activities:

- On the evening of Friday, June 9, the General Synod heard brief remarks from Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, RCA general secretary emeritus, regarding the recent deaths of the Rev. Peter Borgdorff, executive director emeritus of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Rev. Edwin Mulder, general secretary emeritus of the Reformed Church in America.
- On the evening of Friday, June 9, the General Synod also heard presentations regarding joint ventures between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America regarding joint endeavors in the areas of church multiplication, refugee assistance, disaster relief, and women’s ministries. Leaders, presenters and other participants included Carol Bremer-Bennett, Emily Brink, Scott Engelsman, Rev. Kate Kooyman, Rev. Denise Posie, Kellie Scholma, Rev. Kevin Schutte, Stephanie Sodersstrom, Rev. Liz Testa, Rev. Randy Weener, and Keith Young.

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

The following delegates were designated by the president to serve on advisory committees that considered specific business on church order and governance as well as overtures and new business.

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CHURCH ORDER AND GOVERNANCE**

*Moderator:* Travis Else (Classis of West Sioux)

*Vice Moderator:* Jim Poit (Classis of the Southwest)

*Ministers:*
Carol Bechtel (General Synod professor)
Dennis Colton (Classis of New Thing)
Elizabeth Brown Hardeman (Classis of East Sioux)
Patricia Singletary (Classis of New York)
David Tsai (Classis of British Columbia)

*Elders:*
Sung Su Lee (Classis of Queens)
Lorena Serrano (Classis of the Americas)
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS

Moderator: Philip Assink (Regional Synod of the Far West)
Vice Moderator: Sheila Moses (Classis of New York)

Ministers:
Timothy Breen (Classis of East Sioux)
Nancy Claus (Classis of North Grand Rapids)
Robert Hoffman (Classis of Schoharie)
Chad Pierce (General Synod Professor)

Elders:
Eric Moreno (Classis of California)
Robert Wierenga (Regional Synod of Mid-America)
June Denny (Classis of Southwest)

MODERATORS OF THE ALL-SYNOD ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The following delegates to the General Synod served as moderators of the all-synod advisory committees that met jointly with delegates to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Twelve individuals from the Christian Reformed Church in North America delegation also served as moderators.

Tuck Bartholomew
Ned Beadel
Regina Brannock
Norma Coleman-James
EJ de Waard
Andrea DeWard
Audrey Edewaard
Michael Hardeman
Susan Hetrick
Dustyn Keepers
Noah Livingston
Sarah Palsma
Bethany Popkes
Marcus Roskamp
Glenn Spyksma
Sally Tapley

DISPOSITION OF COMMUNICATIONS

The Office of the General Synod received no communications that were directed to or intended for the General Synod.

PRESENTATION AND REFERRAL OF NEW BUSINESS

One item of new business was presented to and received by the General Synod and then referred to the Committee of Reference for further referral or disposition as appropriate. The new business was as follows:

The City Classis requests the General Synod to transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants and all ministers and candidates under care from the Regional Synod of the Far West to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics by a date suitable to all parties but no later than December 31, 2018.
Reasons given for submission of the foregoing as new business were:

1. This matter arises from very recent actions of the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) in April and May of 2018 that attempt to disband City Classis.
2. The reason for the RSFW’s actions against City Classis lie solely in the RSFW’s disagreement with a “Framework for Life Together” statement City Classis adopted by a large consensus on March 1, 2018, wherein the Classis stated its intention to continue to live and minister together in unity despite significant differences in pastoral approach to ministry among LGBT persons.
3. The RSFW has placed City Classis on a trajectory to be disbanded by the fall of 2018 and has been notified by several City Classis churches that such action would likely force many churches to leave the RCA—indeed, forcing churches to leave the RCA appears to be the very intent of the RSFW plan.
4. The RSFW Executive Team has rebuffed any attempt to discuss supporting the transfer of City Classis to another regional synod and is actively attempting to keep the broader RSFW delegates from having that discussion.
5. City Classis’ need is urgent in that, once it is disbanded, it will be difficult or impossible to present a transfer request to a later General Synod.
6. City Classis believes it would be welcomed by the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics under these circumstances.
7. Transfer of a classis to another regional synod is within the exclusive authority of the General Synod and cannot be sought via judicial complaint—thus a direct petition to the General Synod is the only avenue available to City Classis.

The item was accepted as new business and referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business. For additional information regarding this item of new business, see OV 18-26 on pages 154–155].
I must begin this morning by expressing my gratitude for the privilege of this past year. It has been a chapter in my life that I never expected, but one for which I will always be grateful. Your encouragement and affirmations, and especially your prayers, have sustained me in wonderful ways.

By calling and gifting I am a pastor, and for 38 years I was privileged to serve in that role in Brunswick, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. Even when I was elected vice president of General Synod in 2009, I saw myself more as a pastor to the church at large than as a denominational leader. So once I became confident God was calling me to this role as interim general secretary, I made the assumption I was being called to pastor the RCA for a short season.

Soon after starting, it became apparent that I was there because the staff needed someone to be a pastor among them. The first six months saw wave after wave of unexpected loss and grief among our staff, with all of the emotions that come with it. Tony Campbell, Sara Neevel, and Eddie Oliveira were the most prominent deaths, but others lost parents, and still others faced the uncertainties that come with a diagnosis of cancer. Staff colleagues resigned to accept positions elsewhere, and while we celebrated with them, we also grieved their leaving. It was not an easy time.

The second half of my year has seen more of a focus on leading the denomination forward. It is well-known to many that as the Reformed Church in America reaches its 390th birthday we are at a critical stage. Our survival has been seriously questioned by many.

So let me tell you what I hope to do this morning. The late Max De Pree wrote that a leader’s first job is to define reality, and the last job is to say thanks. I will define reality in the RCA as I see it, which will include a summary of the binational Listening Together discussions. I will propose a way forward for us. I will ask you to join me in thanking staff, and I will end with a call to remember who—and whose—we are.

**Reality As I See It**

I obviously have neither the time nor the expertise to define the full reality of the RCA. But I would like to highlight a few aspects, with more time spent on some.

We are a relatively small and insignificant—but not unloved—part of the larger body of Christ. Yet we continue to make positive impact on the communities and neighborhoods and villages in which we’ve been planted. Throughout our days together here, you will hear stories and watch videos that serve to illustrate this impact. Enjoy them, but realize these are but samples of a much larger impact. God continues to work through the Reformed Church in America, at times because of, and at times in spite of, who we are.

We are a denomination that often works well with others. Depending on your geographical location and your natural affinities, this cooperation may be with a Formula of Agreement partner, it may be with a sister church like the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), or it may be with a neighboring church where there are some natural connections built up through the years. This joint synod with the CRCNA is an example of this cooperation.
Unfortunately, this brings up another reality I have observed: We tend to be suspicious and fearful of those we don’t know well and who might not be as “pure” as we pridefully think we are. We like to be right, and we like to point out where others are wrong. This is to our shame.

A much more positive and historic part of our reality is that we have the opportunity to make history this week. If Eddy Alemán is selected and installed as our next general secretary, we will be the first denomination in North America led by a person who is Hispanic, and he will be the first Canadian citizen to lead us. Those are significant steps for this denomination with Dutch roots and ones I enthusiastically applaud! What Eddy will need from us, the church, is plenty of prayer support, an abundance of grace, time to fill in the staff vacancies that we intentionally left for the new general secretary, and strong trust and encouragement as he leads the RCA forward. God has called and gifted Eddy to be a leader, so please let him lead!

Now permit me to move on to the first reality that must be addressed more fully: that of our contrasting views on human sexuality and how those views get implemented within our polity. Last year, then-general secretary Tom De Vries proposed a denomination-wide discussion on what it means to live in covenant with each other. Thankfully, many participated in various ways, though some chose to abstain. Some on both ends of the spectrum were convinced the listening guide was stacked in favor of the other side. Some were frustrated that we talked about covenant rather than sexuality. Some thought we talked too much, others too little. But almost 900 responses did come in, and I have read them all. Let me share some general conclusions, and then some specific quotes.

There were strong overall respect and gratitude for the process. One consistent response from those who were engaged with someone of a differing viewpoint is that this increased their respect and honor for those with opposing views. At the same time, while respect increased, minds were not changed. People left with the same viewpoint with which they came.

There was strong sentiment that a decision must be reached or a way forward must be found, and I agree. This is paralyzing us and keeping us from the mission on which we should be focusing. To not decide is to decide, and the resulting exodus of churches will cripple us.

It probably won’t surprise many to know that we have significantly differing hermeneutics. While there is strong commitment to the Bible across the board, how that Bible gets read, interpreted, and applied varies greatly, without much grace for those who differ from us.

There also is a significant disagreement on where the power lies in our differences: Is it our polity, or our standards and statements? Is it our structure, or our commitment to a historic view of Scripture? Because we disagree fundamentally here, we often find ourselves stuck.

“Unity, purity, and peace” are words that are verbalized often—indeed, they are part of our liturgy for welcoming new members and ordaining ministers, elders, and deacons. But my observation is that if unity, purity, and peace are the three legs of a stool, we have a problem, because not everyone sees these three legs as being of equal length. Different parts of the denomination emphasize one leg much more than the others.

Some ask why this issue is so much more divisive than others we have faced. They ask, “We’ve dealt with differences in the past and always solved them; why can’t we do so now?” I would offer two responses. First, the political and social climate is much more
divisive today, and to our shame, it seems as though the cultural climate is influencing the
church more than we are influencing it. Second, I’m not sure we have ever solved some of
these underlying issues. We’ve just been able to focus elsewhere until another issue arose.
It’s time to face this reality.

Now let me share a series of quotes from the responses themselves. This will give a sort of
cross-section of how the church feels:

“To focus on our survival as a church is, I believe, an indication of the problem. It’s not
about us, but about God’s dream.”

“How does my defending this position compare to all else Jesus asks of me? Is this really
the most important thing that I am asked to do in obedience and service to God?”

“Unity does not equal uniformity.”

“Simply put, I’m staying … living into the covenant love God has expressed to me.”

“Where does this sin stand in relation to others we tolerate so easily?”

“Instead of focusing on divisions and disagreements, I will seek to understand how people
are bearing fruit in ministry.”

“Why do we think we can be united in mission while having fundamental differences on
God’s Word that sends us into mission?”

“This topic has distracted this denomination on and off for more than two decades. It has
hijacked the work of General Synod, created conflict in classes, pitted brother against
brother and sister against sister, etc. It’s time to separate for the glory of God.”

“My fear is that a split will lead to dividing congregations.”

“I’m willing to live in the tension. As a foot I’m willing to let the hand be the hand and the
lungs be the lungs and the eyes be the eyes, all to the glory of God.”

“This is an important issue of hospitality, justice, and kindness.”

“Part of showing up means speaking the truth the Spirit seems to be revealing to me and
part of showing up means listening to the truths that others are hearing from God. And then
continuing to wrestle these truths together.”

In just a moment, I will suggest a way forward, but first a few reflections on this topic. One
of the reasons homosexuality seems so easy to condemn is because it’s something with
which most of us never struggle. It’s easy to be a bit self-righteous here. We would be wise
to adopt the attitude of Tony Campolo, who said, “Most people say, ‘Love the sinner, hate
the sin.’ I say, ‘Love the sinner, hate my own sins.’” We would do well to walk together, all
in need of God’s grace. Too often we operate out of fear, distancing ourselves from those
whose sexuality is different from ours. Yet 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love, but
perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not
reached perfection in love.” Until we love with the perfect love of Jesus, we all fall short.

A second reality that must be addressed is that of our polity. Totally apart from the ways it
has been used or misused to achieve desired ends on controversial matters, it is not serving
us well. Written for an agrarian age, it does not consider how we can communicate and make decisions using technology today. Some of its terminology is antiquated for those not growing up in a church world. And most serious to me is the glaring lack of alignment. We have a 15-year goal, Transformed & Transforming, which very intentionally was derived from an extended, bottom-up discernment process. Yet as we try to implement it, there is no alignment between classes, regional synods, and General Synod staff. We have commissions and agencies that are filled with passionate and gifted people, but any alignment with denominational goals is accidental if it happens at all. There are affinity groups like Room for All and Gospel Alliance that have significant influence, but no place at the table.

As I was considering how to propose a solution to this, keeping in mind the seeming roadblock of the human sexuality question, the Holy Spirit seemed to be doing some alignment work ahead of me. First, when the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) met, they committed to working on a new day for themselves in spite of their significant disagreements. These eight regional synod leaders sent a pastoral letter to the church and then met with the General Synod Council. At that latter meeting, they shared with us their sense of current realities, widely divergent as they were. They shared their sense of our default future—that if we do nothing to address our current divisions, within two to five years, so many churches, classes, and even regions will have left the RCA that it would create “an organizational, ecclesiological, and economic crisis for the remaining churches and mission partners.” And they called for a start on a radical new vision and action. Without this, we will have a potential implosion impacting everyone from retirees to church planters, missionaries to church camp directors, insurance programs to the Church Growth Fund. This is urgent!

Shortly after and independent of the COSE meeting, General Synod president Lee DeYoung brought together a group of leaders from Room for All and the Gospel Alliance. In spite of the deep theological differences, honor and respect were shown, repentance happened, a deep desire was expressed to find a way to stay together as one denomination, and consensus was reached that a new polity might have to be designed that could allow for divergent camps under one big tent—with a common commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ and to Scripture and the standards, and a common agreement on programs, such as insurance, retirement, support of global missions, and the Church Growth Fund—while allowing each of the two or three camps to handle their own internal matters, such as discipline.

To summarize the current state of the RCA, I quote the words of researcher Dr. Brené Brown:

> The world feels high lonesome and heartbroken to me right now. We’ve sorted ourselves into factions based on our politics and ideology. We’ve turned away from one another toward blame and rage. We’re lonely and untethered. And scared. So damn scared.

But rather than coming together and sharing our experiences through song and story, we’re screaming at one another from further and further away. Rather than dancing and praying together, we’re running from one another. Rather than pitching wild and innovative new ideas that could potentially change everything, we’re staying quiet and small in our bunkers and loud in our echo chambers. … I can only conclude our world is in a collective spiritual crisis (*Braving the Wilderness*, p. 45).

Dr. Brown doesn’t know us … but she knows us.
I am well aware that for an interim general secretary to propose a radical new way forward may cause strong emotional reactions from some. I am also aware that to not do so will cause similar strong emotional reactions from others. Therefore, with all this as background, with hope for the future yet sensing the urgency of the moment, with input from the Council of Synod Executives and with the support of both the General Synod Council and general secretary candidate Eddy Alemán, I propose the following:

Proposal 1
To appoint a 2020 Vision Group to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

- Staying together.
- Radical reconstituting and reorganization.
- Graceful separation.

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to identify the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are “for” rather than by what they are “against” and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that honor and affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.

The vision group will consist of ten to twelve members named by the general secretary in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary will serve as an ex-officio member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed $250,000.

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to General Synod 2020.

Tod Bolsinger, author of Canoeing the Mountains, spoke at the all-Canada leadership event in April. There he reminded us that people don’t resist change; they resist loss. I am well aware that my proposal could result in the loss of the way in which we have always done business in the RCA. That loss is real and must be taken seriously. But to not be open to change is to go the route of too many churches that you and I have watched die because of an unwillingness to adjust as they moved into their future. Remember the warning—and promise—of Jesus in John 12:24: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Should this proposal be affirmed, what do we as a denomination do in the meantime? We commit ourselves to prayer! If we find a way to honor the bride of Christ without tearing her apart, we will do so only because God has led us through. Let’s be bold enough and humble enough to seek his favor! As we do this, I am confident he will show us a good way forward.

What else do we do? We call a timeout. We swallow a chill pill. We take a nap. To do so is not to “kick the can down the road once again,” as so many fear. It is to trust that the Spirit will work through this process to lead us to a new day. For over 40 years, this
denomination, through reports, votes, statements, etc., has on paper consistently held that while we are to be welcoming of all people, God’s intent for marriage is one man, one woman. And the margins have been such that it is naïve to think this view will be changed within our structure in the next few years. At the same time, some have felt compelled by the Spirit to act otherwise as they minister to those God gives them, convinced that our polity provides such freedom. Still others believe this simply is not a matter over which we should divide. To continue as we are without finding a new way is to ignore the warning of Galatians 5:15: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (NIV 1978). And to act hastily without counting all of the costs and impacts on so many ministries is to be equally foolish. Let’s stop the overtures, let’s refrain from judicial charges, let’s pause from actions that contradict the consistent stated belief, let’s stop the maneuvering, and let’s allow the Holy Spirit to show us a new way forward through the work of the proposed vision group. When you’re tempted to disregard this, go take a nap! And do so with a confident trust that while you are resting, God will still be working. After all, he loves his church more than we do!

And when you wake from that nap, refocus on the mission of Transformed & Transforming. Go mentor a new disciple. Go train up a new leader. Go start a new mission that improves your church. Honestly listen to someone whose views differ from yours. Intentionally cross a cultural or racial barrier. Improve the accessibility of your church. Take a teenager to lunch and listen to their dreams. Help plant a church. Go on a mission trip. Find out where God is working and follow him in mission. Let’s spend these next two years doing what God is calling us all to do together. Let’s be about the business of Transformed & Transforming.

As we wait for the vision group to do its work, let’s also practice what we’re called to in some Scriptures that often go overlooked. Proverbs 20:3: “It is honorable to refrain from strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.” Romans 12:10: “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (NIV). Galatians 6:2-4: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work.” You get the idea. God cares about our relationships as much as he cares about our “rightness.” Let’s work out our own salvation and let God work on those with whom we may disagree. There’s always the slight possibility that they are right and we are wrong!

Saying Thanks

Now I come to the enjoyable—and emotional—part for me, and that is the expressing of gratitude. First, I honor my wife, Cathy, who has made the biggest sacrifice in this year where we have mostly been apart. Would you help me in thanking her?

Let me ask the staff to begin gathering on stage. I shared earlier the emotionally draining year this has been for them. And there have been more recent losses, including the death of Willie Rich, and more recent health difficulties. On top of that, those working in the Grand Rapids office have had a terrible physical work environment for months. The building was completely remodeled, repainted, and recarpeted while we were working in it. Offices moved from week to week, so staff worked out of boxes—at times with obnoxious smells, often with pounding noises, and occasionally with leaky roofs. And they did it with a great attitude, cheery smiles, focused attention, and a willingness to set their own personal viewpoints aside on issues like human sexuality so that they could serve the whole church. They work long hours and travel many miles, sacrificing family events at times, all too often without being properly thanked. So I’m asking each staff member here to briefly state their name and job, and then I’m asking you to thank and honor them.
Let me wrap this up with a story, a Scripture, and a picture. In 1999, our family moved out of a parsonage and into a home that we had built for ourselves. When spring came, I had to put in a lawn. So with the help of a friend, I got the dirt ready, spread the grass seed, covered it with straw, unrolled the hoses, and turned on the sprinklers. It grew quite well, with one problem. The straw I used was not very clean; it had weeds in it, and they had seeds, and soon, in the midst of my new lawn, there were a lot more weeds than I wanted. I asked an old-timer at church what I should do about that, and he gave me advice I’ve never forgotten because it applies to so much more than green lawns. Here is his wisdom: “Don’t worry about the weeds. Just feed the grass, and eventually the grass will choke out the weeds.” I did, and he was right.

Friends, we as a denomination have spent too much time and energy on worrying about weeds. It’s time to get refocused on feeding the grass! This leads me to a parable of Jesus recorded in Matthew 13:24-30 that has stayed on my mind this entire year. It’s the story of a farmer who sowed his wheat crop, only to have an enemy sneak into the field at night and sow weeds on that same ground. When the workers realize that weeds are growing amongst the wheat, they ask for permission to go pull up the weeds. The farmer denies them permission, saying that in pulling up the weeds, they will damage the wheat as well. “Wait,” he says, “until harvest. Then I’ll handle it.” Years ago, we returned from a family vacation to discover a lot of weeds growing in our flower beds. Cathy set about cleaning them out. Our son Kevin, who was about two at the time, wanted to help. So when Cathy ran into the house for a moment, he saw his chance. She came back out to find a neat pile that he had pulled, except there were more flowers that had not yet bloomed than there were weeds. His intentions were good, but his knowledge was lacking. Friends, let’s follow Jesus’s advice and let God determine who the weeds are in his good timing. Our intentions may be far better than our knowledge. If we run ahead in our zeal, we may do much more damage than good.

I close with the one picture I brought with me from home to decorate my office. It’s of me and my granddaughter Riley, who is two months old at the time of the picture, smiling at each other. I’m smiling at her not because of anything she has done in her young age to earn my favor, but simply because she is mine. And I like to believe she’s smiling at me not because she has this great intellectual understanding of our relationship, but because she intuitively knows she is safe and loved in my arms. What you need to know is that I brought that picture with me not primarily to show off my granddaughter or to have a conversational piece. I brought it for myself, as a visible reminder that no matter how well or poorly I did in this job as interim general secretary, I have a heavenly Father who loves me and holds me safe in his hands. I am his beloved, not based on who I am or what I’ve done or whether I’m on the right or wrong side of a decision. I am his beloved because of who he is! And so are you! So is the Reformed Church in America! That’s why I have hope!

It doesn’t matter whether we’re progressive or conservative; straight or gay; young or old; male or female; African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, or Asian. If we have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, together we are God’s beloved. In our casual interactions and in our vigorous debates, in our joint worship services and in our private prayers, may that be the way we treat ourselves and treat each other this week. Thank you.

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, Proposal 1 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See p. 152 for the resulting recommendation, OV 18-23.
A Time of Transition

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, the apostle Paul writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction.”

In verses 10-11, Paul adds, “On [the Lord] we have set our hope ... as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

These past two years have been a time of major transition for the RCA. Last June, Tom De Vries concluded his service as our fifth general secretary to become the new president of the Willow Creek Association.

Just 33 days later, we were shaken by the sudden passing of Tony Campbell, the RCA’s associate general secretary and director of mission engagement. And as the search for the next general secretary was proceeding, we entered into a yearlong denomination-wide discussion about covenant and the RCA’s future.

Sometimes as I pondered weighty concerns like these, I’d struggle to imagine how such challenges might be resolved. Doing so seemed clearly beyond my control. Yet, to my surprise, as the list of concerns kept growing longer, I felt a sense of peaceful serenity. My initial reaction to that was, “What a crazy response to such a litany of challenges!” But a still, small voice calmly countered with the awareness that the Lord was truly present—that many throughout our denomination and around the world were fervently praying! When God calls, God always provides. What a privilege it’s been for me to experience this call and (amid so much uncertainty affecting the RCA) to see God provide!

So, from the bottom of my heart, I am here today to thank God and so many across the RCA who have been persistently praying for the Lord’s guidance and provision. That includes Jonathan Brownson and John Ornee, who have labored diligently to organize this year’s prayer coverage before and during General Synod. I’m indebted to the congregations and assemblies I’ve visited this past year who have laid hands on me and interceded on my behalf and for the RCA.

I am so grateful for the sacrificial support and understanding of my family. I’m especially grateful to my wife, Sheri, for her forbearance during the more than a hundred nights I’ve been away from home this past year in my travels. I’m thankful for the cooperation of my Words of Hope colleagues and board, who have graciously afforded me the needed time for my RCA responsibilities. I appreciate the support and understanding of my pastor, Mark Kleinheksel, who happens to be a classis delegate to this General Synod, and to my home congregation, Hager Park Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

I thank God for the fellowship and close friendship of my predecessor as president, Dan Gillett, and my successor as vice president, James Nakakihara. Each has been a source of inspiration, valued counsel, prayer support, and constant encouragement. And it’s been inspiring to serve alongside our gifted staff, who have persevered together through so much!

God has richly blessed the RCA through interim general secretary Don Poest’s pastoral
devotion to our staff and others during times of personal anxiety and loss. Thank you so much, Don, for setting aside a year of your retirement to faithfully respond to this call on your life!

Context

The experiences of these past two years have deepened my appreciation for the thoughtful design of the RCA’s governance. As described in the Book of Church Order (BCO), “The president of the General Synod performs a listening function, seeking to discern the concerns and aspirations of our churches and ascertain the gifts and needs of the world through the RCA mission program.”

Each year’s General Synod selects one of its regular delegates to embark on a three-year journey of intentional observation and discernment—to systematically deepen and enlarge his or her awareness of the breadth and diversity of this 390-year-old denomination. Each new officer brings his or her unique life experience to this prescribed listening function, which culminates in the annual report you’re hearing now.

This year’s report comes from an elder who has been an active member of the same western Michigan congregation since 1982. (I know, that dates back before some of you were even born!) Uniquely, much of my life experience centers around 33 years of full-time service as the primary international liaison for Words of Hope—an RCA-rooted ministry that helps indigenous global partners use media to extend the impact of their regional gospel outreach ministries.

In that capacity, I’ve been privileged to cultivate ongoing working relationships with indigenous Christian leaders in various parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Some of my closest friendships and professional relationships are with evangelical pastors, ministry founders, and elected leaders of indigenous denominations from Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, independent, and Pentecostal traditions. Three of my global colleagues are here with us today: Rev. Mai-aiki Kadade, president of the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger; Dr. Ajoy Kumar Lama, South Asia director of Words of Hope and the CRC’s Back to God Ministries International; and a third who, for security reasons, should not appear publicly on camera.

In the months following the 2016 General Synod, I visited six of our regional synods as vice president, and I’ve visited all eight regional synods during this past year as president. I served on the general secretary search committee and participated in events with members of our Hispanic Council, our African American Black Council, and our Native American/First Nations congregations.

I’ve represented the RCA at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s “Reformation 500” commemoration in Washington, D.C., the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, and the third international gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Bogotá, Colombia.

I’m grateful for the opportunity to have visited RCA global missionaries Tom and Aïchatou Johnson and Jeremy and Susan Beebout in Niamey, Niger (West Africa), and David and Char Alexander in Tainan, Taiwan.

In my past two years as a General Synod officer, opportunities have arisen to optimize my regular international travel for Words of Hope with RCA-related destinations. These have included visits to Albania, Armenia, Bhutan, Brazil, Colombia, India, Kosovo, Nepal, the
Netherlands, Niger, South Sudan, Taiwan, Togo, Turkey, and Uganda.

In most of these locations, I’ve sought to evaluate how churches are faring in their varied global contexts and look for similarities and contrasts with the Christian environment here in North America. Before sharing a few observations from a 30,000-foot, big-picture, global perspective, I’d like to note three major global trends that are impacting the future of the global church, including the Reformed Church in America.

**Three Global Trends**

1. **More Christians are alive today than ever before.** Exponential growth has occurred in the “Global South” (not Europe and North America). While the Christian population percentage in North America and Europe has declined since 1970, the church has been flourishing in parts of Africa, South America, and Asia. Africa’s growth accelerated dramatically around 1970—shortly after countries gained independence from European colonial powers. Church governance became indigenous, and the stigma of Christianity as a religion imposed by foreign occupiers began to subside. As with the Samaritan woman at the well, localized witnessing boosted response.

   As depicted by this data chart from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity in Hamilton, Massachusetts, in 1970, 57 percent of the world’s Christians lived in the Global North; 43 percent were from the South. Today, the Global South is home to 66 percent of the world’s Christians, compared to 34 percent from the Global North. This is a huge historical shift.

   Earlier this year, Africa surpassed South America as the continent with the largest Christian population:

   - 630 million - Africa
   - 601 million - Latin America
   - 571 million - Europe
   - 388 million - Asia
   - 277 million - North America
   - 29 million - Oceania

2. **Global migration:** The scale of today’s people movements from one continent to another is unprecedented in history. Today, 191 million people are living in a different country from where they were born. By 2025, falling birth rates in the developed world will lead to a net population deficit in some countries. That will be offset by the migration of millions of people (with or without documents) from poorer parts of the world. The United States is home to the largest number of them by far: 38.4 million—20.2 percent of the world’s total. Canada ranks sixth on that list, with 6.1 million of the world’s immigrants—3.2 percent of the world’s total. Immigrant and refugee communities are emerging and growing throughout North America. Many are in the same communities where RCA churches are. They represent a great ministry need and outreach opportunity for our congregations.

3. **Rural to urban:** Since 2005, for the first time in history, the world’s urban population has surpassed the rural. In 1800, 3 percent of the global population
was urban. By 2100, that percentage is expected to swell to 90 percent. This will enormously impact Christian ministry. The kind of rural settings in which many of us were raised are no longer normative. This realization must influence the church’s training, strategic planning, and ministry focus in the years to come.

As we consider the RCA’s future, what insights might we glean from these global trends? Beyond traditions and trappings, which are in part culturally derived characteristics, part of the church’s purpose is to serve as heaven’s embassy to a fallen world—a link between an eternal and immutable God and specific communities and cultures that are ever changing.

The church functions like an electrical cord, solidly plugged into the ultimate power source—God’s unchanging truth—and acting as a conduit of God’s power to ever-changing communities around us. To do that, the church must be firmly planted and connected on both ends. God’s power (attained by prayer and diligent study of God’s Word) is actually transmitted when the church is effectively interacting with people outside its walls. Individual believers and congregations need to regularly connect with God and one another and also establish contact with surrounding communities.

As with normal breathing, we must regularly gather together (inhale) and then scatter out to the world around us (exhale). A pattern of doing only one function while neglecting the other is less than healthy.

**Outreach in a Post-Christian, Post-Denominational Environment**

Globally, many of the places where the church is currently growing are in settings where Christianity seems relatively “new”—not the traditional norm for that culture. Here in the Global North, Christianity is dismissed by some as a fading remnant of our culture’s past. Secularists increasingly view the church as part of the problem, not a fresh solution. Individualism, affluent comfort, and an increasingly secular worldview leaves many feeling self-sufficient and not sensing any pressing need for an unseen God. As Puritan minister Cotton Mather famously noted in his *Ecclesiastical History of New England* in 1702, “Religion begat Prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”

Today, 316 years later, many say that our North American culture is increasingly post-Christian and, among many committed believers, post-denominational.

The number of independent congregations is growing. At the same time, over the past two decades, North American evangelicalism has seen the rise of interdenominational partnerships (or networks, alliances, etc.). The aims and theological perspectives of these voluntary movements vary. But in this communications-rich digital age, the websites, publications, blogs, and conference gatherings of organizations like The Gospel Coalition on the right and publications like *Sojourners* on the left are influencing many who feel affinity with their core values. Christian outreach in the twenty-first century is increasingly focused on relational movements, with diminishing commitment to organizational structures.

**Coping with Our Division**

Within the RCA, some notable affinity groups have arisen during this same period of time. In 2005, following the trial of General Synod professor Norman Kansfield, a nonprofit organization was incorporated in the state of New York under the name “Room for All,” with the mission “to support, educate, and advocate for the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the RCA.”
Early last year, a group of RCA pastors established the “Gospel Alliance.” Its stated purpose is “to engage leaders and communities with the transforming message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make more and stronger disciples.” Alliance distinctives assert that Jesus has declared that human sexuality should be expressed solely in a monogamous, lifelong covenant in which one man and one woman “join body, mind, and soul.” Hundreds of RCA ministers and others have publicly affirmed one or the other of these organizations, reflecting our denomination’s deep theological and hermeneutical disagreement over matters relating to human sexuality.

In light of our yearlong denomination-wide discussion about covenant and the RCA’s future, I felt the Lord’s leading to convene a two-day meeting between representatives of Room for All and the Gospel Alliance. By God’s grace, such a meeting did take place in Holland, Michigan, on March 14–15, 2018. Bob Bouwer, Scott Treadway, and Charlie Contreras represented the Gospel Alliance. Tricia Sheffield, Lynn Japinga, Chad Tanaka Pack, and Marilyn Paarlberg participated on behalf of Room for All. Don Poest and I were there as observers. Facilitated by Jim Herrington of The Leader’s Journey, discussion focused around two questions:

1. How might the RCA move forward as a denomination together?
2. How might the RCA move forward as a denomination apart?

Afterward, a joint letter was written. Some of you have already seen it. Its full text is appended as an attachment to this report. Here are a few selected excerpts:

Our time together was productive, creative, and respectful. We listened carefully to each other. We were vulnerable. We were forgiving. We moved forward in our discussion slowly together, even when we could not agree.

We disagree about the interpretation of Scripture and the Standards of the RCA. We disagree about the most effective form of governance for our classes and regional ministries. We are tired of arguing. We are tired of hurting each other. If we continue to behave in mutually destructive ways around our disagreements, the Reformed Church in America will perish.

During our discussions, we learned some of our misconceptions about each other. Although we have different understandings of human sexuality, we share many views:

- We love the RCA and seek its flourishing.
- We believe in the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the RCA.
- We seek to live into our calling to teach and preach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the Church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God.
- We are called to love and support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ). [That’s only a partial list.]

On whatever path the RCA moves forward, it will undergo change. Change will involve loss. Loss will involve grief. We pledge to join with the people of the RCA in confession, grief, and loss. We also pledge to continually proclaim the good news in Christ: By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are forgiven to go forth and live in peace. As leaders of the Church, we will move forward not as enemies but as
friends. Not as opponents but as siblings in Christ. Together, we pray for wisdom and humility, relying on the Spirit to lead us in love.

As you’ve heard in this morning’s interim general secretary’s report, Don Poest has proposed the formation of a vision group to find a way forward for the RCA in the spirit of that meeting. As we deliberate on that proposal as well as other recommendations and overtures before this General Synod, I pray that the spirit of our interactions here might align with facilitator Jim Herrington’s reaction to the Gospel Alliance and Room for All meeting:

There is so much polarization in the country and in the Christian culture. It was inspiring to see people able to define themselves while also compassionately and intentionally staying connected to others who define themselves differently. If we could multiply that experience over and over across the country, things would change.

I was inspired by all of you.

Whatever polity actions or theological declarations we might enact this week and in the future, it’s my conviction that every RCA congregation should (whether affirming or theologically traditional in their biblical convictions about human sexuality) prayerfully strive to be faithful and welcoming witnesses to Christ’s redeeming love to everyone in their surrounding communities, including LGBTQ persons. Since the church has long been perceived by many as hostile and rejecting, LGBTQ persons must first experience our love before they’re apt to believe anything we might say about biblical truth.

Call to Mission

In Acts 1, just before he ascended, Jesus called his followers to be witnesses to Jerusalem and to all Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth—guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Fulfilling that mandate is far beyond the human capacity of any single congregation, any one denomination, any single nation! It requires prayerful collaboration with like-minded believers of many traditions and nationalities.

The RCA has modeled that collaborative approach on a global scale throughout its history. That’s much more than a historical footnote. Just a few weeks ago, the king of Bahrain invited the RCA’s director of development and facilitation, Ken Neevel, to a special reception in his palace. Ken is a descendant of pioneering RCA missionary Samuel Zwemer. On April 30, 2018, at the royal palace in Bahrain, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa hailed long-standing ties between Bahrain and the United States of America. The king said,

Today we celebrate the deep and special bond between our nations. The evidence of that friendship is all around us and there can be no greater symbol of our friendship than the American Mission Hospital. Over a century ago an intrepid young American named Samuel Zwemer traveled from New Jersey to Arabia with a noble mission in his heart. The medical dispensary he opened here in Manama became a hospital that has saved countless lives. Here in Bahrain we have a hospital founded by a Christian mission, alongside mosques and churches, synagogues and temples. Together we share the dream of a world where we can all live alongside each other in peace and prosperity.

In response to the king’s speech, U.S. ambassador Justin Siberell added,

As your Majesty has frequently observed, our friendship [between Bahrain and the
United States] began with the arrival of a group of remarkable and selfless individuals who founded the American Mission. The first of those great Americans was Samuel Zwemer, who set up a medical dispensary in Manama which grew into the American Mission Hospital.

His wife, Amy, was a nurse who cared for patients and opened a school for girls in the back room of their apartment above the medical dispensary. That school lives on today as Al Raja School, still one of Bahrain’s finest schools. Amy and Samuel Zwemer’s only two children, daughters Ruth and Katherina died within days of one another in 1904 during a cholera epidemic. Both are buried in the cemetery in old Manama. The Zwemers literally gave all they had to their life of service in Bahrain.

With us today is Mr. Ken Neevel, the great nephew of Samuel and Amy Zwemer, who traveled to be here from the State of Michigan. He continues to be involved with the Reformed Church in America, the organization with whom the Zwemers were associated. Thank you for coming back to Bahrain for today’s event, Ken.

Ambassador Siberell went on to commend the king for his White House meeting with President Trump last November and expressed appreciation for Bahrain’s strategic engagement with the United States Armed Forces. But the focus of both speeches by the ambassador and the king highlighted the ongoing legacy of RCA missionaries Samuel and Amy Zwemer that continues to richly bless the people of that Persian Gulf kingdom, with enduring impact on crucial geopolitical dynamics in today’s world. In celebrating that legacy, Bahrain’s king specifically invited the RCA’s current director of development and facilitation, Ken Neevel, to travel from Michigan to join him at his royal palace!

As our general secretary emeritus, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, quipped to me last December following an informal meeting with some local Formula of Agreement church leaders in Santa Fe, New Mexico, “When it comes to denominational impact on the global stage, the RCA has always punched far above its weight.” A month later, the nominee to become our next general secretary, Eddy Alemán, told our search committee,

The RCA is a denomination with a great past. We have been engaged in serious and continuous ministry for almost 400 years in the USA, Canada, and many parts of the world! The RCA is a denomination with a difficult present as we’re presently struggling with the question of human sexuality. The RCA is a denomination with a wonderful future. The promises of God are true and real for us, and he will take us through this difficult time as he has done in the past.

I believe that obedience to God’s call for this next chapter of the Reformed Church in America’s ministry requires us to intensify our twenty-first century witness to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. New missional paradigms are emerging. Our traditional views of church multiplication and global mission should no longer be confined to separate ministry “silos.” Consultation between North American and global church planting efforts can provide synergy for these related outreach endeavors.

For example, one of RCA Global Mission’s new strategic impact areas is Brazil’s Amazon basin. For more than 110 years, the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPManaus) has proclaimed the gospel to people living in the capital city of Brazil’s Amazonas state and along the Amazon River. They’ve accomplished this through medical boats, missionary training, and church planting. IPManaus operates two boats as well-equipped outpatient clinics and uses seven for evangelism and pastoral visits.
There are 7,693 riverside villages along the Amazon and its 1,000+ tributaries. Deep in the rainforest, many of these are only accessible by boat or plane. IPManaus employs physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, and other professionals to deliver free medical care to thousands of isolated people. And, alongside that compassionate service, the church systematically trains and assigns a church planter to visit or reside in many of those villages. In March, it was my privilege, along with RCA staff members Randy Weener and Luis Ruiz and church planter Pat Dirkse, to visit Brazil and observe this unique outreach firsthand:

VIDEO 1: Brazil Amazon Outreach
IPManaus missions pastor Djard Cadais de Moraes: “We have two medical boats visiting some villages along the Amazon River. So we’re providing medical care, dental care, and social care. While we are taking care of people, we are planting divine seed in their hearts. We spend all day long providing these treatments, but at the very end of that day, in the beginning of the night, [we] have a meeting. In that meeting we preach the gospel, sharing God’s love, and people open their hearts. And nowadays, in Manaus, we have 9,000 membership. And these people invest in mission and we have a chance twice a month [to] do a mission trip inside of the hinterlands—the rural areas along the Amazon River—planting churches. And we have up to 100 rural churches inside of the Amazon valley. Pray for our vision to planting 100 churches [by] 2025. So I hope that God [will] bless the RCA so you can keep walking together to [make] new history on [the] Amazon.”

What an amazing ministry model! Pastors Djard and Jose Jiao and their team from IPManaus are here with us during General Synod. Thanks for all you’re doing and for taking the time to visit us here. We look forward to hearing more from you during tomorrow evening’s Global Mission report.

Because I believe that future interactions between the RCA’s North American church planters, their Brazilian counterparts, and others elsewhere would be mutually beneficial for all concerned, boosting kingdom impact, I submit to you the following:

Proposal 2
To urge the general secretary to explore possibilities for establishing a global church planters’ leadership collaborative to facilitate ongoing interactions between North American church planters and counterparts in selected countries where the RCA is engaged with indigenous global mission partners. The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

This could entail collaboration between RCA Church Multiplication and Global Mission personnel. The initial collaborative could include gathering at least one facilitator/leader with at least three planters from at least two nations.

RCA Global Mission’s outreach today features a total of 89 full-time missionary personnel. Some serve alongside denominational partners such as the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger (EERN). The EERN is the largest Protestant denomination in Niger—a West African country located in the Sahara Desert. While Niger is overwhelmingly Muslim, according to data from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Niger ranked third among the world’s countries with the fastest-growing Protestant populations from 2005–2015. Its annual Protestant growth rate was 7.14 percent per year. On two days in January of 2015, an extremist group of political operatives incited protests that led to the systematic burning and looting of 80 Christian churches throughout the country. Everyone was stunned! But within hours, the graciously forgiving response of church leaders and
members amazed their neighbors and the world:

**VIDEO 2: Forgiveness in Niger**

EERN secretary for global partnerships Issaka Moussa: “My church is one of the 80 churches, plus some properties like houses, that have been burned. All things in the compound have been burned or stolen by demonstrators. It was really a shocking time for me, yeah. We quickly gathered the National Board. And the first thing we receive from the Lord is the peace. We decided to forgive quickly, to tell them that, no, we understand what happened and the church forgives. All the churches came together and say, ‘Hey, let’s not fear again. Fear is behind us. Instead of condemning this, let’s see it as an opportunity for the church to go fast, go fast through the Great Commission application.’ We asked the radio stations to increase programs that are preaching the gospel of the Lord in this country. And we say, ‘Don’t stop worship on Sundays.’ And that brought our Muslim brothers closer to us, asking for forgiveness and even showing compassion. Many of them called us. They were weeping, saying they never thought this can happen. Some started to bring back what they have stolen. Some even offered to help rebuild the burned properties. Our target now is to establish 52 new churches in the big towns of Niger. And our strategy is to start with the radio programs. And then our pastors are following up to take care of the people who are listening and eventually help them on a discipleship program. These riots made the church think that it’s now time to rebuild the churches, but also time to rebuild our relationship with our neighbors so that they would know us better. Among Christians, what happened is a kind of revival. Many are accepting the Christ and understanding what is his message for the world.”

Around the world, the church of Jesus Christ faces many challenges. Some are persistent and expected. But others, like Niger’s unprecedented wave of church burnings in 2015, cannot be foreseen. I praise God for the EERN’s marvelous example of spontaneous grace amid extreme pressure. May their bold, visionary response to such attacks and the divine blessings that have continued to multiply ever since be an inspiration to us all. President Kadade, the RCA is so grateful for the EERN’s partnership. Thank you.

**Small Churches**

Back here in North America, prayerful focus on one of the RCA’s most pervasive concerns can open doors to new opportunities. Sustaining small churches with fewer than 100 in worship is a challenge for most of our classes. Here in my home classis, where we’re meeting this week, Great Lakes City Classis leader Randy Weener has organized a leadership collaborative among pastors of small churches:

**VIDEO 3: Randy Weener - Small Church Forum**

Randy Weener: “About two years ago, we started a forum, gathering small church pastors in the Great Lakes City Classis. And one of the first things that I discovered as I talked with these pastors was a sense of defeat and inferiority because they didn’t measure up to the larger congregations that often get the visibility. After we began to look at, what are the uniquenesses of a small church that a larger or medium size church can’t provide, they began to, to gain a little bit of their own self-esteem [in] their unique ability to reach and attract people that other sizes cannot. It’s been really a joy over these number of months now to watch them not only feel better about who they are in God’s kingdom, but to begin to imagine what can they uniquely do because of their size, not in spite of their size. And we are starting to see them be creative and be visionary.”
“Yesterday we were talking to a small church pastor who has about 35 people who gather on Sunday morning. They have a budget of $77,000 dollars. He was feeling insecure, inferior, that his numbers were not bigger. So in comparison, we pulled up the report of another church within his own classis that has 1,800 members and over a $2 million dollar budget. And we looked at that chart, and we looked at the larger congregation, which is 55 times larger than his, and they had seven adult baptisms in the previous year. Then we asked this small church pastor, ‘How many adult baptisms did you have last year?’ And he said, ‘Five.’ Here’s a congregation 55 times larger, which only had two more adult baptisms than he had. He is not an insignificant piece of God’s kingdom, nor is any other small church because of their ability to reach people who are especially attracted to that smaller community of intimacy and deep relationships. All of us have our preferences. Some of us prefer the small hardware store or we go to the small college, and we go to the small church because we want to be there.

“The median size church in North America is 75. That means that half of the churches in our continent are gathering with less than 75 people on any given Sunday. Small church is not the exception; small church is the norm. It does not matter whether we are small or large; it matters that we are thriving at whatever size that God created us to be. And no matter what our size is, we have a unique calling, a unique ministry, a unique people group that God has called us to. So we need to get over this inferiority complex as small churches that we are not measuring up to the large congregations, the ones that get presence on the stage, that write the books, that hold the conferences. Small churches just don’t get as much publicity or visibility as the large, but they have always been a part of the fabric of God’s kingdom. It’s the way the church started and for the first two or three centuries, it was the one way in which the gospel spread across to the ends of the earth. It’s the way it’s happening in China, in India, in Africa, in South America today as well. Not only is it a part of our past; it is a part of our future as well.”

Congregations can be missionally vital but remain relatively small due to various local factors. Sometimes the closing of an older, declining congregation can lead to the later flourishing of 12 multiple micro-targeted church plants. Randy Weener describes one such example located just five miles from this arena:

**VIDEO 4: Randy Weener - Three Churches in One**

Randy Weener: “[I’m] standing here on the entrance way to what three, four years ago was New Life Reformed Church. As that congregation aged and declined, it ultimately closed about three or four years ago. And in its place now are three congregations, each small. One is a Nepalese community church, which addresses some of the residents who have landed here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Another is The Branch, which is an English-speaking, Anglo congregation reaching the surrounding neighborhood of Alger Park. And the third is Comunidad Cristiana de Grand Rapids, a Hispanic congregation.

“These are three small churches, each with their niche, who are able to reach into the community around us that a larger church might not be able to do. And together in partnership, they can make ends meet as they, as they work together to reach their respective people groups. But by working together also, it’s a great picture of the church coming together multiculturally to serve in some common worship and ministry experiences that they are doing together.”

Even small churches can be instrumental in planting new congregations. One of the three
recently established small congregations Randy just described is already acting upon its vision for church multiplication. Yakuv Gurung is the planting pastor of the Nepali-speaking congregation mentioned in the video clip you’ve just seen:

**VIDEO 5: Yakuv Gurung - Nepalese Church Planter**

Yakuv Gurung: “We want to see Reformed churches be planted among the Nepali-speaking people group here in United States, and beyond United States. We have planted our church here in Grand Rapids, and we have helped to plant a church in Lansing, Michigan. We also have been planning to plant a church in Ohio. And currently we also have been planting church back in Nepal. Our goal is to plant 50 churches in next five years in Nepal.”

Despite his Nepali-speaking congregation’s relatively small size, its ambitious church multiplication vision appears to be contagious. The Branch (the Anglo congregation that shares their building) recently pledged financial support toward the church-planting initiative in Nepal.

Because sustaining small churches is a widespread challenge for most RCA classes, I submit the following proposal:

**Proposal 3**

To urge the general secretary to help facilitate the launch of small church leadership collaboratives in at least three different RCA regional synods. Each leadership collaborative would seek to foster ongoing interactions among leaders of small churches (averaging fewer than 100 in worship). The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

Initial planning could include consultation with leader(s) of existing initiatives, including the Small Churches Forum in the Great Lakes City Classis. The primary emphasis could be on small churches with potential to remain vital. The initial effort could include a summit for representatives of multiple classes and/or regions. Participants could be trained to work with churches in their own areas. Regional summits could be considered to reduce travel costs.

**Conclusion**

In closing, our ultimate hope is wonderfully expressed in the answer to the Heidelberg Catechism’s first question: “That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” God doesn’t need any particular denomination (including the RCA) to accomplish his eternal purpose. But by his grace, he offers us not only eternal life, but also the precious opportunity to align our lives and witness with what the Spirit is already doing around the world. Our calling is to obedience: to radically follow Christ in mission together.

A hopeful sign of God’s continuing provision for the RCA during this past year was the experience of our general secretary search committee: 12 RCA members, representing each of our regional synods and ethnic councils, six men and six women, six ministers and six laypeople. After the first round of interviews, we unanimously sensed God’s clear leading to recommend Eddy Alemán to become our next general secretary. In light of the RCA’s growing diversity and divisions, such spontaneous unanimity seemed astonishing!

Eddy differs from his predecessors in some notable ways. For one thing, as a native of Nicaragua, he’s the first general secretary whose mother tongue was neither English nor
Dutch! (He understands six modern languages, plus biblical Greek and Hebrew.) He’s served since 2014 as the RCA’s director of strategic leadership development and Hispanic ministries. Eddy was instrumental in the planting of two congregations in Ontario and seventeen in California.

Ten of those church plants resulted from his five-year service at Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount, California. That church began in 1925 in what was then an agricultural area that later became the city of Paramount. Their worship services finally changed from Dutch to English in the 1940s. By the 1970s, the surrounding farmland had become suburban housing as the Los Angeles metro area expanded. Instead of closing or following the migration of its Dutch founders, Emmanuel Reformed responded to God’s call by becoming a “mission outpost” to its rapidly changing surroundings. Under the pastoral leadership of Harold Korver and later his sons, God blessed Emmanuel’s outreach, and it continues to thrive.

As author Tod Bolsinger observes in his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, ministry in the future will significantly differ from the past. What worked before might not be effective today. Christianity is no longer the dominant worldview for many North Americans. The days ahead will require new skills for those who are called to lead. Bolsinger notes that leaders from places where Christianity was never the dominant worldview have already experienced the adaptability needed to navigate through circumstances which seem “completely off the map” for many of us.

That describes Eddy Alemán’s life experience to a T. I thank God for preparing Eddy to lead us through such a time as this.

The RCA’s legacy is historic. God continues to bless. May we be people of faith, hope, and love as we seek to serve our Lord in the days ahead.

To God be the glory!

*Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, Proposal 2 and Proposal 3 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See p. 153 for the resulting recommendations, OV 18-24 and OV 18-25.*

**ADDENDUM: JOINT LETTER FROM THE GOSPEL ALLIANCE AND ROOM FOR ALL**

We, the undersigned, are members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and Jesus is its only head. We are leaders of the Gospel Alliance and Room for All. The two organizations are not assemblies, agencies, or commissions of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). In our roles as leaders of the two organizations, we do not have authority to effect constitutional changes in the denomination. We have come together, guided by the Holy Spirit, to discern how the RCA might move forward as a denomination.

We gathered in person for two days of discussion, fellowship, and prayer. With us were the President of General Synod, Lee DeYoung, and the Interim General Secretary, Don Poest. We explored answers to two questions:

How might the RCA move forward as a denomination together?
How might the RCA move forward as a denomination apart?
Our time together was productive, creative, and respectful. We listened carefully to each other. We were vulnerable. We were forgiving. We moved forward in our discussion slowly together, even when we could not agree.

During our discussions, we named and lamented some of the hurts and wounds that have been inflicted in denominational discussions about human sexuality. Some people have been hurt intentionally. Many people have been wounded when harm was not intended. We confessed how we personally have hurt others. We are still learning how we have and may continue to wound others.

For many years, siblings in Christ in the RCA have acted in wrongful ways around our disagreements. Some of our disagreements are fundamental to our faith. We disagree about the interpretation of Scripture and the Standards of the RCA. We disagree about the most effective form of governance for our classes and regional ministries. We are tired of arguing. We are tired of hurting each other. If we continue to behave in mutually destructive ways around our disagreements, the Reformed Church in America will perish.

We seek healing from the hurts we have inflicted on each other.

We seek movement forward together.

We seek the freedom to serve, unburdened by our disagreements.

We seek clarity of a shared vision for our denomination.

We seek new life for the Church and its people.

During our discussions, we learned some of our misconceptions about each other. Although we have different understandings of human sexuality, we share many views:

We love the RCA and seek its flourishing.
We believe in the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the RCA.
We accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life.
We accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.
We seek to live into our calling to teach and preach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the Church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God.
We are called to love and support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ).
While all things are possible through God, we do not believe that prayer or conversion therapy can change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity.
We believe that the healthiest way to express human sexuality is through a committed, mutually loving relationship between two people.
We have much to learn about human sexuality. We do not have all the answers. We want to listen and learn from each other.
We are committed to move forward as one denomination.

We imagined moving forward using the existing governmental framework as set forth in the Book of Church Order. Some of us felt strongly that the denomination must adopt a position on whether or not to fully include LGBTQ people in the life of the church. This approach would therefore require changes to our Constitution. It would also imply a
“conscience clause” to allow Classes of different views to consider LGBTQ candidates for ordination, and to allow Consistories of different views to consider authorizing same-sex marriages. Many of us felt that establishing a “conscience clause” was not an acceptable way to move forward together.

We also imagined and sensed energy, though not consensus, around a restructuring of the denomination that accommodates our diverse understandings of the Bible, theology and polity. While we did not explore details of such a restructuring, we imagined the RCA becoming a home for two or more assemblies (or synods, conferences, or groupings) of classes. Each assembly would be rooted in Reformed history, theology, liturgy, and the Standards, but going forward could be responsible for its own polity, theology, and liturgy. These assemblies could gather together every few years for fellowship, learning, and celebration of our ministries. Many of the institutions of the RCA could remain and provide shared services to the two or more assemblies of the RCA, including the seminaries, the Board of Benefits Services, RCA Missions, RCA offices and staff.

On whatever path the RCA moves forward, it will undergo change. Change will involve loss. Loss will involve grief. We pledge to join with the people of the RCA in confession, grief, and loss. We also pledge to continually proclaim the good news in Christ: By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are forgiven to go forth and live in peace. As leaders of the Church, we will move forward not as enemies but as friends. Not as opponents but as siblings in Christ. Together, we pray for wisdom and humility, relying on the Spirit to lead us in love.

Bob Bouwer   Tricia Sheffield
Charlie Contreras  Chad Tanaka Pack
Marilyn Paarlberg  Scott Treadway

Attended, but does not support this idea of denominational restructuring: Lynn Japinga
Report of the General Synod Council Serving As the Executive Committee of the General Synod

The Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves the church by his Spirit and his Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 54). The church exists to announce, teach, and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church speaks, and it acts. For those of us in the Reformed tradition, the church governs its life, and it determines how best to carry out its mission through its assemblies.

God seeks certain characteristics, and the world also watches to see if those characteristics are evident in our life and work together. Our ability to go forth and preach the gospel is supported by the work of our congregations, classes, and synods. Together we are a body of committed believers in covenant with one another. Christ’s mission is enhanced when the Word of God and our love for each other are the foundation for order, discipline, and effectiveness. This Reformed understanding of the church and the manner through which we govern our life together are foundational.

Our prayer throughout the year and as we meet as a General Synod body is that our unity and attention to governance will glorify God.

The General Synod Council is established by and responsible to the General Synod. It shall act as the executive committee of the General Synod and it shall administer the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It shall implement decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. It shall support, strengthen, and coordinate the work of the several commissions, boards, institutions, and agencies of the Reformed Church in America, thus seeking to increase the effectiveness of the mission and witness of the church (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 7, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 69]).

The General Synod Council serves “as the Executive Committee of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod, and as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6a [2017 edition, p. 106]).

For a full listing of the responsibilities of the General Synod Council, see the Bylaws of the General Synod (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, pp. 106-107]).

The work of the General Synod Council, as directed by previous General Synods, is reported to this General Synod in two areas:

1. Matters of governance—the work the General Synod Council (GSC) has done with respect to a) the meeting of the General Synod; b) matters of its own organization, including its oversight and stewardship of the financial resources given to it; c) its support and supervision of denominational staff and the general secretary; d) the work of its committees, teams, and racial and ethnic councils; and e) a general overview of the work of the church as reported by the GSC in its role as the General Synod Executive Committee.

2. The work the GSC has done with regard to the oversight of the mission and ministry assigned to it by the General Synod under the rubric of Transformed & Transforming, the General Synod’s 15-year ministry goal, and which is reported
by the GSC in its role as the General Synod’s program agency. Referrals addressed to the GSC from previous General Synods are dealt with throughout this report.

Review of Regional Synod Minutes

As of June 8, 2018, the General Synod office had received and read the 2017 minutes of seven of the eight regional synods.

GENERAL SYNOD MEETING

Referral of Business
The business of General Synod was assigned to the appropriate committees as presented in the General Synod Workbook.

EC 18-I
To approve the agenda and schedule of the General Synod as presented in the General Synod Workbook. (ADOPTED)

General Synod Offering

The General Synod received offerings at the opening worship on Thursday, the worship on Sunday evening, and the closing worship on Tuesday. The offerings were designated by General Synod president Lee DeYoung to support RCA/CRC Disability Concerns, al-Hoda (a ministry to the Arab-speaking world), and (c) the Presbyterian Church of Manaus. For additional details regarding these ministries, see “Formation of the Synod – Worship” on pages 11–12.

The Seating of Delegates

The Bylaws of the General Synod require that a classis be current in the payment of its General Synod assessments before its delegates may be seated as members of the General Synod (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1a [2017 edition, p. 103]). The general secretary reported on classes’ payments of General Synod assessments and reported that there were no delegates who would not be seated because of irregularities.

Amendments to the Book of Church Order

The General Synod of 2017 adopted and referred to the classes for approval five amendments to the Book of Church Order. The amendments are recorded in the 2017 Minutes of the General Synod as noted. One classis reported to the General Synod office that it did not vote on the questions of whether to approve the amendments. The votes of the other 44 classes, as reported in writing by the classes’ stated clerks, were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book of Church Order Amendments</th>
<th>Disapproved</th>
<th>Approved</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Fuller Integration of Commissioned Pastor into</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>Polity of the RCA (MGS 2017, R 17-41, pp. 257-263)</td>
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<td>BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 1 and 2 (2017 edition, pp. 11-19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Articles 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 15, 17 (2017 edition, pp. 29-35, 52-60)</td>
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2. **Furloughing Missionaries**  
(MGS 2017, R 17-42, p. 263)  
BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Articles 1 and 3 (2017 edition, pp. 65-67)

3. **Supersession of a Consistory**  
(MGS 2017, R 17-43, pp. 264-266)  
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9 (2017 edition, pp. 38-39)

4. **Minister of Word and Sacrament**  
(MGS 2017, R 17-44, p. 268-269)  
BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 3 and 4  
(2017 edition, pp. 11-12)

5. **Supervisor of Consistory**  
(MGS 2017, R 17-45, p. 270)  
BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 34)

**EC 18-2**  
To declare Amendment 1 to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

**EC 18-3**  
To declare Amendment 2 to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

**EC 18-4**  
To declare Amendment 3 to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

**EC 18-5**  
To declare Amendment 4 to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

**EC 18-6**  
To declare Amendment 5 to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Book of Church Order. (ADOPTED)

The 2017 General Synod also approved in first reading for recommendation to the 2018 General Synod one amendment to the Bylaws of the General Synod:


**EC 18-7**  
To declare Amendment 6 to the Bylaws of the General Synod adopted in first reading by the 2017 General Synod to be approved for incorporation into the 2018 Bylaws of the General Synod. (ADOPTED)
Appointment of the General Synod Treasurer and Assistant Secretary

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod must annually appoint a treasurer of the General Synod corporation (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V).

EC 18-8
To appoint Jillisa Teitsma as treasurer of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

In accordance with its corporate bylaws, the General Synod may elect or appoint such other officers as the needs of the corporation may from time to time require (Corporate Bylaws of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, Article V). In order for Paul Boice, chief operating officer, to have authority to sign legal documents for the corporation of the General Synod, the General Synod approved the following recommendation:

EC 18-9
To appoint Paul Boice assistant secretary of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

General Synod Planning

Responsibility for planning the agenda and schedule for the annual meeting of the General Synod is assigned to the General Synod Council (GSC) in its capacity as the General Synod Executive Committee. Planning for the annual meeting begins shortly after the conclusion of the current meeting and involves the General Synod officers, the general secretary, staff from the General Synod Office, and numerous others. At the fall meeting of the General Synod’s commissions and the GSC, moderators of the commissions, the moderator of the GSC, some GSC staff, the general secretary, and officers meet to consider anticipated business from all of these entities for the next year’s meeting. Initial plans for the annual meeting are discussed at the fall meeting of the GSC. Prior to the start of the General Synod meeting, the GSC reviews and approves the schedule and agenda.

The selection of General Synod worship leadership and the preachers is a prerogative of the General Synod president. A worship planning team works with the president and the selected preachers to develop all of the worship liturgies for the synod.

In 2011, the General Synod moved away from providing a printed agenda and reports except by special request. The equipment that supported the 2018 meeting was purchased in 2011 jointly by the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) to support meetings of both denominations. Technology staff support is present to assist delegates throughout the meeting. The transition to electronic reporting has reduced synod’s expenses for paper and shipping and lessened the environmental impact of the meeting.

Simultaneous translation and enhancements to support people with various disabilities were provided based on the needs expressed by delegates and guests when they registered. Calvin College’s Van Noord Arena and the Chapel were equipped with hearing loops for people who have hearing disabilities. The main floor orchestra section of the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Arts and Worship at Grand Rapids Christian High School, where Sunday evening’s joint worship service with the CRC Synod took place, was also equipped with a hearing loop. The synod leadership and staff thanks RCA Disability Concerns for its continued advocacy for these enhancements.
General Synod Meeting Location

The location for the next annual meeting of the General Synod in 2019 is Hope College in Holland, Michigan. The 2019 meeting of the General Synod will take place on June 6–11. The General Synod is able to respond to invitations from the assemblies of the church to meet in other locations. Planning for the meeting requires invitations to be submitted at least two years in advance of the proposed meeting.

OVERVIEW OF THE GSC’S WORK ON MATTERS OF ITS INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

The General Synod Council operates internally according to a not-for-profit governance practice known as “policy governance” developed by Dr. John and Miriam Carver. Policy governance allowed the GSC to enhance its ability to monitor the various “ends” and objectives that were established to fulfill the General Synod’s directives regarding Our Call, the General Synod’s ten-year goal for mission and ministry that ended in 2013. In October 2014, the GSC adopted new ends and objectives to fulfill the directives of the new ministry goal adopted at General Synod 2013, Transformed & Transforming. Policy governance has also enhanced the GSC’s ability to both support and monitor the work of its general secretary and staff through a series of “limitations” policies. The GSC has established and holds itself accountable for its own work through polices concerning its own internal governance and its relationships with the general secretary and staff.

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the Board of Benefits Services also operate in accordance with the principles of policy governance. This work required extensive discussion over a period of two years to clarify the governing relationship of these agencies with the GSC in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod.

RCA Salary Structure for FY 2018

In 2006 the General Synod Council adopted policies to govern its work and to establish clear guidelines for oversight of its staff. The GSC policy pertaining to staff compensation states: “With respect to employment, compensation, and benefits and recognition of employees, consultants, contract workers, and volunteers, the General Secretary will not cause or allow jeopardy to fiscal integrity or to public image or decisions that are unrelated to the relevant market” (GSC Policy EL-8).

Upon the instruction of the general secretary, the human resources department completed a study of the compensation methodology of the GSC in the fall of 2006. The director consulted with The Employers’ Association, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to develop the current compensation system. Two key factors were considered in the development of the system. First, an evaluation system was utilized to ensure that internal equity was established for all positions based on their contribution to the RCA’s mission and vision. Secondly, positions were benchmarked against comparable external positions through the use of salary compensation surveys in the nonprofit and church sectors.

This system allows for the evaluation of positions based on the essential requirements and responsibilities of the job as defined in the job description. Job descriptions are created together by the manager, employee, and human resources department. As responsibilities change, the system allows for reevaluation of positions to ensure that they are classified in the correct range. The system incorporates geographical differentials to recognize variances in distinct regions.

This system incorporates a model that utilizes 14 ranges. The ranges span grades 10 to
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL SYNOD

23; Grade 10 represents the most entry-level positions and Grade 23 represents the highest range, held by the general secretary. 

Staff are evaluated annually by their managers. Any increases or adjustments in wages are approved by the general secretary. The general secretary is evaluated by the General Synod Council. Executive staff reporting to the Board of Benefits Services (BOBS), the Church Growth Fund (CGF), and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) are evaluated by their respective boards.

The following tables represent the ranges that were used for fiscal year 2017. The ranges are utilized to establish base wages and annual compensation and do not represent the actual compensation of any individual employee.

### MISSION PERSONNEL

#### 2017–2018

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### GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

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### CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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### NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
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**NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

2017–2018

**ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE**

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**ORANGE CITY, IOWA**

2017–2018

**ANNUALIZED SALARY RATE**

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Commission Review Process

The GSC moderator and General Synod president met with two commission moderators in February 2017 to begin drafting a specific process the GSC will use in fulfilling its BCO-assigned responsibilities of both providing support for the work of the General Synod commissions and reviewing them once every five years.

The proposed commission review process was presented to the GSC at its March 2017 meeting. After discussion and some adjustments to improve clarity, the GSC voted to adopt the process (which appears below). GSC appointed a small group of GSC members to work on the surveys mentioned in points two and three and bring a proposal back to GSC. In October 2017, GSC received and adopted proposed survey questions for both surveys.

The first year cycle of the process began in spring 2018; current members of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education and the Commission on Church Order have received a link to the longer survey mentioned in point three of the process via SurveyMonkey and have been asked to complete the survey by June 1, 2018. Current members of the other commissions received the briefer annual survey and were also asked to complete it by June 1, 2018.

**Commission Review Process**

1. In order to encourage open channels of communication between the commissions and the GSC and to help the GSC support the commissions in their work, the GSC will send a representative to each commission’s winter meeting when there is a GSC member available and in close geographical proximity to the meeting place.

2. Each commission will be asked to fill out a two- or three-question survey each year for report to the GSC. Commission members will be asked to fill out the
survey individually, not together as a group. The survey will be sent out around
the time of the winter meetings, and commissions will be asked to complete it
by General Synod. Responses will be reviewed by the GSC at its fall meeting.

3. Every five years (on a rotating basis, two commissions per year), each member of
a commission will be asked to complete a longer survey. Commission members
will be asked to fill out the survey individually, not together as a group. This
survey will also be sent out around the time of the winter meetings, and the two
commissions will be asked to complete it by General Synod.

The rotating schedule for commission review will begin as follows:

- Year one: Christian Discipleship and Education, Church Order.
- Year two: Theology, Women.
- Year three: Christian Worship, Race and Ethnicity.
- Year four: Christian Action, Christian Unity.
- Year five: History, Nominations.

4. At one of its meetings at General Synod, the GSC will assign three GSC members
to each of the two commissions, and they will be given the compiled survey
responses from that commission. Whenever possible, one of those assigned to
the review team should be the GSC member who attended the commission’s last
winter meeting. GSC members will also be asked to comment on that particular
commission based on the work that the GSC knows the commission has done
(based on General Synod reports, etc.) and reports from GSC members who
have attended meetings of that commission. The three GSC members assigned
to the commission will fill out the same survey that the commission members
fill out.

5. The three GSC members will then meet with the commission being reviewed
during the fall joint meeting of the GSC and the commissions.

6. The GSC members who meet with the commission will report back to the GSC
either later in the fall meeting or at the spring meeting.

7. The GSC will decide whether to recommend to the General Synod a continuation
of, a reconstitution of, or a discontinuation of the commission (BCO Chapter 3,
Part I, Article 3, Section 6g [2017 edition, p. 107]).

General Secretary Search Process

Tom De Vries announced in April 2017 that he would be concluding his service as the
RCA’s general secretary effective June 2017. With this announcement, the General Synod
Council (GSC) embarked upon a search for the person whom God would call to the RCA
as the next general secretary. In May, the GSC appointed Donald Poest to serve as interim
general secretary while the search process for a new general secretary was conducted.

The Book of Church Order (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 5, Section 3 [2017 edition, pp. 68-
69]) states:

The General Synod shall have a general secretary whose duty shall be to present
at each General Synod meeting a report articulating a vision for the church,
including recommendations for the future; to keep faithful record of all the
proceedings of the body; and to furnish official notices in writing to all persons directly affected by judicial decisions of the assembly. The general secretary shall also be responsible for forwarding to the denominational archives minutes of the General Synod and subsidiary corporations, and shall undertake such other duties as may be assigned by the synod.

The Bylaws of the GSC (Article VIII) state:

8.1 The general secretary shall be employed by the GSC upon the recommendation of its search committee and only following the prior approval thereof by the General Synod.

8.2 The identification of a general secretary for employment by the GSC shall be accomplished through a search committee. The search committee for the general secretary shall be appointed by the GSC (subject to the remaining provisions of this Section 8.2). The search committee shall have not less than ten nor more than 12 members. Membership on the search committee may include the moderator of the GSC, two other members of the GSC who are appointed by the GSC, and such other members as are needed to provide a committee broadly representative of the Reformed Church in America. All members shall be confessing members of a local church (as that term is defined in the BCO), but need not be members of the GSC. The GSC shall designate the moderator of the search committee. The current general secretary shall not be a member of the search committee.

8.3 The GSC shall be responsible for the supervision of the general secretary. The GSC shall review the performance of the general secretary annually in a manner that is consistent with the GSC’s policies. Not less frequently than every three years the GSC’s review of the general secretary shall be a comprehensive performance review that solicits data from various leaders throughout the Reformed Church in America. For all such reviews of the performance of the general secretary, the GSC may appoint a committee of its own membership to conduct interviews (including with the general secretary), gather data, and prepare a report. The report shall be submitted to the GSC at its annual meeting.

8.4 The GSC may terminate the employment of the general secretary.

Following General Synod 2017, the GSC solicited applications from across the church from people interested in serving on the search committee. The GSC met in special session in August to select the 12-member committee from among the applications submitted, with careful attention to putting together a committee “broadly representative of the Reformed Church in America,” as required by the GSC bylaws. The GSC appointed the following persons to the committee: moderator Evan Vermeer, Michelle Chahine, June Denny, Lee DeYoung, Ken Labbe, Young Na, Pamela Pater-Ennis, Steven Rodriguez, Erma Rolle, Andres Serrano, Lauralyn Vasquez, and Matt Waterstone.

The committee first met in person in September 2017. It accepted applications for the position of general secretary from the end of September through November 10, 2017, conducted face-to-face interviews in February 2018, and concluded its work at the end of February with a sole candidate to recommend to the General Synod Council at its March 2018 meeting.
At the GSC’s March 20–22, 2018, meeting, Evan Vermeer, moderator of the search committee, shared the search committee’s process and experience with the GSC as follows:

The GSC put together an amazing group. This committee was “sold out” on the job. They were dedicated, willing to put in a lot of time, and excited to be called to be part of the process. Most importantly, they were prayers and seekers of God’s will for the RCA. The members of the search committee soon became friends and supporters of each other as well as partners in the work of the church.

As a group, the committee planned for two to three Zoom call meetings and three face-to-face meetings.

Members agreed upon on a general description of the kind of person they felt would be best for the RCA today.

- Missional around Transformed & Transforming.
- Recognize that we have a big issue to deal with.
- Understood that this position was an employee of General Synod and must align with General Synod policies and statements.

The search committee obtained a very complete view of the process used in 2011 when Tom De Vries was selected as general secretary. This was very helpful as a starting point. From this and other gathered information from the RCA HR department, the search committee generated an application form that allowed it to study training, experience, and general qualifications.

When 19 applications were received, it became apparent that it would be very helpful to dig a little deeper into each candidate to seek more ways to separate them. The search committee then sent out two more questions.

1. Given the deep division within the denomination today, what is your vision for the future of the RCA?
2. How would you lead the RCA into that vision?

At this point the search committee brought in a professional search trainer and spent several hours with that person. This was extremely helpful for the committee both for deciding which candidates to interview and also for understanding how to conduct the interview to gain as much insight as possible into that person. In addition, the search committee met with Don Poest. The committee felt that as the interim general secretary, his input into the kind of person needed for the new general secretary would be valuable. Don also provided the committee with thoughts from key staff.

The search committee ranked some of the qualifications it felt were the most important for the position of general secretary:

1. Ability to manage a large staff.
2. Ability to manage a large budget.
3. Fundraising.
4. Knowledge of/experience with Transformed & Transforming.
5. Knowledge of/experience with growing a church and church planting.

From here the search committee used candidates’ answers to the two questions...
sent out after receiving the applications as a separating process, settling on six candidates to interview.

The interview process was as follows:

1. One hour of standardized questions asked by the same member of the search committee to each candidate. All of the candidates received the questions prior to the interview. The other 11 members of the search committee listened and took notes during this process.
2. Thirty to forty minutes of open questions from the search committee as well as questions from the candidate.

This interview process was spread over two and a half days.

The search committee interviewed six candidates who are all powerful leaders and people of God. It was a joy to hear their stories and answers to the committee’s questions.

The committee studied almost 400 pages of application information and answers. References were checked. Some members did extensive social media searches. The committee felt the process was very thorough.

The committee spent about three hours after the interviews in deliberation. One candidate began to stand out to all members. After a lot of discussion, it became clear that the committee could be in complete agreement on a recommendation: Eddy Alemán.

The GSC received the search committee’s report and then spent time interviewing the general secretary candidate in executive session. GSC also adopted a motion that the approval of at least two-thirds of the voting members present would be required in order to adopt the recommendation of the general secretary search committee.

Following time spent in prayer and deliberation, the GSC voted to adopt the recommendation of the general secretary search committee that Eddy Alemán be the sole candidate considered by the GSC for employment by the GSC as general secretary of the General Synod and to recommend to the 2018 General Synod that it approve the GSC’s employment of Eddy Alemán as the general secretary of the General Synod.

The General Synod Council therefore offers the following recommendation:

EC 18-10
To approve the General Synod Council’s employment of Eddy Alemán as general secretary of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, effective July 1, 2018. (ADOPTED)

RESOLUTIONS

Upon the retirement of Donald Poest as interim general secretary of the RCA, the General Synod Council offers the following resolution:

EC 18-11
WHEREAS, after a full career of ministry at Brunswick Reformed Church and as a leader in his classis, regional synod, and General
Synod, the Rev. Donald Poest came out of retirement to become interim general secretary of the Reformed Church in America; and

WHEREAS he stepped into the job immediately and fully, serving with humility and wisdom, listening throughout the denomination, and seeking the best for Christ’s church; and

WHEREAS he pastored staff and denominational leaders in a difficult year of transition and loss;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, offers thanks to God for Don Poest’s leadership and his year of faithful service as interim general secretary;

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that General Synod invites its delegates and guests to express to Don Poest its gratitude, admiration, and appreciation for his service and to offer a prayer for him as he again enters retirement. (ADOPTED)

To mark the death of Antoine “Tony” Campbell on July 18, 2017, the General Synod Council offers the following resolution:

EC 18-12
WHEREAS the Rev. Antoine Campbell joined the General Synod Council staff in 2013 as coordinator for African American/black ministries and soon took over leadership of denominational mission efforts and later also served as associate general secretary; and

WHEREAS Tony exercised bold leadership and brimmed with passion for the transforming power of the gospel; and

WHEREAS Tony frequently addressed the injustices of racism and worked to build bridges across racial divides in the denomination; and

WHEREAS his missional vision inspired many to work more fully in furthering the kingdom of God, helping churches discover their passion for mission and build up their capacity to do that mission; and

WHEREAS Tony had previously pastored four churches, served at America’s Promise and United Way, and tirelessly worked in community development and advocacy;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, invites its delegates and guests to celebrate Tony Campbell’s life and express its gratitude for his service to the RCA and the wider church. (ADOPTED)
To mark the death of Edwin Mulder on May 1, 2018, the General Synod Council offers the following resolution:

EC 18-13
WHEREAS, in a ministry that spanned half a century, the Rev. Dr. Edwin Mulder pastored churches in Michigan, New Jersey, and New York, and then pastored the denomination as general secretary; and

WHEREAS through his caring nature, Ed embraced everyone with the love of Christ; and

WHEREAS he balanced grace and truth, strength and compassion, and challenge and encouragement; and

WHEREAS Ed’s heart for the gospel was as passionate for justice as it was for the good news, staunchly opposing apartheid in South Africa and leading the denomination to advocate for justice; and

WHEREAS he championed the Belhar Confession, which came out of South Africa and became one of the Reformed Church in America’s Standards of Unity; and

WHEREAS in his retirement Ed continued to pastor churches and serve the denomination; and

WHEREAS he was so beloved that he served two churches twice;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, invites its delegates and guests to celebrate Ed Mulder’s life and express its gratitude for his service to the church. (ADOPTED)
REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF FINANCE

The Office of Finance provides centralized finance and accounting services to the denominational corporations, including the General Synod, the General Synod Council, the Board of Benefits Services, and the Church Growth Fund. The Office of Finance strives to ensure financial systems, procedures, and controls are in place to support the mission and ministry of these entities and to assist the officers and directors of the corporations in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The finance staff is available to respond to financial questions from local congregations, classes, and regional synods as together we strive to manage the financial resources with which we have been blessed.

2017 Annual Audits

The 2017 financial statements of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services Retirement Program and General Fund, and Church Growth Fund were audited by CapinCrouse LLP, certified public accountants. All corporations received unmodified (or “clean”) audit opinions. The audited statements are available at www.rca.org/finance. The General Synod Council’s Audit and Risk Management Committee reviewed the audited financial statements of each entity and the management comment letters from the auditors and reported the audit results to the boards of the respective corporations. Financial highlights of each organization are presented below.

Financial Summaries—Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2017

General Synod Council (GSC)

The GSC ended the year with an overall net surplus of $2.6 million. The GSC netted over $3.1 million of unrestricted reserves. This was due primarily to the building addition at the Michigan Regional Center, which was paid for by temporarily restricted contributions. Restricted funds decreased by $860,000 due to the use of restricted campaign dollars. Permanently restricted funds grew by $380,000 from new endowment contributions and investment growth. Funding for the work of the General Synod, including the operating budget and all other designated and restricted funds, is presented in the following chart:

![2017 Income Sources Chart]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2017</th>
<th>Fiscal Year 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributions and Grants</td>
<td>$10,705,660</td>
<td>$10,446,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>$6,756,055</td>
<td>$7,054,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Income*</td>
<td>$3,219,719</td>
<td>$3,191,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL INCOME</strong></td>
<td><strong>$20,681,434</strong></td>
<td><strong>$20,693,437</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes investment earnings and fees for services provided to related entities

The generosity of donors—churches, individuals, and foundations—provided more than 50 percent of the costs of carrying out the work of General Synod. Assessments provided 33 percent of income and continue to be consistently paid to GSC by classes.

The funds provided to GSC are spent in three areas: Transformed & Transforming priorities, work of the General Synod, and ministry support services, as represented in the following chart:
Transformed & Transforming includes the following ministry priorities and initiatives:

- Discipleship and Next Generation Engagement
- Leadership
  - Emerging Leaders
  - Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches
  - Women’s Transformation and Leadership
- Mission
  - Global Missional Engagement (expenses relating to Global Mission made up 58 percent of Transformed & Transforming expenses and 41 percent of total expenses in 2017)
  - Church Multiplication
  - Local Missional Engagement
  - Cultural Agility and Advocacy
  - Volunteer Engagement
  - Disability Concerns

Work of the General Synod includes costs related to the annual General Synod meeting, commissions, task forces, the Office of the General Secretary, the General Synod Council, and Communication and Production Services, including RCA Today magazine.

Ministry support services includes costs relating to the general and administrative support needed to carry out Transformed & Transforming and the work of the General Synod. This includes human resources, data management, information technology, financial services, legal counsel, and fundraising.

Board of Benefits Services—Retirement Programs

As of September 30, 2017, the date of our most recent audit, $446 million was set aside for participants in the 403(b) and retirement plans. Participant and employer contributions to the plan in fiscal year 2017 were $10 million. BOBS staff continues to work with pastors, congregations, and classes to obtain necessary information to monitor compliance with Book of Church Order Formulary No. 5 requirements, specifically the requirement to contribute 11 percent of eligible salary to the pastor’s retirement fund. As of September 30, 2017, it is estimated that $1.6 million was owed to the retirement accounts of RCA pastors by their local congregations. In fiscal year 2017, distributions to participants totaled $20 million. For additional information about the retirement plan, see the report of the Board of Benefits Services and the audited financial statements available at www.rca.org/finance.
Board of Benefits Services—General Fund to Administer Retirement Programs

The Board of Benefits Services General Fund administers the retirement programs, life and long-term disability insurances, and assistance and retiree chaplains programs for active and retired RCA ordained ministers, their dependents, and surviving spouses. The General Fund is financially strong, with $17.3 million in net assets as of September 30, 2017. The General Fund ended fiscal year 2017 with a net surplus of $11 million. In 2017, the BOBS insurance reserve was transferred to the BOBS General Fund in order to establish an endowment fund. This transfer accounts for $10 million of the surplus.

Administration costs for the retirement plans are covered primarily by a fee on employer contributions to the 403(b) and retirement plan accounts and totaled $1 million in 2017. Effective January 1, 2018, the fee is 22 basis points (0.22 percent), a reduction of six basis points over the previous year. This is the fifth consecutive year of administrative fee reduction.

Support for the assistance programs came from a General Synod assessment, designated contributions, a portion of the administrative fees charged to retirement plan participants’ accounts, and annual investment income from endowment funds. Assistance program expenses, including assistance grants and the retiree chaplains program, were $533,000 in 2017.

Church Growth Fund

The Church Growth Fund makes affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for building projects used in ministry. Loans are funded by RCA churches, agencies, and individuals that purchase CGF savings certificates, which are interest-bearing investments offering a favorable rate of return. In fiscal year 2017, the CGF continued its plan to grow and service more RCA congregations, reaching $80 million in total assets.

As of September 30, 2017, the CGF had $25 million in cash and short-term investments and $56 million in loans to churches. The loans were funded by $35 million in savings certificates and $45 million in net assets (capital). Net income was strong due to gains on investments; it totaled $1.2 million after contributing $471,000 to the GSC to be used for grants to church plants, scholarships to fund youth mission experiences, and the capital campaign.

The CGF has very strong liquidity, capital, and cash flow when compared to standards established by the North American Securities Administrators Association.

Investments

The investments of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Church Growth Fund are managed by professional investment managers. Performance and compliance with defined investment policy statements are reviewed twice a year by the Investment Advisory Committee, which is made up of representatives from the boards of each corporation and at-large members with investment expertise.

Excess Operating Cash

Until December 2017, the operating cash of the General Synod Council, Board of Benefits Services, and Church Growth Fund was invested with Standish in an actively managed portfolio of fixed-income securities. As of December 2017, the funds are being managed
by Telemus Capital, LLC, an investment firm based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The new investment manager allows for the segregation of funds for each RCA corporation. The investments are further segregated and managed under two separate fixed income investment policies. The first policy is the secondary liquidity source after cash and savings for all three RCA corporations and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays 1-5 Year Government/Credit A+ Index. The second policy is the third source of liquidity for the three RCA corporations and uses the benchmark for investment returns of the Barclays Intermediate Government Corporate Bond Index. The total amount invested in fixed income at Telemus Capital, LLC is $35 million.

Endowment Funds

The General Synod Council manages $17.3 million in funds provided by donors or set aside by management to be invested long term. Some of the endowed gifts entrusted to the General Synod Council date back to the mid-1800s. The investment proceeds from endowed gifts are used for donor-designated purposes while preserving and growing the dollar value of the original gift. These investments are managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd. The benchmark for investment returns is 70 percent S&P 500 and 30 percent Bank of America Merrill Lynch 110 Year Government/Corporate Bond Index. These investments were in compliance with the investment policy as of December 31, 2017.

In addition to the General Synod Council and Church Growth Fund, the endowment pool includes amounts designated for local congregations and RCA seminaries and colleges. In fiscal year 2017, the RCA Endowment Fund distributed $539,000 to the General Synod Council, $21,000 to the Church Growth Fund, and $140,000 to RCA-affiliated organizations. If you are interested in setting up an endowment, please contact the development office.

In December 2016, endowments designated for BOBS that were previously administered by the GSC were transferred to BOBS along with reserves from the BOBS Insurance Fund. These endowments designated for BOBS total $11 million. The BOBS endowment funds are also managed by LVM Capital Management, Ltd. and follow the same investment policy and use the same benchmark as the GSC endowment fund.

The endowment fund policies and investment manager performance are reviewed semi-annually by the RCA Investment Advisory Committee.

RCA Retirement Plans

Fidelity Investments provides recordkeeping and investment management services for the Board of Benefits Services retirement programs. Mutual fund options available to retirement plan participants include target-date retirement funds based on a participant’s retirement age as well as 20 diversified mutual funds, with socially responsible options. As of December 31, 2017, 80 percent of RCA participant funds are invested in target-date retirement funds.

Fidelity has made changes in the active investment strategy of its target-date retirement funds. These changes have had positive results, with Fidelity outperforming peer funds in the overall market. The Investment Advisory Committee meets twice a year and continues to monitor the performance and overall investment offering from Fidelity, thus meeting its fiduciary responsibility for the benefits of RCA ministers and lay staff invested in the RCA retirement program.
As a result of the Request for Proposal conducted in 2015, Fidelity Investments has partnered more closely with the Board of Benefits Services to offer additional services and guidance to better prepare our ministers for retirement. Personalized investment advisory services, referred to as Portfolio Advisory Services at Work (PASW), are now available to participants in the RCA retirement program.

For the third year in a row, the Board of Benefits Services completed a reallocation project that allows eligible participants in the retirement program to reallocate funds from the RCA retirement plan to the 403(b) plan, resulting in greater flexibility at retirement.

Together as a denomination we, through decisions of General Synod, have agreed to contribute 11 percent of the eligible salaries of ministers of Word and sacrament to their retirement accounts each year. Currently, an estimated $1.6 million has not been paid into participant accounts from local congregations for benefits owed between January 1, 2009, and September 30, 2017. RCA ministers of Word and sacrament should review their quarterly statements to verify that 11 percent of their eligible salary is being contributed. Elder delegates to synod should ask questions in their local congregation to ensure that their congregation is providing this important benefit for their pastor(s).

**Planned Giving Programs**

The General Synod Council manages various planned giving programs, including charitable gift annuities, totaling $1.4 million. The Barnabas Foundation provides investment management and recordkeeping services for these programs. The investments include equities and fixed income to provide cash flow to cover the required payouts. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

**Church Growth Fund Investments**

The Church Growth Fund invests a portion of excess operating cash in two fixed-income accounts and one equity account. LaFleur & Godfrey Investment Management and LVM Capital Management, Ltd. manage these funds. The RCA Investment Advisory Committee reviews the investment policy and investment performance semi-annually.

**Socially Responsible Investments**

All investment policy statements for each pool of investments require the investment manager to avoid investments in the securities of companies whose principal business involves gambling, for-profit prisons, or the production or distribution of tobacco or alcohol.

Retirement funds may be invested, at the discretion of the participant, in socially responsible funds screened for the above restrictions.

The Board of Benefits Services participates with and pays dues to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR). In its forty-sixth year, ICCR is the pioneer coalition of shareholder advocates who view the management of their investments as a catalyst for social change. Its 300 member organizations are faith communities, socially responsible asset managers, unions, pensions, NGOs, and other socially responsible investors with combined assets of over $200 billion. ICCR members engage hundreds of corporations annually in an effort to foster greater corporate accountability on questions such as climate...
change, corporate water stewardship, sustainable food production, human trafficking and slavery in global supply chains, and increased access to financial and healthcare services for communities in need.

The General Synod Council also invests a portion of excess operating cash with Oikocredit, one of the world’s largest sources of private funding to the microfinance sector.

2017 Budget Process and Assessment Proposal for GSC, BOBS Assistance Grants, and Theological Education

Alignment of Resources with Transformed & Transforming

Delegates to the 2013 General Synod addressed the direction of the RCA as the final step in a three-year discernment process that had broad and significant input from across the denomination. A 15-year goal called Transformed & Transforming was adopted by those delegates. Synod delegates again read and heard about progress that has been made this year and ways that individuals and congregations can connect with this communal goal.

In August 2013, the General Synod officers, regional synod leaders, and General Synod Council staff, as well as several non-staff, gathered to define how to carry out Transformed & Transforming’s three priorities: Cultivating Transformation in Christ (discipleship), Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow (leadership), and Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission (mission). Ten projects were identified, along with specific goals, timelines, and potential staff and budget resources.

GSC staff focuses on equipping churches and church leaders in the three Transformed & Transforming priority areas—discipleship, leadership, and mission—so they are better able to follow the unique call that God has given their church. Initiative plans for each priority and initiative leader were originally determined in 2013 and 2014 with the launch of Transformed & Transforming. These plans defined a purpose statement; what will be accomplished over the course of the 15-year goal, including how much will be accomplished by certain points in time; five-, ten-, and fifteen-year check-in points, along with one-year and ninety-day markers of progress; and definitions of the metrics to be used along the way.

Portions of each initiative were included in the capital campaign that began in calendar year 2015. Priority leaders developed 2018 budgets based on goals for measurable outcomes. These goals are primarily achieved by equipping churches and leaders through opportunities like connection events, learning communities, leadership communities, and leadership collaboratives. The 2018 budget includes funding for the initiatives from both current-year operating income and from campaign funds as they are available. For 2018, enough funds were raised by the beginning of the fiscal year to spend almost $500,000 from campaign funds.

General Synod Council Operating Budget Process

The General Synod Council operating budget is primarily funded by assessment income and contributions. Assessment income includes only the General Synod assessment and is 48 percent of all operating income. Contributions provided from donors and congregations for supporting missionaries and for the RCA Ministry Fund make up 36 percent of available financial resources. Other income includes services provided to the Board of Benefits Services and the Church Growth Fund, registration fees for Transformed & Transforming events, and investment and endowment earnings.
The 2018 budget was finalized by determining revenue available from assessments, contributions, investments, and other income. Assessment revenue for 2018 is budgeted to be approximately the same as 2017 due to an increase of $1.54 per member offset by a decrease in confessing membership.

In 2018, each dollar of the General Synod Council assessment is projected to be used in the following ways:

![Chart showing how each dollar of General Synod assessment is used.]

Contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund are general, unrestricted contributions to the RCA. The 2018 contributions to the RCA Ministry Fund were budgeted at $75,000 more than in 2017 due to the conclusion of fundraising for the capital campaign. Global Mission expects to see a decrease in contributions of about $200,000 due primarily to retiring missionaries. With no significant change in budgeted revenue for 2018, total budgeted expenses remain relatively similar to the previous year.

The 2018 budget was prepared assuming a draw on reserves of about $160,000 for costs related to moving forward with the initiatives of Transformed & Transforming. However, it is unlikely that reserves will be used due to unfilled staff positions. Several positions are open and are expected to remain open until a new general secretary is appointed.

Budgeted income by type for fiscal year 2018 is displayed in the chart below:

![Chart showing 2018 GSC budgeted income. Assessments 48%, Contributions and Grants 36%, Other Income 6%, Services Provided to Related Entities 4%.]
Budgeted operating expenses are shown by ministry and support areas below. Personnel costs, including salaries and benefits, make up 70 percent of the total budget. The remaining 30 percent of the budget is used for meeting and travel costs for the GSC, commissions, and General Synod; office costs, including rent and utilities; and other costs necessary to carry out the work of the GSC.

More than 500 congregations are engaged in Transformed & Transforming so far—that’s more than 50 percent of RCA congregations. The assessment amount provided this year enabled the General Synod Council and staff to come alongside those congregations in many ways, including:

**Transformational Processes (Discipleship)**
- Thirteen RCA congregations are participating in a 3DM learning community.
- Discipleship connection events were held in Iowa, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois.

**Next Generation Engagement**
- Connection events were held in Indiana and Iowa.
- One next generation discipleship learning community began.

**Emerging Leaders**
- Six leadership development connection events were held in different regions.
- Two leadership development leadership collaboratives began.

**Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches**
- One Congregational Vitality Pathways learning community began.
- One leadership collaborative for specialized transitional ministers began.
Women’s Transformation and Leadership

- Six women’s leadership collaboratives began, involving three languages, five facilitators, and forty-two participants.
- One women’s global experience continued in the form of a pilot leadership development process in which the travelers continue to meet and develop ways to bring what they’ve learned back to their faith communities.

Local Missional Engagement

- Online connection events were created around the We Are Speaking movement in partnership with Women’s Transformation and Leadership.
- Two learning communities began in partnership with Church Multiplication and Disability Concerns.

Global Mission Engagement

- We saw increased RCA church engagement in the strategic impact areas of Nicaragua and Botshabelo, South Africa.
- New consulting tools and systems are in development for churches interested in expanding and deepening global mission involvement.

Church Multiplication

- Ten new congregations were activated for parenting and are in the process of developing New Congregation Plans (NCP).
- Four NCPs were approved and others are in the process of being approved.

Volunteer Engagement

- 1,455 volunteers engaged in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- The Cultivate program developed; 12 young adult volunteers were recruited and trained to participate in Cultivate during 2018–2019.

Cultural Agility and Advocacy

- One hybrid learning/engagement community experience took place.
- Three cultural agility learning communities began.

Disability Concerns

- One mental health learning community began.
- Six connection events were held.

In addition to the operating budget, generous gifts from donors and foundations will provide funding for specific, designated projects, including disaster relief, Global Mission projects, an initiative to address the financial health of pastors, and a joint leadership initiative with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Funds raised through the Called campaign are available in addition to the operating budget and are being used to fulfill the three priorities of Transformed & Transforming.

Formulating the 2019 budget will begin in midsummer and will include direction from 2018 General Synod delegates. The focus will continue to be on aligning staff, support
services, and programs to fulfill the priorities of Transformed & Transforming in impactful and measurable ways.

**2019 General Synod Assessment Amount**

The proposed GSC 2019 assessment includes an increase of $0.46, or 1 percent, over the previous year’s amount of $53.75. In a year without significant budgetary changes, a reasonable increase would be based on the current rate of inflation or the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This would help cover increases for the costs of doing business, including wage increases and health insurance increases. For 2017, CPI increased 2.1 percent. Due to surpluses in recent years, we are not recommending a full 2.1 percent increase. In 2017, the GSC had surplus income and added to the reserves. The GSC budgeted to spend into reserves in 2018, however, due to several vacant positions, we expect to again add to our reserves.

Another consideration in setting the assessment rate is declining membership. The Consistorial Report Forms as of December 31, 2017, are not available at the date of this report. Reported membership has declined at an average of 1.8 percent per year over the past ten years. Therefore, we are assuming another year of declining membership and expect that even with a 1 percent increase in the per-member assessment, assessment revenue will be less than the amount received in the previous year. We plan to use the unspent reserves from recent years to balance the budget in 2019.

The 2018 proposal removes the additional amounts added during the 2017 General Synod since they were one-year funding commitments.

The interim general secretary and executive leadership team prepared a budget for the current fiscal year using the $45.64 per-member amount approved by the delegates of the 2017 General Synod. These funds were directed toward continuing the work of the three strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming and providing support for 11 specifically defined initiatives. The interim general secretary and executive leadership team are committed to using the resources provided from the General Synod Council assessment along with capital campaign funds, contributions, and endowment earnings to balance the 2018 budget and continue to move forward the priorities of Transformed & Transforming.

We understand General Synod’s concerns about the impact of increasing the per-member assessment amount on local congregations. The interim general secretary and executive leadership team realize the tremendous blessing and responsibility we have been given to manage the past and present funds entrusted to us by donors and congregations.

**Alternate Funding Plan Update**

Over the years, several reports have come to General Synod relating to the current assessment structure. Most recently, a recommendation was passed in 2008 to start the exploration of alternative funding strategies. From 2008 to 2014, the General Synod studied this issue through all-synod advisory committees, through a task force for future funding, and by observing the Regional Synod of the Far West’s percentage of income model. The most recent report related to this topic was made in 2014. At that time, no recommendation was made due to the transition to the new goals of Transformed & Transforming and the beginning of the capital campaign.

Since October 2017, an eight-member committee, including the GSC’s CFO, has been
meeting to discuss and develop an alternate funding plan; specifically, a funding plan based on a percentage of income. The two simplest methods for calculating assessments are either a method based on membership or one based on dollars of income. We are currently using the per-member system and have been asked by the denomination to bring forward a proposal for a per-income method.

The committee has reviewed data based on the December 31, 2016, CRF and will review data for the previous five years and the December 2017 CRF data once it is available. The committee is reviewing the impact that this change would have on each church, classis, and region. Some of the key topics discussed by the committee include the following:

- **Values:** The committee has determined three primary values that must exist in any funding method. The three top values are that the method be biblically-based, be equitable, and have a simple calculation method.
- **Defining income:** The committee has discussed what types of income to use as the basis.
- **Implementation:** With a change to a new percentage of income method, nearly every church would see a change in amounts owed; some will increase and some will decrease. The implementation could be gradual and be spread over a period of years.
- **Limitations on change in assessments from year to year:** After implementation, limits could be set to prevent a significant fluctuation in amounts owed.
- **Fairness to churches with low membership but high income due to higher operating costs.**
- **Name change:** If a percentage of income method is adopted, these payments to the denomination could be called “covenant shares” rather than “assessments.”

The committee met with classis clerks at their annual meeting in June and received their input into a new funding plan. Next fall, the committee will send representatives to as many classis and regional synod meetings as possible. Materials sharing the committee’s data analysis and ideas will be sent to every classis whether or not committee members are able to attend the meeting. The committee will use the input provided by the classis clerks and classis and regional meetings in order to develop a proposal to offer to the GSC by March 2019.

If you have ideas, thoughts, or concerns regarding a potential change in funding plan, please contact finance@rca.org.

**2019 Board of Benefits Services Assistance Grant Assessment**

In 2017, the Board of Benefits Services’ assistance program for retired participants, spouses, and dependents provided $368,000 to retirees and active participants experiencing financial distress. Assistance may be granted for housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, higher education for children of deceased ministers, funeral grants to surviving spouses, and retirement contributions for ministers who are disabled. Matching grants are available for emergency needs of active RCA ministers and for the medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church plant.

The BOBS assistance program also provides for 30 retiree chaplains who connect with more than 1,000 retired RCA ministers of Word and sacrament to tend to the spiritual, financial, and relational needs of those who have served the church. This ministry strives to keep retired pastors and their spouses connected to the RCA after a life of service and provides a resource for those experiencing significant medical, financial, or emotional needs.
The assessment to support the assistance program was approved at $2.00 per member at General Synod 2017. The remainder of the funds required to sustain this program are provided through annual contributions, a portion of the administrative fees charged to retirement plan participants’ accounts, and annual investment income from the Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Fund, as well as other endowment funds. The Board of Benefits Services is requesting no increase for 2019, leaving the assessment at $2.00.

**2019 Theological Education Assessment**

The Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee originally proposed an overall theological education assessment of $875,000 to the GSC.

An overall amount of $875,000 calculates to a per-member assessment of $6.43, which is a $0.46 increase over last year, or 7.7 percent.

GSC discussed the recommendation of the PFCC at length and ultimately decided that it could not recommend such a large increase.

Instead, the GSC recommends a 2019 per-member assessment for theological education at $6.12, an increase of $0.15 per member. This represents a 2.5 percent increase over the previous year. The PFCC has adjusted the formula in its recommendation to match the GSC’s.

**Change in Assessment from 2018 to 2019**

The chart below summarizes the General Synod assessment amounts for 2018 and the General Synod Council proposed amount for 2019.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Assessment</th>
<th>MGS reference</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>Proposed</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<td>$46.10</td>
<td>$0.46</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Amounts added during Synod 2017:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>$554.22</td>
<td>$0.47</td>
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</table>

Per General Synod vote (F 18-4), reserves will be used to fund the half-time position and joint committee with the Christian Reformed Church in North America that were established by the adoption of RF 18-4 (see page 97).

**F 18-1**

To approve the General Synod Council 2019 assessment of $46.10 per confessing member.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.
VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt F 18-1.

F 18-1
To approve the General Synod Council 2019 assessment of $46.10 per confessing member. (ADOPTED)

F 18-2
To approve the assessment of $2.00 per confessing member for the Board of Benefits Services to provide assistance funding for retired pastors who have a demonstrated need. (ADOPTED)

F 18-3
To approve the assessment of $6.12 per confessing member for theological education. (ADOPTED)

To fulfill the requirement of RF 18-4 to fund the half time position of coordinator for interreligious relations:

F 18-4
To approve the $2.78 per confessing member assessment to fulfill RF 18-4 to fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, and a joint interreligious committee with the CRCNA.

A motion was made and supported to amend F 18-4 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To approve the $2.78 per confessing member from the unspent reserves from the year 2017 assessment to fulfill RF 18-4 to fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, and a joint interreligious committee with the CRCNA.

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

After further debate a motion again was made to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To amend F 18-4.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt F 18-4 as amended.

The final version of F 18-4 as amended and adopted reads as follows:
REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENT

The development team’s purpose and vision statement reads:

- Our purpose is to develop relationships that make the mission of the RCA known, inspiring financial partnerships that make the ministry of the RCA possible.

- Imagine … Strong relationships with prospects, donors, and churches; where we know the answer is “yes” before we ask.

- Imagine … Finances are no longer an obstacle for ministry.

- Imagine … Every RCA staff member inspiring financial partnerships.

This statement defines our goals on behalf of the RCA.

The development team’s responsibility is to encourage churches and individuals to generously give of the financial resources God has entrusted to them to support the ministry and witness of the Reformed Church in America. We coordinate all GSC fundraising efforts, including but not limited to support for RCA Global Mission, Transformed & Transforming, and the Church Growth Fund. We strive to develop and strengthen relationships with donors, potential donors, church leaders, and others to inspire financial partnerships but also to promote the mission and vision of the RCA overall.

Development team members raise financial support through outright gifts, bequests, life income plans, and grants. Gifts may be designated for a specific ministry area or left undesignated for the greatest need. Undesignated gifts are typically assigned to the RCA Ministry Fund, a fund that supports the operational budget and work of Transformed & Transforming. The development team also assists with raising resources through Church Growth Fund savings certificates, Partner in Mission (PIM) shares, estate planning, and special project funding, such as the Called Campaign. Gifts to the RCA enable and empower ministry throughout the church, transforming lives both at home and around the world.

The mission and ministry of the RCA is largely possible because of the generosity of God’s people. In fiscal year 2017, 52 percent of the RCA’s total income came from voluntary support. Only 33 percent was derived from assessments. Other income such as investment earnings and fees paid for services rendered account for the remaining 15 percent of the RCA’s income in 2017.

The funding structure of the RCA relies heavily on gifts received from individual donors and from churches that give above and beyond assessments. We are truly grateful for those who have chosen to invest in the ministry of the RCA. A copy of the 2017 Annual Report to Donors is available on the RCA website and was available in hard copy form at General Synod.
The development team represents the GSC throughout the RCA, but individual staff members work primarily in these regions:

Amanda Bruehl (abruehl@rca.org): Colorado, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania. Amanda also coordinates the annual Ministry Fund appeal process.

Larryl Humme (lhumme@rca.org): Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Ken Neevel (kneevel@rca.org): Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Washington, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Dann Stouten (dstouten@rca.org): Canada, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio.

We are searching for an additional team member to replace Troy Van Beek, who returned to pastoral ministry in the fall of 2017.

Additionally, Scott Engelsman is responsible for defining missionary and mission project support needs, the communication of those needs, and for guiding Global Mission fundraising. Michele Quick oversees development operations and donor research.

Called: The RCA’s Campaign for Transformed & Transforming was launched in the summer of 2015 with a goal of raising $6.5 million. There were two primary foci of this campaign: 1) resource the strategic ministry initiatives of Transformed & Transforming; and 2) provide a ministry center and revised Michigan Regional Center to more effectively serve the church through the strategic initiatives. The campaign was formally and successfully completed on July 1, 2017, and as of January 1, 2018, a total of $6,797,474 was committed to the campaign. We praise God for the generosity of people across the church who embrace the vision of Transformed & Transforming and are supporting it with both prayer and financial resources.

The RCA continues to partner with the Barnabas Foundation for resources around estate planning, planned giving, and planned gift resource management. The easiest gift you can make is a gift through your estate plan. Consider tithing your estate to the ongoing work of the RCA. For information about how you can include the RCA in your estate plans, or how you can derive lifetime income from a planned gift that will benefit you during life and the RCA after death, please contact Michele Quick at mquick@rca.org.

The mission and ministry of the RCA can only happen with the generous support of people throughout the church. As was noted above, only 33 percent of the RCA’s work is resourced through assessments. Please consider including a gift to the RCA in your regular giving. To give an outright gift in support of the RCA’s ministry and mission, please visit the RCA website at www.rca.org/give, or contact a development team member directly.
REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

To the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America, greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Please receive the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2017. Included in this report are the following:

- Update on the changes in our leadership.
- Our annual fall gathering.
- An affirmation of our support of last year’s proposed RCA anti-racism policy.
- A request to improve relationships with the GSC.

Before we begin our report, we wish to acknowledge the loss of two vital members of the AABC and RCA families in 2017. The untimely passings of our coordinator, the Rev. Antoine “Tony” Campbell, in July and our vice chairperson, Deidre “Dee” Fiscus, in December were as painful as they were startling. Both were vital members of the AABC and servants of our Lord. Tony saw the direction we need to seek, and Dee understood the urgency to get there. They will be sadly missed but never forgotten. The healing has begun, and we move on thanking God that they both so let their lights shine that we may praise our Father in heaven—one pointing us in the right direction and another shining light on our understanding, both acquiring their radiance from above. (Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal!)

Change in Leadership

Due to the aforementioned, the AABC found itself in need of new leadership in 2017. Tony’s passing left us without a coordinator and Dee’s without a vice chairperson.

After grieving Tony’s passing, our chairperson, James Steward, immediately called a meeting of the AABC executive committee. The following is an excerpt from his report to the council in October:

We suffered a profound loss this summer as God called home to glory one of the very best in Tony. While totally shocked and saddened by the news that Tony died, I knew that Tony would want me and the council to proceed with the work that he started and the work we were called to do. Because Tony worked so hard for the council in his short four-year tenure, it would not be acceptable for me to allow our work as a council to die with Tony. Immediately, I called an emergency meeting of the AABC executive committee to recommend Earl James to serve once again as our interim coordinator. It was a position he held before and served us well in that capacity and I believed we needed strong and recognizable leadership in that moment. While others were discussed, the executive committee affirmed Earl and this decision was confirmed by Don Poest, interim general secretary.

From that point on we moved forward as a council to meet with Earl and started making plans for our October fall gathering.

Annual Fall Gathering

Our annual fall gathering was held October 27 to 28, 2017, at the Embassy Suites by Hilton in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Our gathering this year was purposeful and productive.
Neither time nor content allow us to cover all that went on during the gathering, and words cannot capture the context of the moments we shared together in the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, these are some of the highlights from that gathering.

We elected new officers for the council for the coming year:

Chairperson: Jeffery A. Hough (Muskegon, Michigan).
Secretary: Hellen Harvey (Oakland, California).
Immediate past chairperson: James Steward (New York, New York).

We welcomed Don Poest, interim general secretary, and Lee DeYoung, president of General Synod. We were greatly appreciative of the conversation we had with Don as he enlightened us on the state of the denomination. His presence at this meeting was vital following the loss of Tony and the departure of Tom De Vries. We believe we were all reassured that God is still in control of the RCA. The fact that Don and Lee were available for conversations with members was beneficial and encouraging. We were able to offer our prayers for Don after he addressed us.

During our Friday evening session, we were led in a poverty simulation by Communities First Association (cfapartners.org), arranged by Earl James. The following are some of the insights participants shared:

- It truly opened our eyes to the everyday struggles of others.
- It compelled us to think and reexamine our day-to-day thinking.
- It put some of us on the defensive.
- It encouraged us to want to extend a helping hand to those in our community.
- Some would like to take this experience and share it with others.

The fall gathering was attended by more than a dozen clergy. This was the most clergy to attend a gathering in many years. Clergy met together for a luncheon on Saturday. They shared stories and encouraged one another. While the clergy were meeting in one room, the laypersons were praying for them in another room. This was spontaneous and lay-led. Clergy expressed great appreciation for the gathering, acknowledged the need, and expressed the desire to continue to meet.

We were led in discussion by our coordinator concerning our purpose and the need to connect to our communities.

- Both clergy and lay persons together took part in the discussion.
- Many voices were heard and the conversation, while earnest, was seasoned with laughter.
- The presence of the Holy Spirit was felt by all.
- Concrete discussions took place and a sense of hope for the future prevailed.

We all departed the fall gathering knowing we had been in the presence of the Holy Spirit. We had followed the leading of the Spirit and knew our meeting was not in vain. We were energized by our fellowship together and the unity of purpose that pervaded the gathering. Lay and clergy met together to be about their Father’s business. We left encouraged as we sought to capture our vision and fulfill our purpose. We prayed together, listened together, ate together, laughed together, praised together, and learned together; together we were uplifted by the Holy Spirit. Much had happened that could have caused this fall gathering to be unfruitful, but God had showed himself faithful and had brought us together, and we
departed savoring the fruits of our labor. (In short, we were fulfilling our RCA mission statement: a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.)

Proposed RCA Anti-Racism Policy

The report for this council in 2017 was presented by our chairperson, James Steward, on the floor of Synod 2017. This report culminated in a proposed RCA anti-racism statement. This statement is an edict written after years of study and reflection from AABC constituents. This council is appreciative for the opportunity for the proposed RCA anti-racism policy to be read at Synod. We further express our pleasure with the actions taken by GSC (led by General Synod president Lee DeYoung) to develop a joint task force with members from the AABC to implement this statement. We wait with great anticipation for the outcome of this endeavor and express our continued support for this statement and its implementation, and by faith we have hope that our unifying love for Christ and in Christ will pilot future discussions. Our prayers are with the GSC.

Connecting with GSC

The General Synod bylaws in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2017 edition, p. 105) states:

The General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.

There have been conversations by constituents of this council expressing our desire and need to communicate more effectively with the GSC. Historically, the GSC and the council alike have been content for the GSC merely to receive one annual report from the council updating GSC on our activities and with any recommendations attached. That seems to us an ineffective, inefficient way for standing advisory committees to advise GSC.

Why can there not be less-formal communications between councils and several GSC members at any time advice needs to be given? What are some best practices to guide and govern communications between active advisory groups and the boards and committees they advise? The current level of communication—single annual reports from each council—seems simply to be done “because we always did it that way.” The AABC believes it is time for the GSC and its councils to look at fresh ways to improve their ongoing working relationships and makes this recommendation:

Recommendation to GSC:
That GSC form a task force to meet (virtually, whenever possible) over a period of no more than 12 months in order to make recommendations to the GSC that promote more effective communication and relationships between the GSC and its racial/ethnic councils. The task force should include leaders from each council, including Native American representation, the three racial/ethnic coordinators, three to five GSC members, and at least two organizational development experts who are not on GSC or a council. The task force should conclude its work and report back to GSC by February 28, 2019.
GSC met by videoconference on April 16, 2018, engaged in initial discussion around this recommendation, and voted “To discuss the recommendation from the AABC and the broader topic of communication between the GSC and other bodies at the GSC’s October 2018 meeting” (GSC 18-21). Reasons for engaging this discussion in October:

- GSC recognizes the importance of the questions about communication raised by the AABC in its report, and questions about communication also seem to extend beyond the councils to other bodies such as the commissions. GSC feels the need to engage in a fuller discussion at its October meeting.
- Providing that General Synod 2018 approves the GSC’s recommendation of Eddy Alemán to serve as the RCA’s general secretary, he will be in place as general secretary by October, and GSC would like the general secretary to be part of this discussion.

Transformed & Transforming

The mission statement of the Reformed Church in America states:

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

Our mission statement, our vision, and living out our vision are expressed in our strategic priority: Transformed & Transforming. The three interconnected strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming are Cultivating Transformation in Christ, Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow, and Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission. Moreover, the document “RCA Ministry Plan: 2013–2028” includes plans for African American pastors and various forms of ethnic churches (see five-year goals under Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches and Church Multiplication). We as the AABC state for the record that we wholeheartedly embrace the mission statement of the RCA and the tenets of Transformed & Transforming.

We acknowledge it is a biblical vision, and we also attest to the fact that members of our council were active participants of the vision-casting process that led us on the journey to Transformed & Transforming. We further acknowledge that the current reality in the North American landscape is changing, and due to a number of factors, there is a declining participation in Christian churches. We are the African American Black Council of the Reformed Church in America. We are not exempt from the increasing number of people with no religious affiliation, people becoming more spiritual and less religious, and the “itching ear” messages of a prosperity gospel that disproportionately targets our communities.

We affirm that a church that lives and loves like Jesus is the only deterrent to the realities stated above. Our cultures are different, the hue of our skin likewise, our histories and experiences varied, and our traditions diverse, but our Savior is one and the same. We acknowledge the latter and have been empowered to overcome the former. It is the intent of our current chair to recommend to our executive that we include on our coming agendas time spent praying together and discerning how we are to live into the vision of the denomination to which God has called us for the furthering of his kingdom.
Conclusion

2017 was a challenging and eventful year for the AABC. We lost valued and beloved members of our family. We saw changes in our leadership. We met together with the Holy Spirit at our fall gathering. As we move into 2018, we are determined to continue to be led by God’s Spirit. Our executive committee recently met in January, and our council’s spring meeting occurred on April 27 and 28.

In addition to these endeavors, we will finalize our revised bylaws, collectively author a purpose statement, and set the vision for our future. We pray with all the RCA as we seek a general secretary and seek a voice in the hiring of our next coordinator. Those of us who attended Sankofa journeys in the past understand that a Sankofa bird is one that forges ahead while keeping an eye on what is behind. We as the AABC are on a journey that forges us ahead, propelled by our past.

Humbly submitted,

Rev. Jeffery A. Hough, chairperson
For the African American Black Council of the Reformed Church in America

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

The Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b, states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.” To that end, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents as well as advocating for the rights of our people while ensuring that we speak up and strategize together on positive strategies of resolving issues that separate us all as God’s people.

Annual Consultation

As it entered its 39th year of ministry in 2017, CPAAM had an annual consultation meeting from June 6 to 8 at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. In celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, CPAAM had decided on the theme of the “Spirit of Reformation” for the annual consultation. This was the first time the consultation met at Hope College. Participants in the CPAAM annual consultation had an opportunity to worship at the opening service of the General Synod, where they presented a special offering song.

Engage in Christ’s Kingdom Mission

Doug Leonard, who was then serving as the RCA’s director of Global Mission, was the keynote speaker at the consultation meeting. He presented and helped the participants gain new perspectives about global mission in this rapidly changing world. Derrick Jones, supervisor of RCA mission in Africa, and Luis Ruiz, supervisor of RCA mission in North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, both took the opportunity to introduce the RCA
mission programs in their areas and to ask for ongoing support. During the consultation meeting, CPAAM leaders raised support and made pledges for Lubna Younas, who is a Pakistani Christian and the first female theological professor at a Protestant seminary in Pakistan. Younas teaches Old Testament at St. Thomas Theological College in Karachi, Pakistan. One of the programs at this consultation meeting involved participating in a local volunteer community service opportunity. All participants went out to one of the “Hungry for Christ” sites and provided three hours of hands-on service to re-pack foods that would be distributed to under-resourced communities. Overall, this year’s consultation meeting proved to be a great opportunity for participants to listen, learn, and engage in both global and local missions in the RCA. CPAAM was able to be a valuable resource to build and strengthen the mission of the RCA because our churches and leaders already have original ties and ecumenical relationships with their mother countries.

**Equip Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow**

We had our thirty-second Jesus Retreat, which is the annual youth retreat of RCA churches in New York and New Jersey, during the summer of 2017. Three years ago, one of the Hispanic RCA churches in North Bergen joined the Jesus Retreat as well. This is a good sign that the composition of the participants in this retreat is changing toward becoming multiracial and multicultural. In the future, CPAAM would like to support the Jesus Retreat to host more diverse churches and individuals who want to have the opportunity to develop leadership and discipleship. CPAAM would be a good venue to recruit both youth and English ministry leaders who are likely to experience difficulty and struggle with first generation–dominant ministry environments. CPAAM would also be a good bridge to connect next generation leaders in immigrant churches to RCA denominational programs and resources. CPAAM and the RCA Korean Churches Association could provide financial support and supervision for the Jesus Retreat and leadership training.

**Cultivate Transformation in Christ**

Three years ago, the Japanese American United Church (JAUC) started a Disability Awareness Sunday at JAUC. Last year, Terry DeYoung, coordinator for Disability Concerns, visited the church. We now have a disability advocate who is a dancer and a choreographer and who is blind. We are focusing on physical and mental health disabilities, as well as care for the caregivers of persons with disabilities, including seniors. We hope to partner with CPAAM to bring disability awareness to the Asian American community, where disability concerns are met with silence, stigma, and shame.

The Lao congregation at Peace Church in Eagan, Minnesota, has grown from 20 members to 125 members within the past five years. The Lao population in Minnesota is around 25,000, and most of them are Buddhists. Within this population, less than 1 percent are Christians. Pastor Chan and the Lao congregation are focusing on building one-on-one discipleship, which is a proven discipleship training method for the congregation. Recently, the church baptized five people. There are new people every Sunday. In order to build relationships with newcomers, Pastor Chan tries to actively engage in people’s lives. Like other immigrant churches, the Lao congregation is trying to make harmony with the younger generation and the older folks.

Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese churches have been faithful in regular prayer commitment, Bible studies, and hosting new discipleship seminars.
Conclusion

In order to fully live out Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s 15-year strategy for mission and ministry, CPAAM churches and leaders encourage GSC to provide more language-friendly materials and documents, in addition to more culturally appropriate methods of communication. CPAAM has been in new challenges: embracing and training young emerging leaders within our ministry, planting new churches across the country, welcoming churches and ministers who want to join the RCA, and enhancing effective communication with leaders in the larger body of the RCA. We thank all GSC members, GSC staff, and all our members and leaders of CPAAM for their time and effort given to the ongoing faithful ministry of CPAAM.

Respectfully submitted,

Members of the CPAAM executive committee
David Theonugraha (chairperson), Chanthala Sythavongsa (vice chairperson), Kyunghoon Suh, Lynn Min, Daniel Kim, Shi Yang Lin, Gerri Yoshida, Stephen Kim

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

The Book of Church Order states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2015 edition, p. 105). To that end, the Council for Hispanic Ministries shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents, as well as advocate for the rights of our people while ensuring that we speak up and work together on positive strategies to resolve issues that separate us all as God’s people.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries held its 43rd annual meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on August 24 to 26, 2017. The theme for that meeting was “Reformed and Always Reforming according to the Word of God.” The gathering focused on the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We had a great meeting of worship, celebration, and fellowship.

The executive committee and the director of strategic leadership development and Hispanic ministries are presently working in several areas:

1. We have 23 church plants in progress, which is almost half of the proposed vision of 50 church plants in five years (2017 to 2022). Praise God for that! God is raising a great group of church planters, and many RCA churches, classes, and regional synods are embracing the vision and partnering with the council to plant all of these churches in many different cities in the U.S. and Canada. Reference the map below to see where all of these new congregations are located. As you can see, we still have a lot of work to do, but we are blessed to see what God is doing.
2. The third annual RCA Hispanic Church Planting Summit took place in Orlando, Florida, on February 26 and 27, 2018. The meeting was a great success. We had more than 70 leaders present. These included church planters, parent church leaders, and classis and regional synod leaders. The theme for the meeting was “Feed the Fire.”

3. We are working on providing fundraising training for Latino leaders with the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, which is part of the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University. The title of this certificate is “Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising for Latino Leaders.” The dates of this training were scheduled for March 22 and 23, 2018, and April 5 and 6, 2018, at Western Theological Seminary. We are focusing on training established pastors and church planters to become effective fundraisers to raise the funds needed for their ministries.

4. In January 2018, we launched a leadership collaborative with Hispanic pastors and emerging leaders in West Michigan. Seventeen leaders are part of this leadership development leadership collaborative; the focus is on leadership and preaching.

5. We are working hard to equip Hispanic pastors. Thirty-four Hispanic leaders are going through the certificate program at Western Theological Seminary. This program prepares these leaders to become commissioned pastors and will be the foundation for those who would like to pursue an M.Div. at Western Theological Seminary and become fully ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

6. Six RCA Hispanic churches completed the Reformed Leadership Initiative process in December 2017. This was a two-year leadership process that equipped them to develop leaders for the work of ministry. All of these churches now have a leadership development pathway.

7. Fourteen Hispanic church planters are going through Church Multiplication Network’s training process for church planters. The group meets once a month to go through 12 modules that will equip them to be successful church planters in their communities.
Concluding Comments

With much love and many prayers we submit this report to you. We are thankful for the work that the interim general secretary, the director of strategic leadership development and coordinator of Hispanic ministries, and the General Synod Council have done for the Hispanic people of the Reformed Church in America. We know and understand that there is a long way to go to where we want to be, but we are going in the right direction. We believe that Transformed & Transforming is giving us focus for ministry effectiveness. We pray for God’s blessings and for the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be with us as we continue on this journey of transformation to live and love like Jesus.

Respectfully submitted,

The executive committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind ...” (1 Corinthians 1:4-5)

Since its origins in 1628, the RCA has given testimony to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Now, in the midst of Transformed & Transforming, we continue to share stories of how God is at work among us. We also share ideas, goals, concerns, prayer needs, and other information and resources. This happens in a wide variety of ways, utilizing longstanding communication channels alongside new ones.

Supporting Transformed & Transforming

Over the last year, GSC staff have worked to raise awareness of Transformed & Transforming, the denomination’s vision to engage in discipleship, leadership, and mission. Stories of transformation have taken the form of magazine and website features. They’ve also been tweets, Facebook posts, and video testimonies.

Transformed & Transforming initiatives were designed in response to needs expressed by churches and leaders. As those initiatives took shape, congregations and leaders were invited to take their next step in order to better fulfill God’s call for them. A plethora of learning and equipping opportunities are available. The RCA communication team has supported each initiative in sharing these opportunities and in developing related resources where needed.

Over the past year, communication staff have also worked to share a clear vision of what Transformed & Transforming is and the opportunities it holds for RCA congregations and members.

Responding to Disasters

Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Wildfires. 2017 was a particularly devastating year. The communication team shared frequent news updates on disasters, including how they impacted RCA churches, communities, and mission partners; reported how RCA Global
Mission responded and is responding to each disaster; and invited churches and individuals to help by donating and by volunteering.

**Coordinating Communication**

Communication trends are in constant flux, reflecting changes in our world, our homes, and our churches. GSC staff strategically provide communication tools that align with the needs of RCA members. To best serve the diversity in the RCA, communication happens both in print and electronically through social media, email, the RCA website, other websites, and apps.

With the blessings of a more ethnically diverse denomination, there is also the need and opportunity to communicate in a number of languages.

Communication efforts are coordinated across these various channels and languages to connect with RCA members most effectively and meet their communication needs.

**Changing Communication Meets the Needs of Leaders, Members, and Seekers**

The RCA communication team manages an array of websites and social media interactions online. Thousands of people have interacted with the RCA on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vimeo in the last year.

The digital communication team continues to utilize a Google AdWords grant of $10,000 per month in free advertising. Ad campaigns have included helping searchers find an RCA church nearby, highlighting seasonal worship resources, and promoting the Gift of Hope Christmas campaign for RCA Global Mission. The RCA website has seen more than 122,000 visits as a result of this grant since it was awarded in 2015.

More and more people are accessing the RCA’s digital communication channels from smartphones and tablets rather than computers. Emails, social media content, and the RCA website are optimized for mobile use, including a mobile-friendly online donation system.

**Print Pieces Continue to Serve the Church**

While technology allows communication to take place in a number of ways, many people still desire print communication. Within the RCA, this medium includes *RCA Today* magazine, which is produced three times a year for each RCA household. *RCA Today* continues to support Transformed & Transforming by communicating stories of church and individual discipleship, leadership development, and mission. *RCA Today* underwent a redesign in the last year, introducing a new look and new content features. A readership survey is underway to measure engagement and identify opportunities for growth.

A bulletin insert, also called *RCA Today*, shares RCA ministry stories and increases connection with RCA mission work around the world.

To better marry new technology with print communication, an app-based electronic edition of *RCA Today* magazine debuted in fall 2016. The app includes the full content of the magazine, formatted for easy reading on a phone or tablet, plus additional interactive features such as videos, photos, music, and more. The app is available in the iOS App Store and Google Play.
Translation Efforts Increase

As the RCA grows in diversity, the need for translated materials also grows. In addition to offering the 2017 *Book of Church Order* in Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin, the *RCA Today* bulletin is produced in Spanish and Korean each month. A number of Transformed & Transforming resources have also been translated, including a multi-year leadership development curriculum. Resources for church multiplication, disability advocacy, cultural agility and advocacy, volunteers and mission teams, and women’s leadership development have also been translated this year. A Korean translation of *Worship the Lord*, the RCA’s liturgy, was completed in the last year. The RCA’s annual Advent devotions were bilingual for the first time in 2017, distributed in both English and Spanish.

In order to make these resources available to the largest audience, the majority of the translated material is posted on the web in lieu of printing. This is cost-effective and allows translated material to be made available more quickly, and at no cost to churches. This momentum will continue as we look to bring RCA communications into the languages in which our members worship the Lord.

Report on the Faith Alive Christian Resources Partnership

The RCA continues to work with Faith Alive Christian Resources as a partner in distributing resources. RCA staff meet with Faith Alive leadership to ensure the partnership is working well and supporting the resource needs of both the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Staff cooperation between Faith Alive and the RCA is strong. The RCA receives revenue from the Reformed Church Press materials sold through Faith Alive, and that revenue is then used to produce additional resources to support the RCA and other Reformed congregations throughout the United States and Canada.

The Office of Historical Services

The Archives of the RCA serve as the documentary memory of the church. It includes documents, photographs, videotapes, CDs, cassette tapes, hard drives, floppy discs, LP records, and more as technology changes. These records tell the stories of all those who have engaged in the ministry of the church and built a strong foundation for where we are today. The Archives looks forward as it gathers, preserves, and makes available the stories of past generations so that tomorrow has a yesterday. It is the record of Transformed & Transforming for sure!

The office assists congregations, classes, regional synods, the General Synod, our mission fields, and staff offices in order to assure that a strong future is built upon a solid understanding of the past. The primary goal of the Archives in this process is to offer stability and relevance to the long-term mission of the church.

Records Storage

The Archives are housed in space leased from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and also stored in an underground area in Grand Rapids. This year, the regional synod of Canada transferred all Canadian records to the RCA Archives so that a separate storage facility and operation is no longer needed there.

In 2016, New Brunswick Theological Seminary offered a challenge grant to the RCA for the further development of the Archives. That grant allowed for increased staffing and the start of a more aggressive digitization program to make records available more widely.
One of the first efforts has been the completion of the scanning of the minutes of General Synod. All minutes will be available on the RCA website from the first volume through the last synod.

More digital equipment has been procured so that an increasing amount of material will be available to researchers, making RCA history more accessible than ever before.

**Historical Series**

The archivist also assists with the publication of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America and serves as its production editor. The archivist works closely with the general editor and the Commission on History in the promotion and production of the volumes in the series by designing, typesetting, and indexing the books and assisting in photo research and fact checking. A full list of the nearly 90 volumes can be found at www.rca.org/series.

**The Growth and Development of the Archives**

This year the Archives held an open house and offered an RCA History Day as a means of outreach and familiarization with our collections and denominational history.

The archivist also connects with people, groups, and congregations both within and outside the RCA. He met with the Dutch Cousins in Frankfurt, Kentucky, and preached for them at the Old Mud Meeting House in Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

The office also prepared a video on women in mission and ministry for the Women’s Sankofa trip in the fall and a display on RCA women in Sage Library. Regular postings on Facebook and social media also help popularize both the Archives and RCA history.

Researchers from around the world continue to visit and use RCA records. This past year we enjoyed visitors from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Poland, Germany, Japan, and Bahrain. A volunteer from Illinois also spent ten days in the Archives to assist with data entry for a minister’s pamphlet database.

The archivist continues to be active and speak at regional and national professional gatherings.
REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2017

Response to *MGS 2017, R 17-18, pp. 136–137*, Engage in discussion around “covenant”

To request that the GSC as well as each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God’s intention for God’s people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and a small group of pastors and elders so that the rich diversity of the church (including the rich diversity in age, sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity) might be reflected, and should include the following questions:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of conversations at all levels should be shared across the classes and regions. The summary of these conversations should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary in consultation with GSC, regional executives, and the small group of pastors and elders, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world.

In the fall of 2017, the interim general secretary worked with a diverse team of 12 RCA members to develop a discussion process called Listening Together and facilitation resources to accomplish this recommendation, along with an electronic survey to collect responses. The team included regional synod executives, pastors, and elders as required by R 17-18. Links to the materials and survey were sent to all classis clerks in September, encouraging classes to hold a discussion during a stated classis meeting and also to encourage classis members and delegates to take the discussion back to their local congregations and other RCA groups. General Synod Council and commission members also engaged the discussion process together when they met jointly in October 2017. A total of 871 responses from around the denomination were collected, and the interim general secretary reported on these results as part of his address to the General Synod (see pp. 17–23).

Response to *MGS 2017, R 17-32, p. 164*, Mission placements for young adults

1. This falls within the current Transformed & Transforming initiatives and will be run by General Synod staff, specifically under the direction of the Global Mission team.
2. RCA missionaries and mission personnel have already developed and will continue to develop job descriptions and ministry opportunities across the globe.
3. It is requested that RCA churches and classes help recruit young adults for these opportunities.
4. RCA churches and classes are invited to think creatively about ways of sending, funding, and supporting the change of this corporate norm for the sake of the kingdom.

The Cultivate program was developed to fulfill General Synod’s adoption of R 17-32, in response to Dan Gillett’s presidential proposal. Cultivate sends young people ages 18–25 into the mission field to serve alongside long-term RCA missionaries and mission partners. Cultivate participants can serve for a summer or a year-long term. During the 2018–2019 program year, Cultivate has approved 12 participants to serve at six different sites, both in North America and internationally. Through a generous contribution from the Church Growth Fund, Cultivate has been able to offer scholarships to all participants, making the program’s fundraising goals very reasonable.

Response to MGS 2017, R 17-40, p. 232, Refugee resources

To direct the General Synod Council to continue to create and make available resources for churches to engage with the refugee issue and the people who are most affected by it; and further,

To partner with the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well as our Formula of Agreement partners to resettle refugees, be active in advocacy for immigrants, and to support refugee relief around the world; and further,

To publish on the RCA website on a quarterly basis the amount of money raised for refugee work and the plan for investing those resources in efforts to address the global refugee emergency; and further:

To report progress to the 2018 General Synod.

The global refugee crisis continues to grow, and displaced people around the world need our help more than ever. RCA Global Mission continues to respond to the crisis through projects with longtime partners around the world and here in North America.

Globally, we have been able to help RECONCILE as they work in refugee camps and also have been able to partner closer with the Waldensian Church in Italy through RCA missionary JJ TenClay in Palermo, Italy. JJ has been an integral part of the Humanitarian Corridors Project that is welcoming many of the refugees who are making their way across the Mediterranean. JJ helps people get the services and care that they need to settle their families.

In North America, RCA Global Mission continues to partner with Church World Service, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Bethany Christian Services to welcome refugees into our communities and to find pathways to success for them. That work includes initial refugee resettlement as well as working with local church communities to provide them the tools to be welcoming and helpful during the refugees’ times of adjustment.
As requested in R 17-40, the amount of funds raised for refugee work is posted on the RCA website at www.rca.org/refugees, along with plans for how those funds are spent. In addition, on that webpage, congregations and individuals can find suggestions for ways to learn more about the situation of refugees around the world and get involved with advocating for and helping refugees.

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2016

Response to *MGS 2016*, R 16-29, pp. 154–155, Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee

REPORT OF THE PASTORAL FORMATION COORDINATING COMMITTEE

As a response to the recommendations of the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group, the 2016 General Synod adopted R 16-29:

Reconstitute the Call, Care, and Standards Collaborative Group under the new name of Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC). The PFCC will meet for a period of two years, and its funding will come from the General Synod assessment for theological education. At the completion of this two-year period, the PFCC will propose to the General Synod a permanent committee, along with appropriate staffing and budget. The PFCC’s responsibilities will include:

1. In consultation with the professorate, coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod. In conjunction with this process, coordinate the evaluation of overall effectiveness of the certification processes in assisting candidates to meet the standards established by the RCA.
2. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among congregations and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.
3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation as it relates to RCA church order and the mission of the church.
4. Assist the GSC in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

Therefore, in fulfillment of this recommendation, the PFCC offers this report to the General Synod and offers three recommendations.

RF 18-1
To constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB). The purpose of the PFOB is to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future.

The PFOB is to serve the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs.
The responsibilities of the PFOB shall be:

1. Coordinate the processes by which all three theological agents implement the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry in partnership with the classes and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the processes.

2. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among congregations and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.

3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation and continuing education as they relate to RCA church order and the mission of the church.

4. Facilitate the exploration of the ever-changing and increasingly diverse North American context and collaborate to form the leaders capable of doing effective ministry in an increasingly multicultural world.

5. Explore collaboration between churches that are deeply committed to forming pastoral leadership within their congregations and the theological agents.

6. Coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod, in consultation with the General Synod professors (professorate).

7. Facilitate commissioned pastor preparation among classes as together we embrace the mission of the church.

8. Assist the General Synod Council in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education and any additional RCA funding to be requested, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

The PFOB shall consist of 13 voting members and one ex-officio, non-voting member. The membership of the PFOB shall reflect the diversity of the RCA in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. At least three members will be currently serving as General Synod professors. Members are to be chosen as follows:

1. The three executives of the RCA’s theological agents (WTS, NBTS, MFCA).

2. One additional member designated by each theological agent.

3. One member appointed by the GSC from among the GSC’s current members.

4. Six members from the RCA, nominated by the PFOB and appointed by the General Synod, two of whom shall be commissioned pastors. These six people will serve three-year, staggered terms, which will be renewable.

5. The general secretary, ex-officio and without vote.

The PFOB exists to serve classes, candidates, and congregations in the formation of pastoral leadership for the church. It is appointed by and directly accountable to the General Synod and is guided by the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. The PFOB shall
provide an annual report of its actions to the General Synod, to all classes, and to the boards of the three agents.

The GSC, functioning as the Executive Committee of the General Synod, in consultation with the PFOB, shall designate and fund appropriate staff support for the PFOB. Apart from costs for staff, which will be part of the GSC assessment budget, the expenses related to the PFOB shall be covered through the assessment for theological education.

The General Synod Council and the PFOB, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, shall work together to bring an official governing document for the PFOB to General Synod 2019 for approval.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

…in consultation with the General Synod professors (professorate).
7. Facilitate Assist the commissioned pastor preparation among classes as together we embrace the mission of the church.
8. Assist the General Synod Council in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education and any additional RCA funding to be requested, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

The PFOB shall consist of 13 voting members and one ex-officio, non-voting member. The membership of the PFOB shall reflect the diversity of the RCA in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. At least three members will be currently serving as General Synod professors. Members are to be chosen by the Commission on Nominations as follows:

1. The three executives of the RCA’s theological agents (WTS, NBTS, MFCA).
2. One member from each of the RCA’s theological agents currently serving as a theological professor or General Synod professor. One additional member designated by each theological agent.
3. One member appointed by the GSC from among the GSC’s current members.
4. Six members from the RCA, nominated by the PFOB and appointed by the General Synod; two of whom shall be commissioned pastors. These six people will serve three-year, staggered terms, which will be renewable.
5. The general secretary, ex-officio and without vote.

The PFOB exists to…. The president instructed the delegate to create a separate amendment for each of the foregoing proposed amendments to better facilitate their consideration.
A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

7. **Facilitate** Assist the commissioned pastor preparation among classes as together we embrace the mission of the church.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-1 as follows (deletions are stricken):

… and ethnicity. At least three members will be currently serving as General Synod professors. Members are…

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined):

…Members are to be chosen by the Commission on Nominations as follows:

**VOTED:** To adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to further amend RF 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

2. **One additional member designated by each theological agent.** One member from each of the RCA’s theological agents currently serving as a theological professor or General Synod professor.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to further amend RF 18-1 as follows (deletions are stricken):

4. Six members from the RCA, nominated by the PFOB and appointed by the General Synod, two of whom shall be commissioned pastors. These six people will serve three-year, staggered terms, which will be renewable.

At the suggestion of the president a motion was made and supported to table further discussion of amendments to RF 18-1 to allow time for additional editorial work to be done on them.

**VOTED:** To table any further discussion of amendments to RF 18-1.

Thereafter the pending motion to further amend RF 18-1 was removed from the table for further consideration.

**VOTED:** To adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to further amend RF 18-1 as follows (deletions are stricken, additions are underlined):
...Members are to be chosen by the Commission on Nominations as follows:

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

VOTED: To adopt RF 18-1 as amended.

The final version of RF 18-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**RF 18-1**

To constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB). The purpose of the PFOB is to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future.

The PFOB is to serve the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs.

The responsibilities of the PFOB shall be:

1. Coordinate the processes by which all three theological agents implement the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry in partnership with the classes and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the processes.
2. Facilitate appropriate resources, support, and sharing of best practices among congregations and classes in their discernment of the call of ministerial candidates and in their care of ministerial candidates in the ordination process.
3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation and continuing education as they relate to RCA church order and the mission of the church.
4. Facilitate the exploration of the ever-changing and increasingly diverse North American context and collaborate to form the leaders capable of doing effective ministry in an increasingly multicultural world.
5. Explore collaboration between churches that are deeply committed to forming pastoral leadership within their congregations and the theological agents.
6. Coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod, in consultation with the General Synod professors (professorate).
7. Facilitate commissioned pastor preparation among classes as together we embrace the mission of the church.
8. Assist the General Synod Council in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education and any additional RCA funding to be
requested, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

The PFOB shall consist of 13 voting members and one ex-officio, non-voting member. The membership of the PFOB shall reflect the diversity of the RCA in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. At least three members will be currently serving as General Synod professors. Members are to be nominated by the Commission on Nominations as follows:

1. The three executives of the RCA’s theological agents (WTS, NBTS, MFCA).
2. One additional member designated by each theological agent.
3. One member appointed by the GSC from among the GSC’s current members.
4. Six members from the RCA, appointed by the General Synod, two of whom shall be commissioned pastors. These six people will serve three-year, staggered terms, which will be renewable.
5. The general secretary, ex-officio and without vote.

The PFOB exists to serve classes, candidates, and congregations in the formation of pastoral leadership for the church. It is appointed by and directly accountable to the General Synod and is guided by the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. The PFOB shall provide an annual report of its actions to the General Synod, to all classes, and to the boards of the three agents.

The GSC, functioning as the Executive Committee of the General Synod, in consultation with the PFOB, shall designate and fund appropriate staff support for the PFOB. Apart from costs for staff, which will be part of the GSC assessment budget, the expenses related to the PFOB shall be covered through the assessment for theological education.

The General Synod Council and the PFOB, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, shall work together to bring an official governing document for the PFOB to General Synod 2019 for approval. (ADOPTED)

RF 18-2
To set the General Synod assessment for theological education to $829,000 for Fiscal Year 2019, to be allocated in the following manner:

1. An initial $75,000 given to the MFCA to cover expenses and to account for its lack of ability to raise funds compared to an educational institution.
2. 75 percent of the remaining funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, NBTS, and MFCA).
3. 20 percent distributed per capita according to the number of students within each agency who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.
4. 5 percent to cover the cost of the meetings of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-2 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To set the General Synod assessment for theological education to $829,000 $875,000 for Fiscal Year 2019, to be allocated in the following manner . . .

VOTED: To not amend RF 18-2.

RF 18-2
To set the General Synod assessment for theological education to $829,000 for Fiscal Year 2019, to be allocated in the following manner:

1. An initial $75,000 given to the MFCA to cover expenses and to account for its lack of ability to raise funds compared to an educational institution.
2. 75 percent of the remaining funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, NBTS, and MFCA).
3. 20 percent distributed per capita according to the number of students within each agency who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.
4. 5 percent to cover the cost of the meetings of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents. (ADOPTED)

This represents an assessment increase of 2.5 percent per confessing member. However, given the decreasing membership of the RCA, this actually decreases the amount of funding for the three agents. The PFCC had requested an increase to $875,000 given that the overall amount of the General Synod assessment for theological education has not changed in nine years. This increase was meant to meet the realistic demands of both of the seminaries as well as the allowing the MFCA to continue to educate candidates and grant Certificates of Fitness for Ministry while keeping costs manageable for the candidates. However, it is the authority of the GSC to determine the actual assessment amount as set forth above.

The PFCC is also proposing an amendment to the Book of Church Order to insert the Eight Standards for Theological Education.

RF 18-3
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined):
Sec. 6. The agents of the General Synod shall be guided by the following criteria in granting the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry:

a. Personal faith and evangelism: Demonstrate a mature personal faith in Jesus Christ and commitment and skill in nurturing others to embrace that faith.

b. Call: Demonstrate a life worthy of the gospel, a sense of call to the office of minister of Word and sacrament, an understanding of that office in the Reformed tradition, and a commitment to its responsibilities.

c. Scripture: Demonstrate a thorough understanding of the Scripture (with sufficient Greek and Hebrew to understand nuances of the biblical text), commitment to its authority as Word of God, and insight in its interpretation.

d. History and theology: Demonstrate a thorough understanding of the history and teachings of the Christian church and insight in their interpretation.

e. Reformed tradition: Demonstrate a thorough knowledge of and commitment to Reformed doctrine, government, and worship.

f. Leadership: Demonstrate the skill and understanding required to lead the people of God in faithfulness to their mission.

g. Pastoral care: Demonstrate skill, understanding, and compassion in caring for persons and congregations.

h. Worship and preaching: Demonstrate skill and understanding to lead worship, preach the gospel, and administer the sacraments.

[Subsequent sections renumbered.]

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to refer RF 18-3 to the Commission on Church Order.

Reasons:
1. There appear to be several run-on sentences and some of the words used, such as “thorough,” are not clearly defined.
2. The committee had concerns about the proposed placement of the qualifications in the BCO.

VOTED: To refer RF 18-3 to the Commission on Church Order to determine, in consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (current body)/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (proposed body), the appropriate placement in the BCO and make the wording less ambiguous.
First, while the three agents are entrusted with granting the CFM, there is no definition as to what constitutes “fitness.” The eight standards listed above represent the many years of discussion by the General Synod professors as well as the General Synod, most recently in a discussion on the standards for theological education at General Synod 2016. Thus, they provide the most thought-out definition of fitness for our ministerial candidates that the agents of the RCA may use in determining fitness for ministry.

Second, a similar category for the standards for education and competency for commissioned pastors is found in the BCO. The inclusion of the standards for ministers of Word and sacrament brings consistency in the nature of our standards.

The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry

While the PFCC is not bringing a formal recommendation regarding the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, the committee has discussed it at length and offers this discussion to the General Synod.

Understanding the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry

The Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) represents a judgment that incorporates a perspective shaped by the denomination, specifically as found in the Constitution of the RCA, which all candidates for ordination pledge to uphold. The CFM is enacted by the agents of the General Synod (the RCA seminaries and MFCA), and the agents are accountable to the General Synod for their work. However, the CFM is described in the Book of Church Order in the section that addresses the classis. It is not mentioned under the General Synod. One must trust that this is intentional and strategic.

The simple explanation for this is that “the CFM is a component of a larger, complex process.” The classis is ultimately responsible for the process in its entirety, from the initial point of entry to the final licensing and ordination as a minister of Word and sacrament at completion. The CFM is a component of the classis process, not vice versa. It allows the classis to perform due diligence, utilizing the expertise of the “agents” in caring for and preparing candidates. Let it be noted that the CFM is not insignificant or irrelevant; it is important and serves a crucial role, without which a candidate cannot be deemed competent and qualified to be ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament.

The classis discerns the call of a candidate, enrolls the candidate, nurtures the candidate, evaluates the candidate, examines the candidate, and ultimately ordains the candidate. The CFM functions as a contributing part of this process. It is embedded in the classis process while operating in its own and unique sphere. Its ecclesiastical function is to declare a candidate prepared to take the classis examinations for licensure and ordination.

The agents play a specific role in the classis process. The classis has an ecclesiastical role as bishop, and the agents do not claim similar authority. The classis as bishop is responsible for final decisions that include the more subjective and deeper issues where pastoral discernment is required, including the contextual nuances and relevant scriptural understandings represented by the ministries of the classis. The present CFM certifies a readiness according to the standards for the preparation for ministry on the part of the candidate to sit for final classis examinations for ordination; it does not anticipate or direct the results of those examinations, the responsibility of the classis.

In fulfillment of R 17-22 (MGS 2017, p. 146), past president Dan Gillett and Mike Hayes joined the PFCC and were included in the significant discussion concerning the CFM.
Cora Taitt, a member of both GSC and the PFCC, also participated in the discussion.

R 17-22
To direct the General Synod Council to send two of its members as well as two additional RCA members to meet with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) at one of the PFCC’s stated meetings to discuss and clarify the potential migration and redefinition of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to a certificate of academic readiness, and to report back to General Synod 2018.

The PFCC thanks the General Synod for allowing us to engage in these important conversations, and we look forward, if desired, to continuing our work together.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce, moderator

On behalf of the PFCC:
Jim Brownson
Jaeseung Cha
Eun Jae Joo
Cornelis Kors
Brad Lewis
Micah McCreary
Alvin Padilla
Cora Taitt

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2015

Response to MGS 2015, R-39, p. 181, Task Force on Interreligious Understanding

REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS TASK FORCE

R-39
To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Unity, to establish, for a period of three years, a General Synod task force on interreligious understanding and relations, in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of relationships and evangelism between Christians and people and groups of other religions, with the understanding that this task force should work closely with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work, both in North America and globally; and further,

to include in the mandate of this task force the need to make recommendations to the General Synod regarding where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing; and further,

to ask the task force to report annually to the General Synod for the duration of its work.

Introduction

The Interreligious Task Force met five times during the past three years. This was done in a cooperative relationship with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, with the chair of the EIRC serving on
the task force, as well as in conversation with “other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work” with the aim of presenting to this year’s synod a report and recommendation as to “the challenges and opportunities” of interfaith relations and “where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing.” What follows is a reflection on the deliberations of the task force, establishing the rationale for equipping our congregations for missional engagement with and among our neighbors from other religious communities. A recommendation related to the findings of the task force follows this report.

The Missional Mandate

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God’s saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. We are, in this sense, a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God’s renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while also embracing Jesus’ call to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

Although the RCA has a long history of bearing witness to Christ’s love in parts of the world where other faith traditions are dominant, we have not previously given careful and thoughtful articulation to what this means in terms of our missionary calling in our own society, where religious pluralism has become a defining reality. In a time when political and societal tensions are mounting as people develop polarized positions that drive a wedge between neighbors, it is especially critical to develop a better understanding of what it means to love neighbors of other religions with the transforming compassion of Christ. This report aims to serve the church by helping answer the question: “How do we give witness to the good news we have encountered in Jesus Christ while at the same time, sharing life and struggling with common issues more significantly and more sensitively than ever before with people of other faiths and ideologies, while also recognizing and resisting all those forces in the world that tend towards dehumanization and domination?” (Pittman, et al, Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective, p. 27).

Rooted in a Rich Mission History

For more than 200 years, the Reformed Church in America has initiated interreligious encounters and engaged in interreligious dialogue through our global mission program. Missionaries and the congregations who support them have, over the years, developed enduring and sometimes even multi-generational relationships of mutuality with people of other faith traditions. These relationships have allowed us to become acquainted with Buddhist and Confucianist traditions in China and Japan, Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Hinduism in India, and indigenous religions in North, Central, and South America, even though the filters through which we have viewed the religious “other” have not always been reflective of Christ’s compassionate embrace of all who share God’s image. A brief look at the missionary literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows evidence of racial and cultural superiority. Our missionaries were not immune to the temptation to embrace the imperialistic impulses of an era that too often tied the missionary movement to the colonialist spirit of the age.

Yet even while the prevalent cultural attitudes distorted relationships with people of other faiths, RCA missionaries were commended for developing positive models for interreligious engagement that are celebrated even today by the people among whom they lived and worked. This was especially true of medical missionaries such as Ida Scudder in south India, Wells Thoms in Oman, and Samuel Nordoff in Taiwan, all of whom
are remembered with great appreciation by the people among whom they ministered in the name of Christ. Others are celebrated for their scholarship, which helped people understand the faith of our neighbors in a more appreciative and knowledgeable way. One thinks here of John and Dorothy Van Ess, Samuel Zwemer, and more recently, Harold Vogelaar and Lewis Scudder, with their expertise in Islam; John Piet with Hinduism; and Charles Van Engen with animism in Central and South America. Our missionaries have learned both how to deeply love and respect the people among whom they minister while also witnessing in gracious love and truth to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Looking to our missionaries as examples, we are shown a way to bear witness to Christ’s love in a respectful and compassionate manner.

These examples serve as positive dialogical models of interreligious engagement to a post-9/11 world. This paper draws on their examples along with the foundational testimony of Scripture read through a Reformed lens to offer a case for developing a positive model for interreligious engagement for twenty-first-century RCA congregations.

The Call

We are a missional people called to be instruments of God’s saving purposes in the world. To embody the fullness of God’s mission, we are called to focus on two elements constituting a singular call: first, we are called to join with the renewing and reconciling work of God in creation; and second, we are called to bear witness to the gospel and nurture disciples in the way of Christ. Craig Ott and Stephen Tennett, in their book *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, speak of two seamlessly interwoven biblical mandates for mission: the *creation mandate* and the *gospel mandate*, both of which are necessary to participate fully in God’s mission in the world. The first speaks of a compassionate involvement in the maintenance of divinely instituted “underlying ethical values such as protecting human dignity, stewardship of the environment, justice and compassion,” the second of the proclamation of the good news of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ answering his call to make disciples of all nations. In the holistic 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. This is what distinguished the witness of those early RCA missionaries who embodied the call of Christ in their ministry and lives—the recognition that the division between proclamation and dialogue, word and deed, is a false dichotomy in the economy of God’s redemptive work in the world. Both are required to give holistic witness to the gospel of grace. The Christian Reformed Church in North America, in its document “Reformed Christian Engagement with People of Other Faiths,” reminds us that this is an essential message of Scripture:

Our Christian identity ought to be visible in all that we do. This does not mean, however, that evangelistic witness is our only calling in life. We are also to be generous, practice hospitality, bless our persecutors, live at peace with everyone, feed our hungry enemies and give our thirsty enemies water, honor civil authorities and pay our taxes, and do no harm to our neighbor. (Rom. 12:8–13:10, passim) The prophet Jeremiah put it this way to the Babylonian exiles: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jer. 29:7) As we think about our relationship with neighbors who do not share our faith, we must always remind ourselves of what our Lord taught us: “Love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:37-38) He also reminded us in the parable of “The Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) that we
should be prepared to be surprised about the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

The Urgency of the Task

The grounds for interreligious dialogue lies here—in the recognition that the creation and gospel mandates both arise out of God’s compassion for all who have been made in the divine image. Dialogue in this case is not attempting to find a common denominator for a supra-religious ideology or avoiding the difficult topics that arise out of religious differences but rather a commitment to the kind of respectful listening and learning that marks the best human friendships. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves if we do not take the time to get to know them. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves if we shun respectful dialogue. It is Christ’s love that compels us to build these kinds of relationships with our neighbors.

This is an especially crucial point given that too often the motivation for a missional engagement with people from other faiths is fear, often incited by their growing numbers, not only in urban settings but increasingly in smaller towns and rural settings. A fear-based reaction in this case is contrary to the spirit of Christ as it is driven not by love for neighbor but by preservation—of the self, of our immediate community, and of our nations. This is a fear we need to examine as we consider what it means to enter into Christlike relations with our neighbors. We must confess how that fear, individually and collectively, too often has led us not into positive relations with our neighbors but into an isolation that allows dehumanizing stereotypes to take root in our lives and distort our relationships.

One result of this fear, arising from continuing trends of migration mixed with North America’s sordid history of racism and xenophobia, is anti-Muslim fervor that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to meet our Muslim neighbors as neighbors, much less love them with the love of Christ. Sadly, Christians have been among those fostering distorted stereotypes, often without realizing that doing so is a violation of the ninth commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). This is a principal reason why the call for developing a positive plan for interreligious relations is such an urgent one: to counter the relationship-destroying fear that hinders our ability to live with Christlike love for our neighbors—all of our neighbors.

This Christlike love includes the biblical theme of hospitality, which is rooted in the character of God and revealed in God’s desire for the flourishing of all people in relationship to God and others. The Old Testament contains themes of God’s call for special care for the alien and the stranger, such as the command to “love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19). The example of the early church and the teachings of the New Testament in passages such as Romans 12 reinforce this theme by calling Christians to welcome the stranger as we also have been welcomed in Christ. Our Reformed tradition teaches that the act of loving is born of the Holy Spirit working within us to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus leads us to pray for our enemy, love our neighbor, and to move toward the margins where the most vulnerable to dehumanization and harm live and to befriend them.

All of this speaks to the need to act with urgency to pursue dialogue, love, and justice for and with our neighbors of different religions, particularly those who are threatened with insults and violence and narrowed into categories where their humanity is ignored. Jeremiah 29 reminds us that seeking the good of our neighbors rebounds in good for us as well. It also allows us to live in that space where God wants us to live—the space where love for God and neighbor represent a seamless whole.
The Benefits of Interreligious Engagement

God’s call to the RCA is no different from what it has always been; it is a call that has compelled hundreds of RCA doctors and teachers and pastors and evangelists and social workers to offer their gifts to the ongoing call of God to share his love with the world, a compulsion that has driven many to leave home and family to engage foreign cultures and peoples with a holistic ministry, touching body, mind, and spirit. Today, one can often go across the street to meet the very same kind of people and challenges those nineteenth-century missionaries crossed oceans to find. In a society that is growing more multicultural and multi-religious every year, the ability to listen carefully, articulate one’s beliefs without antagonism or coercion, and explore differences is more than a matter of social etiquette. It is the call of the gospel and the call to the church.

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 something to fear. Iron sharpens iron. Dialogue with persons of other faiths invites us to know our full selves as Christians, not unlike our missionary forebears knew.

Even apart from the benefit of living at the center of God’s will, we gain benefit from having our identity as Christians enriched and deepened by an interaction with those who are outside our sometimes spiritually insular enclaves. In building relationships, tearing down stereotypes, and pursuing justice, we learn from others and live out commitments that come directly out of our deepest biblical values:

- Meeting human need.
- Working for social justice.
- Embodying mission and evangelism.
- Resolving human conflict.
- Strengthening families, communities, congregations, and workplaces (These are the spheres of relationships identified in “The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”).

For surely, God said, “… I know the plans I have for you … plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). This is the bedrock of dialogue that we believe to be God’s calling to us at this kairos moment in our history, a calling captured well by the RCA’s vision statement (www.rca.org/ourmission), which could be reimagined in the following way:

Imagine the witness of a faith community with a passion for reconciliation, compassion, and justice, reaching out, meeting others, and playing an active role in its community.

Imagine a congregation with an intentional mission action plan, a vibrant volunteering program, a global awareness, and a local commitment.

Imagine the body of Christ with a faith commitment as deep as those nineteenth-century missionaries, reaching out to the “other” with the gift of reconciliation and grace.

Imagine living and loving like Jesus, where all God’s children make a difference.
The task is urgent. The blessings are manifold. The call can no longer be ignored.

Recommendation

The Interreligious Task Force offers the following recommendation to facilitate the RCA's ongoing interreligious relations work:

RF 18-4
To direct the general secretary to authorize and fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, to facilitate the RCA's interreligious relations work, including equipping congregations, leaders, and students for missional interreligious engagement; and further,

To conduct the RCA's interreligious work through a joint committee with the CRCNA, consistent with the Reformed Collaborative. The committee will be comprised of the RCA coordinator for interreligious relations, the RCA ecumenical associate, CRCNA staff, and practitioners and experts in interreligious relations from both the RCA and CRCNA. The joint committee will report its work to the General Synod each year through the Commission on Christian Unity.

Both the position of coordinator for interreligious relations and the joint committee shall be funded for a period of five years, at which time the effectiveness of structuring the RCA's interreligious work in this manner will be evaluated and the Commission on Christian Unity will bring recommendations to the General Synod regarding whether to continue this structure for interreligious work.

Reasons:
The recommendation adopted by General Synod 2015 (MGS 2015, p. 181) states that this work shall be “permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing.” Making this a staff position ensures that. The staff position would simply make permanent the responsibilities of the missions appointment designated “coordinator for interreligious relations and refugee support ministries” (created in 2017 but not yet funded) that are concerned with interreligious engagement and education.

Connecting the RCA's interreligious work to the Commission on Christian Unity makes joint endeavors with the CRCNA more structurally aligned. Our ecumenical partners (including the CRCNA) facilitate the work of interreligious and ecumenical relations through the same office or committee (for the CRCNA, the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee).

A motion was made and supported to refer RF 18-4 as follows:

To refer RF 18-4 to the 2020 Vision Group as part of the information they consider as they prepare to bring final recommendations in 2020.

VOTED: To not refer RF 18-4.

RF 18-4 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to postpone action on RF 18-4 as follows:
To postpone action on RF 18-4 until the 2020 General Synod.

The president ruled that the motion to postpone was not in order.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-4 as follows (addition is underlined, deletion is stricken):

Both the position of coordinator for interreligious relations and the joint committee shall be funded for a period of five years, then reevaluated, at which time the effectiveness …

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not amend RF 18-4.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt RF 18-4.

RF 18-4
To direct the general secretary to authorize and fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, to facilitate the RCA’s interreligious relations work, including equipping congregations, leaders, and students for missional interreligious engagement; and further,

To conduct the RCA’s interreligious work through a joint committee with the CRCNA, consistent with the Reformed Collaborative. The committee will be comprised of the RCA coordinator for interreligious relations, the RCA ecumenical associate, CRCNA staff, and practitioners and experts in interreligious relations from both the RCA and CRCNA. The joint committee will report its work to the General Synod each year through the Commission on Christian Unity.

Both the position of coordinator for interreligious relations and the joint committee shall be funded for a period of five years, at which time the effectiveness of structuring the RCA’s interreligious work in this manner will be evaluated and the Commission on Christian Unity will bring recommendations to the General Synod regarding whether to continue this structure for interreligious work. (ADOPTED)

The following motion was made and supported:

That any unused assessments collected to provide financial support for motion RF 18-4 be returned to the classes in proportion to the way they were received.
A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt the motion.

Respectfully submitted,
John Hubers, moderator

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2014

REPORT OF THE FIVE-FOLD TEST TASK FORCE

In 2014, the General Synod took the following action by adopting R-15 (MSG 2014, R-15, pp. 113-114):

To direct the General Synod Council to create a task force to assess the RCA’s governance utilizing the Five-Fold Test and make recommendations for changes to its order that are consistent with the tenets of the Belhar Confession and that will aid the RCA’s transition to becoming a more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism; and further,

that the task force include the general secretary, the racial/ethnic council presidents, the General Synod president or vice president, the GSC moderator, a representative of the Commission on Church Order, and a number of additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups; and further,

that the task force make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to General Synod 2016.

Unfortunately, the task force was not duly constituted and did not convene during 2014–2015. The General Synod Council reported to the 2015 General Synod:

Due to the specificity of the stated requirements for the membership of this task force, it took longer than expected to fully form the task force, but all members are now committed, and each task force member is passionate, gifted, and determined to carry out the recommendation’s mandate. The task force is moving forward with setting up its first meeting, and anticipates bringing a report to General Synod 2016 (MGS 2015, p. 72).

In March 2016, the task force had its first meeting. In its report to the 2016 General Synod, the General Synod Council noted that the task force had asked it for more time to complete its work:

The task force met via conference call on March 28 (scheduling challenges prevented them from meeting earlier) to discuss its mandate and steps for accomplishing its work. One of its planned next steps is to consult with the White Privilege Task Force that recommended the creation of the current task force. A conference call has been set up with Shari Brink, moderator of the previous task force. The Five-Fold Test Task Force is also reaching out to the
Evangelical Covenant Church to consult with that denomination on how it has used the Five-Fold Test to great effect to become more multiracial and freer from racism. Because of this, the task force has asked General Synod Council for an extension to complete its work. It anticipates being able to complete its work within the budget it was initially given (MGS 2016, p. 139).

The task force continued to have membership difficulties and reported in 2017:

As of March 1, 2017, participation of some members needed to be confirmed and “additional members necessary to create a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups” needed to be identified and recruited (MGS 2017, p. 98).

A small group did work to push forward, including then–general secretary Tom De Vries; 2015 General Synod president Evan Vermeer; Josh Bode, representing the Commission on Church Order; Rick DeBruyne, moderator of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity; GSC member Sharon Palms; and Tony Campbell, associate general secretary and director of missional engagement, who served as staff to the task force.

On December 13, 2016, February 22, 2017, and March 20, 2017, the task force talked with Shari Brink, who was part of the group that made the initial recommendation, and Gary Walter, president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, which developed the Five-Fold Test. The task force also talked together about the nature and scope of the recommendation.

The task force discussed the need to get input from across the denomination on where the RCA is in terms of its commitment to a multiracial, multiethnic future freed from racism, what has been accomplished, and what challenges still remain. There was consensus that the Five-Fold Test could serve as a helpful tool to measure this systemic change. Tom De Vries suggested that the racial/ethnic councils, along with the Native American/First Nations leaders, hold a joint meeting in order to have this conversation. Denominational and regional staff would be asked to attend in order to listen to the hearts of the people. A tentative date of 2018 was suggested.

Unfortunately, the work of the task force suffered a major setback in April 2017 when Tom De Vries announced he had taken a new position as president and CEO of the Willow Creek Association, and then again in July 2017 when our beloved Tony Campbell was taken home to be with the Lord. Both were champions of the work and vital to the task force.

Having tried unsuccessfully to fulfill the action of the 2014 General Synod, the Five-Fold Test Task Force recommends:

RF 18-5
That the work of the Five-Fold Test Task Force be concluded, the task force dissolved, and any remaining funds that were set aside to fulfill R-15 and R-16 (2014) be made available to the Commission on Race and Ethnicity for use in increasing awareness, understanding, and use of the Five-Fold Test in furtherance of the RCA commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism.

A motion was made and supported to amend RF 18-5 as follows (additions are underlined):
…furtherance of the RCA commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism.

And further, to encourage the GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally use the standards of the Five Fold Test (population, participation, power, pace setting, and purposeful narrative) to guide each of their meetings.

VOTED: To amend RF 18-5.
VOTED: To adopt RF 18-5 as amended.

The final version of RF 18-5 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

RF 18-5
That the work of the Five-Fold Test Task Force be concluded, the task force dissolved, and any remaining funds that were set aside to fulfill R-15 and R-16 (2014) be made available to the Commission on Race and Ethnicity for use in increasing awareness, understanding, and use of the Five-Fold Test in furtherance of the RCA commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism.

And further, to encourage the GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally use the standards of the Five Fold Test (population, participation, power, pace setting and purposeful narrative) to guide each of their meetings. (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator
REPORT OF THE JOINT CRC/RCA ADVISORY COMMITTEES

All synod delegates (voting and corresponding) were assigned to advisory committees along with delegates from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC). These committees each discussed one of four topics related to the RCA’s and CRC’s work together: congregational renewal, interfaith engagement, and two scenarios (Collaboration and New Creation) from a video shown to Synod 2017 delegates presenting potential scenarios for the trajectory of the RCA and CRC’s working relationship. Following are the reports from the advisory committees for each of the four topics discussed.

TOPIC 1: COLLABORATION

For the first time ever, on the morning of June 9, 2018, all of the delegates of the RCA and CRC synods were divided into 29 committees to meet for three hours of discussion. During synod registration, delegates selected one of four topics to discuss: Collaboration, New Creation, Congregational Renewal, and Interfaith Engagement.

Three functions guided each committee:

1. Understanding—reflect on the topic to see how it could affect the life of the church.
2. Community—create space in order to listen closely to each other and to the leading of the Holy Spirit through the presence, voice, and Word of God.
3. Teamwork—work together and create a report from the feedback and ideas on the topic.

On Sunday afternoon, 17 advisory committee moderators gathered to review all of the data and reports generated by each committee in order to produce a statement on each of the four topics.

This report is a snapshot of the statements of the five advisory committees that discussed collaboration.

At last year’s synods, a video was presented that gave several possible new ways in which our two denominations might work together in the future. One proposal was about “collaboration.”

Future collaboration is envisioned as a jointly developed and owned “centralized service center” in which responsibility, authority, accountability, and resources can be shared.

The idea is to collaborate as deeply as our theological convictions and synodical structures allow. This will likely require realigning some of our denominational staff and structures to support the shared mission.

The video proposed particular types of collaboration. It was suggested we include church multiplication, church renewal, congregational leadership, joint synod meetings, and minimized duplication of services.

We discussed this proposal in our advisory committees on Saturday. The framework for our conversations was that of the creative tension model. This model is well known to leaders who have journeyed through the Ridder Church Renewal process, and contains three component parts:
• Current Reality asks, “What does it look like now? What is true now?”
• God’s Emerging Future is defined as the best outcome that the Holy Spirit and God’s Word and the community of believers are striving for.
• Default Future is defined as what will happen when we don’t move into the desired future.

The reports of the advisory committees indicated that delegates perceive the Current Reality of collaboration to be good but limited mainly to the denominational level, with less work occurring at the grassroots level. Many delegates indicated that their congregations were unaware of the cooperation already happening between our denominations.

The Default Future was perceived as “If we don’t change, the default, at best, will be status quo.” Many of the images the groups produced represented decline or death of the two separate denominations, including a poignant image of the grim reaper. There was a sense that no change, or failing to work together, would lead to further decline and possible death.

God’s Emerging Future was perceived as being united in Christ, working together for kingdom expansion, and building God’s kingdom. God calls the church to unity, and collaboration is a way of working toward a common mission. The groups seemed to envision our emerging future as collaboration across all regions and classes and especially at the grassroots level.

Some groups affirmed the focus areas for collaboration suggested in the video proposal, which included church renewal, church multiplication, and congregational leadership. Though all the advisory committees on this topic suggested that collaboration must also take place at the local level. Several groups suggested holding our classis meetings concurrently and one group even suggested considering how we might cooperate in theological education more fully.

Other common themes included learning about and honoring our differences, histories, traditions, and strengths. This calls for getting to know each other better at the local level by meeting and worshiping together to build trust, fellowship, and community. One group suggested that a pathway toward collaboration could begin with reconciliation and repentance of our common schism.

The collaboration proposal also invites us to lean toward increasing frequency of joint synods. However, each group desired more local and regional meeting opportunities for partnering in local ministries. Future collaboration should be at the grassroots level alongside of denominational structures in order to gain congregational buy-in.

These results will occur only when all of us enter into these conversations and relationships with great humility and a willingness to confess past divisions, having hearts open to the unity to which the Holy Spirit is calling us.

Some fears that were expressed had to do with loss of staff positions because of duplicated services. There were also concerns about unknown accountability, feedback, and metrics through collaborative initiatives, as well as apprehensions about a loss of congregational and denominational identity.

Overall, the experience of the groups seems to have been very positive. There was a high level of engagement and excitement. People were very open to conversation and sharing. There was consensus throughout the generated reports from each committee.
One individual expressed that he was touched that his committee’s report was able to so completely and accurately capture the thinking, ideas, and experiences of the group.

One group stated, “We dream to do these things together as a unique mosaic that celebrates differences and distinctions while working toward oneness.”

The general desire from the committees was to encourage and promote the denominations to work toward deeper and more numerous collaborations locally and globally.

Appendix

Topic 1: Collaboration

Summary used in committees that met about topic #1 from the video shown at the CRC and RCA synods in 2017 (https://vimeo.com/219702901)

Advisory Committee Topic #1, Collaboration
(Described as “Scenario 2” in the video, at 12:20)

Imagine that by the year 2027, the RCA and CRC could celebrate a new collaboration between our two historic denominations.

This would require us to begin now (2018), with a common goal: to more intentionally and frequently collaborate with one another in key areas so that we become increasingly excellent in how we function and deliver ministry services. **We envision a jointly developed and owned “centralized service center” where responsibility, authority, accountability, and resources could be shared.** Cross-denominational coaching processes would be developed to help RCA and CRC congregations discern their ministry needs and then to discover and access the shared initiatives and services to meet those needs.

This plan would require us to evaluate everything each denomination does so that the centralized service center could focus on mutual high-impact leverage points. Additionally, we would need to develop a new set of metrics to determine whether this new partnership is actually better-resourcing congregations and multiplying our impact in the kingdom of God (compared to the previous model in which our two denominations worked separately).

Three priority services that might be identified as having the potential for increased effectiveness by using a collaborative model are:

1. **Church Multiplication** (e.g., a new, single process for planting RCA and CRC churches),
2. **Church Renewal** (e.g., new collaborative learning opportunities and collaborative approaches to community development and transformation),
3. **Congregational Leadership** (e.g., various types of cross denominational learning/equipping events and processes).

After our two denominations have experienced the benefits of collaborating in this way, it is possible that by the year 2022 we might identify additional shared priorities such as:

1. **Twice-yearly experiences** for bi-national, regional, international and service center staff of both denominations to engage in worship, dialogue, discernment and empowerment.
2. Synods increasingly being held at the same location, fostering more opportunities for formal and informal fellowship, equipping, and community building running concurrent to activities related to denominational business.

3. Both denominations making a commitment to avoid duplication of services.

The goal of this plan is that through a new “centralized service area,” the RCA and CRC could commit to mutual discernment, increasingly shared resources and initiatives, careful change management, and trust building… which would create a new common culture where collaboration could flourish and enrich our impact in the kingdom of God.

Feedback on “Collaboration” model from the delegates of General Synod 2017

The groups were asked to identify what they affirmed about this option. The top responses were:

- 38% (40) More efficiency / cost savings / better stewardship / less duplication
- 23% (25) Ease of sharing resources / greater access to resources from both denominations / builds on strengths of each denomination
- 12% (13) We are already doing this
- 11% (12) Benefits of scale are realized quickly / can do more together than apart / increased opportunities together especially in areas of advocacy
- 10% (11) Moving from business together to ministry together / allows for deeper partnerships / has greater impact
- 6% (7) Would be an example of Christian unity to others

The top challenges that were identified were:

- 33% (34) mentioned the current cultural differences between the two denominations and the difficulty in resolving those, and in working together when those exist
- 28% (29) talked about the difficulty in management when neither denomination “owns” the ministry. Who would make decisions? Who would set the vision? To whom would they be accountable? Would a power struggle ensue with one denomination feeling like they were run over by the other?
- 16% (17) mentioned the loss of identity, tradition, and autonomy that would result from changing ministries into collaborative ones
- 11% (12) cited the staff and program cuts that would result and the difficulty in figuring out what to do with educational institutions
- 11% (11) mentioned that getting buy-in from local congregations for this kind of change would be difficult. Would this potentially result in the loss of members and congregations?

TOPIC 2: NEW CREATION

This report focuses on the idea of creating an entirely new denomination. Before we begin our report, let us say we are thankful to the denominational staff of both the CRC and RCA for their tremendous leadership and dedication in this process. Thank you for helping us have these exciting conversations!

Five advisory groups met to discuss Topic 2: New Creation. Our process involved watching a clip from a video that was shown to our two denominations in 2017. The video clip described a proposal for the creation of one new denomination out of two.
Our basic question was this: Is it a good idea, and what would it look like for the CRC and RCA to start a completely new denomination? The advisory groups interacted well and enjoyed a strong collegial spirit. We discovered that each denomination brought unique ideas and perspectives, and the groups gathered steam and excitement as we discussed possibilities. There was an overwhelming sense of appreciation and encouragement for one another, and participants expressed genuine gratitude for the time to work and dream together.

When looking honestly at our current reality as denominations, we saw a mixed bag. On the negative side, we saw tension, lethargy, and downward trends in many areas of the church. We saw that our current reality and our default future point to predictable decline.

But, on the positive side, there is much to celebrate! There are growing and thriving congregations, there is increased collaboration between our denominations, and there is kingdom growth. There is hope and joy in both the CRC and the RCA.

As the groups talked and shared and imagined a bold and courageous restructuring, some common themes emerged:

First, our future must be rooted in an unflinching commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This theological priority must shape our future even as we struggle to reconcile our divergent understandings of the gospel’s implications.

Second, unity, collaboration, and cooperation were the values named and celebrated in each of the groups. We desire unity in Christ with collaboration and cooperation around the church’s mission to make disciples. We imagined how prayer, grace, humility, and intentional Christocentrism can help us on this road.

Third, we looked at a proposal that included three affinity synods, leaving the option for a church to decide which synod they wanted to belong to. While some found hope in the idea of affinity synods, a strong majority found them problematic, and all had questions about whether affinity synods would really bring us together or if they would just divide us further.

Fourth, we imagined a denominational structure that exists to train, equip, and resource local congregations for mission. We imagined this structure to be deeply collaborative, with wiser use of resources and decreased bureaucracy.

Fifth, we envisioned a denomination in which people at all levels felt invested, engaged, and excited. There was some fear about a “top-down” approach, which might only replicate current experience. Groups were excited about the idea of a new denomination that wasn’t viewed as a chore or as a duty, but one in which they felt they belonged.

Regarding how we might actually move forward with this, the groups generated many ideas.

Here is a representative sampling:

1. Be brave! Let’s go all in! Let’s boldly name this idea of one denomination as a future reality. Once we do that, let’s come together as denominations to figure out our path forward.
2. Let’s make sure, whatever we do, that our change is centered on resourcing and blessing our local congregations. Let’s keep the Great Commission as the impetus for any change we make.
3. Let’s collaborate more and do more together. The more we can work together, the more it will make sense for us to one day create one new denomination.
4. Let’s increase our communication on all levels: congregations, pastors, classes, synods, and other institutions.
5. Let’s make this process a grounded and pastoral process. We have to approach this not just from an institutional standpoint; we need to remember the real, live people in our churches.

Overall, as we discussed the exciting idea of the RCA and CRC coming together and forming one new denomination, our groups all agreed that we want a unified future. We believe God is a God of reconciliation, and God is at work in both of our denominations. We don’t know yet what that looks like or how all the details will come together, but we affirm and celebrate God’s movement toward unity.

Appendix

Topic 2: New Creation

Summary that was used in the committees that met about topic #2 from the video shown at the CRC and RCA synods in 2017 (https://vimeo.com/219702901)

Advisory Committee Topic #2, New Creation
(described as “Scenario 3” in the video, at 16:00)

Imagine that by the year 2027, the RCA and CRC could celebrate the formation of a new denomination out of two historic denominations. This would not only bring the heritage of the two denominations together into one new denomination but result in a new model for denominationalism.

This plan would require us to begin now (2018), with the realization that current denominational structures often do not meet twenty-first century realities. The weight of tradition and culture in the RCA and CRC might not allow for the level of transition, change, and transformation needed for our denominations to continue to respond to the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond. This necessitates rethinking the future of denominations in the reformed tradition in North America. For each denomination to continue with vitality, vibrancy and efficacy, a new model of denominationalism might be needed, along with a rethinking of substance, structure, strategy and style.

Rather than seeking to adjust how the RCA and CRC function individually, the RCA and CRC could begin to formally explore the possibility of coming together to launch a new denomination based on twenty-first century realities and bringing a respectful closure that honors historic contributions and heritage to both the RCA and CRC. The goal would be to discern and develop a new denomination that could carry with it the strengths, substance, and heritage of the RCA and CRC with structure and style designed for relevance to twenty-first century denominational life.

Together, we would need to commit several years to exploring new, emerging synergistic models in business, education, and denominationalism. This exploration might be led by a cross-denominational group of thought leaders who embrace both tradition and innovation. They could focus on models that both preserve the core substance of our theology and mission, and make space for radical structural change to equip an increased number and diversity of churches with greater specialization.
The question before us is: “If we were to form a new reformed denomination in North America relevant to the movement in God’s Church of the twenty-first century, what would it look like?” This new denomination must be built on shared beliefs and convictions, be innovative yet rooted in RCA and CRC traditions, and able to equip the local churches to engage in God’s transformative mission.

Logistically, by about the year 2025, we would need to form a multi-year plan to centralize services, agencies, and institutions. We might also need to consider the formation of a diverse synodical structure. One proposal is for three distinct affinity synods to be formed to represent the spectrum of theology and practice within our congregations and regions. Each synod could embrace the challenge of identifying ministry priorities and equipping congregations within their synod for mission. Within each synod, church renewal would be engaged, new churches would be started, and leaders would be equipped. Processes would be developed to help congregations identify which synod to align with.

Realizing people may be unclear about what is happening to their denomination, both the RCA and the CRC would need to provide pastoral processes to deal with the emotional response created by this change. Early on, metrics would also need to be developed to assure that the benefits of transitioning were greater than the perceived losses that would be experienced.

Feedback on “New Creation” model from the delegates of General Synod 2017

The groups were asked to identify what they affirmed about this option. The top responses were:

- 29% (30) mentioned that this approach would be a great example of Christian unity, follows Biblical directives to seek unity, and is well adapted to the postdenominational era in which we live
- 22% (23) focused on the fact that working together would maximize our impact and give us a greater voice and greater witness in the world.
- 20% (21) focused on increased efficiency and financial savings that would result from streamlining our administration and ministries and eliminating duplication
- 19% (20) mentioned that this would provide a fresh start or clean slate for the future; it would break old habits and eliminate tradition for traditions sake
- 13% (14) mentioned that this would enable us to take steps of reconciliation and manage the theological/cultural differences that are currently hurting our denominations
- 12% (11) mentioned that it this scenario is the most exciting to think about, it provides the opportunity for something new, freedom to experiment, and to be innovative

The top challenges were:

- 24% (26) mentioned current cultural and theological differences that would make it difficult to find unity
- 20% (21) mentioned resistance from congregations and individuals that would lead to an overall loss of churches and members
- 18% (19) said it was just too impractical and complex; how can you create a shared vision and come to agreement
- 17% (18) questioned the affinity synods. Is this just a way of providing a place for liberal, moderate and conservatives to have their own church? Would it lead to a future split and the fracturing into three new denominations?
• 13% (14) worried about the overall loss of identity
• 9% (10) said it would be too expensive financially and emotionally and that this would create a loss of focus on gospel ministry

TOPIC 3: CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL

Eleven advisory committees engaged topic #3, congregational renewal. The purpose of our advisory committees was “to help shape the vision and work of the Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal [RPCR] between the RCA and CRCNA.” Our groups imagined what it could look like for both denominations to have access to a resource capability that would encourage the ministry of the local church.

Our committees engaged this topic by:

• Sharing stories from our ministry settings.
• Reading a summary document prepared by those who already participated in listening groups around this topic.
• Drawing such a resource capability.
• Compiling a list of key success factors that would be critical for the launching and implementation of this capability.

Group experience

All groups expressed joy in working together as two denominations and engaging with this topic collaboratively. There was a clear sense of excitement as we shared stories from our individual contexts and expressed a need for shared ministerial resources. Multiple groups said they were able to come to a quick consensus concerning process values. Alongside this excitement, there was a named skepticism that such a resource may not be accessible or useful, or that such a capability might negate the uniqueness of a specific church. There is a sense of urgency in our groups that such a resource is necessary, evidenced not only in our conversation, but by the significant number of participants in this topic.

Values: concerning theology and process

Throughout their conversation, groups articulated both the values of this resource capability and a strong desire to see it align with our Christian faith and Reformed identity. This includes:

• A strong biblical foundation.
• Strengthening ministries of both word and deed.
• Attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, which includes grieving our losses as God leads us through transformational change.
• Every congregation is a unique, called community.
• Relationships among churches, ministries, and denominations must be rooted in trust and built on mutuality and love.

The following observations emerged as being essential to this collaborative effort:

• Respect: Specific contexts matter, and the autonomy of our individual ministries must be honored by this process.
• Listening: Creating space for internal dialogue that inspires ownership of our current reality and a desire to flourish. The desire for coaching was addressed in the majority of group reports.
• Assessment: Tools that provide honest internal and external evaluations.
• Sharing: A space to contribute ideas, collaborate, and learn from one another, which includes engaging existing resources.
• Accessibility: A multilingual information database that is simply designed for participation and collaboration.
• High tech, high touch: Available online, and deeply rooted in human relationships.
• Congregational responsibility: Action and implementation of church renewal is the responsibility of the local church, with support from partners.

Additional observations

• While no report presented a specific outline for this resource capability, there is a consensus that such a process should be clear and available to any congregation who chooses to use it.
• Our advisory groups wanted this resource capability to reflect the experience we had together in our conversation: one of authentic listening, collaboration, vulnerable storytelling, and a common love for serving God through ministry.

Conclusion

We observed that those who participated in this conversation around congregational renewal expressed a deep need for a resource that would allow churches within the RCA and CRC to share their learning, ask questions without fear of losing contextual identity, and network with other ministry leaders whom they might otherwise not know.

Appendix

Topic 3: Congregational Renewal

Summary that was used in the committees that met about topic #3

Summary of what was learned through the 12 listening sessions held across Canada and the U.S.

1. Most RCA and CRC churches desire revitalization and many will require a new approach to achieving their goals.
2. Many vital, mission-shaped congregations have undergone revitalization processes; they have used external catalysts and coaches to supplement the work of pastoral and congregational leadership; and they are eager to equip and assist other congregations.
3. Many vital, mission-shaped congregations have developed prayerful discernment processes through which they listen to God and their local contexts and then identify and implement next steps.
4. Current needs of other CRC and RCA congregations are not currently being met well due in part to lack of knowledge about what is available, lack of readiness for change, or inadequate processes for prayerful discernment.
5. Current efforts, while good, do not adequately address the vital needs of all congregations—helping them identify the right resource at the right time with the right implementation support.
6. Present processes usually focus on specific solutions or resources and because they are not universally holistic, do not draw on the best of both denominations.
7. Both denominations would benefit from collaboratively developed and commonly shared approaches to prayerful discernment leading to congregational renewal and missional engagement.
8. There is an opportunity to develop a new approach or capacity—a partnership for church renewal—which complements and enhances existing denominational...
work in both denominations and that creates better alignment with congregational needs.

10. Congregations and pastors in vital, mission-shaped churches are eager to participate at tables of conversation and collaboration—both with congregations that are similar to them and with congregations that would like to learn from and with them.

11. Denominational and regionally deployed staff are ready to collaborate more fully in order to better serve congregations.

The opportunity that was discerned:

1. How the Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal (RPCR) can best serve CRC and RCA congregations.

   a. Congregational discernment
      i. Congregational agency. It is the responsibility of the congregation to engage in prayerful discernment and then to identify and implement the processes or resources that are right for them.
      ii. CRC and RCA regional and denominational staff are responsible to assist congregations as they prayerfully self-evaluate and discern their current reality, so they can connect to the right resources/consultants.
      iii. Congregations possess an understanding of current health and life-stage and, with assistance, can make decisions based on what they know.
      iv. Many congregations need assistance in understanding their current context and discerning how God is calling them to serve in that context.

   b. Convening, collaborating, and coaching for the sake of learning that leads to action
      i. Pastor and congregational leaders are eager to participate in “tables of conversation and collaboration” that lead to shared learning and action.
      ii. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can catalyze innovation and renewal by stimulating gatherings of leaders from CRC and RCA congregations with common interests, church settings for dialogue and learning.
      iii. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can serve both denominations by creating tables of conversation and collaboration for regionally deployed and denominational staff members of the CRC and the RCA.
      iv. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can serve by creating networks of learning for CRC and RCA rural churches and urban churches.
      v. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal must align congregational health and life-stage with appropriate resources (what) and scope of assistance (how) for each congregation.

   c. Based on the listening sessions, the activities to be performed by the reformed partnership for congregational renewal include:
      i. Mutually developing and employing prayerful congregational self-assessment.
      ii. Convening tables of conversation leading to intentional collaboration.
      iii. Collaboratively enhancing existing, and developing new church renewal resources.
iv. Stimulating missional imagination and courageous experimentation
v. Shaping a common vocabulary that is widely employed
vi. Curating resources appropriate to a wide variety of congregational contexts and sizes

TOPIC 4: INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT

On Saturday morning, June 9, 2018, five joint advisory committees of the RCA and CRC met to discuss the current reality of interfaith engagement and to imagine future collaborative efforts. “Interfaith engagement” includes all intentional efforts to get to know people of different faiths, to understand them, be hospitable to them, and to show the love of Christ to them.

These are the common themes that were heard in their reports. The groups discovered that as we approach interfaith engagement, there are differences in our understandings of terms like “witness,” “evangelism,” “conversion,” and “coexistence.” Even as we struggle to seek clarity on these theological differences, we affirm our shared foundation of Scripture and Reformed creeds and confessions.

Those who participated expressed their joy in working together, wrestling with the topic, expressing various opinions, and the worthwhile nature of, and time spent, in this work together.

Each group recognized that in the globalized context of today, there is an urgent need for interfaith engagement. Therefore, as Reformed Christians who are called to love God and love our neighbors, we offer the following reflections from the interfaith advisory groups.

We confess that our human sinfulness defaults to fear and suspicion of the “other.” Our fear has kept us captive to ignorance, isolation, and seclusion throughout our society. Yet we are assured of our calling as witnesses for Christ in the world. Therefore, we affirm the biblical mandate to “seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent you” (Jeremiah 29:7) and to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). We acknowledge that interfaith engagement prioritizes this work toward the common good of all humanity: eradicating hunger, ending war, preserving the environment, making education more available, and much more.

Therefore, in a spirit of reconciliation and unity between the RCA and CRC, we encourage the two denominations to move forward in their partnership on interfaith engagement. Some possibilities imagined by the groups include the following:

1. Provide training and learning experiences, such as field trips to religious centers in our communities, especially for the pastors and leaders in the denominations to equip them for congregational conversations.
2. Provide and promote learning trips for congregations and youth in scriptural reasoning, interfaith engagement, etc.
3. Provide combined funding to make resources available to local congregations.
4. Encourage congregations and individuals to share space, work together, and celebrate events with other religious groups in their communities.
5. Seek to go beyond simply teaching in order to provide opportunities and experiences.
6. Develop a theology and practice of missions as being a guest.
7. Develop ways of creating space for doubt, questions, and fear that will result from interfaith engagement.
Trusting the work of the Holy Spirit, we encourage everyone to be intentional in reaching out to our neighbors, and to build relationships across our cultural and religious divides. May we build these interfaith relationships with an atmosphere of mutual respect and humility as we seek to understand, listen to learn, and share and receive hospitality.

Addendum

Here are some questions that emerged in different advisory groups:

- How do we help people be faithful to Jesus while endeavoring to understand people of other religions?
- How do we work with non-Bible-based faiths?
- Are we willing to accept other faiths and let God sort things out?
- What can we learn from others?
- How can we help churches understand their communal histories with all their sins and seek forgiveness with those we have offended?
- How does the political situation globally influence our discussion?
- What causes separation?
- Who makes the final decision?
- How can we continue to build relationships? (RCA/CRC and beyond)
- Where do we go from here?

Appendix

Topic 4: Interfaith Engagement

Handout that was used in the committees that met about topic #4

Key Questions Concerning Interfaith Engagement

Adopted from “Frequently Asked Questions,” by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) of the CRCNA (https://www.crcna.org/eirc/interfaith-mandate-engagement/frequently-asked-questions)

1. What is interfaith engagement (engaging people of different faiths)? How is interfaith engagement different from ecumenical relations?

Interfaith engagement includes all intentional efforts to get to know people of different faiths, understand them, be hospitable to them, and show the love of Christ to them. It differs from Christian ecumenical relations which are attempts by different Christian traditions and denominations to understand each other and work together. In interfaith engagement we seek out our neighbors; in ecumenical work we seek out our brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. Why is it important for Reformed Christians to engage people of different faiths?

We are human before we are Christian and share with all human beings the dignity of being image bearers of God. Christians have a twofold calling: 1. We are to bear witness to the gospel and call all people to be reconciled to God in Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). 2. We are to “seek the peace and welfare of the city (and neighborhood, and nation) in which we live” (Jeremiah 29:7). We cannot do either faithfully without honest engagement, especially today when people of different faiths live right next door.
3. **How does the Bible inform our engagement with people of different faiths?**

The Bible teaches (Leviticus 19:33):

- God the Creator is present to all people (Psalm 19; Psalm 104; Romans 1, 2; Acts 14, 17)
- All people respond to God’s revelation in creation (Romans 1, 2; Acts 14, 17)
- God’s people must resist all idolatry and false religion (Exodus 20: 3-4; 1 Peter 2:9-12)
- God’s people are to show compassion, mercy, and justice to the “aliens” among them (Leviticus 19:33)
- God’s people are called to concern and prayer for the welfare of all people (Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

4. **What is the relationship between evangelism and interfaith engagement?**

Evangelism is the “announcing” or “preaching” or otherwise making publically known the “good news of Jesus Christ.” God’s Word incarnate in Jesus Christ has gone out and will not return to the Lord until it has accomplished the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:1-13) Those who receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord live in community around the world across time. In some places in the world, Christians are a majority and in others places, Christians are a minority. Wherever Christians live, they live a new life in Jesus Christ, knowing they are saved eternally and knowing here in this world by the Holy Spirit they are being sanctified, that is, renewed, reformed, and transfigured in how they live in love with God and with their neighbors. Our lives in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, find evangelical expression in all that we feel, think, say, and do. This is the witness to which Jesus calls us and for which he has commissioned us (Matthew 28:18-20).

Interfaith engagement is an opportunity to learn about who others are, what their faith is, how their religious practice manifests and deepens their faith. In other words, interfaith engagement enables us to know others better and as we know them better, we are able, as we care for one another, to come together and work side by side towards common goals: eradicating hunger, ending war, sharing natural resources, making education available more fully and more completely, preserving the environment, and much more.

Called to give witness to Jesus Christ in all that we feel, think, say and do, we are always evangelizing, announcing the good news of Jesus Christ, in every moment of our lives, including interfaith engagement. There are many ways of doing this.

How does one evangelize in interfaith engagement? Perhaps the best way is to follow Jesus’ example: by the Holy Spirit, expressing love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) as we get to know, love, and live with our neighbors of different faith. If by the Spirit, we truly live the fruits of the Spirit, our neighbors in various ways will be drawn to the light that we have not hidden under a bushel (Matthew 5:15).

5. **Do we have to ignore our differences when we participate in interfaith engagement? Must we only focus on those things upon which we agree?**

If we live by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, by God’s grace the fruits of the Spirit will find expression in our all our relations, including interfaith engagement. As in any relationship, we begin by discovering what we share in common. In time, as we get to know each other better by working side by side to solve shared challenges in our communities, trust grows and we are able to share deeper differences, especially as these
differences have bearing upon our work for the shared good of the community. As we discover these differences and work through them in interfaith engagement, it is important to lean on God (his Word, his salvation in Christ, his loving faithfulness) and remain humble before God and others, for “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).
OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS

Overtures

TRANSFER OF CONGREGATION BETWEEN TWO REGIONAL SYNODS

1. The Classis of Chicago overtures the General Synod to transfer Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney, Illinois, with all of its assets and liabilities, from the Classis of Chicago, Regional Synod of Mid-America, to the Classis of the City, Regional Synod of the Far West.

Reasons:
1. The General Synod has responsibility and authority to transfer churches from one regional synod to another (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 65]).
2. The consistory of Faith Community Reformed Church has asked for the transfer, believing the new classis alignment will better position the congregation for an increasingly strong future of intentional, creative, winsome service and witness to the gospel in their urban context.
3. The executive committees of the Classis of Chicago and the Classis of the City have affirmed the request for transfer, as has the Regional Synod of Mid-America.

In response to Overture 1, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-1
To transfer Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney, Illinois, with all of its assets and liabilities, from the Classis of Chicago, Regional Synod of Mid-America, to the Classis of the City, Regional Synod of the Far West. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. The mutual understanding of representatives of Chicago Classis, the Regional Synod of Mid-America, and Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney, Illinois, is that Faith Community Reformed Church of Stickney can best serve the kingdom as part of City Classis.

AFFIRM THAT RCA WELCOMES INCLUSION OF LGBTQ PERSONS

2. The Reverend Classis of New Brunswick overtures the General Synod to affirm that, in a forensic review of the structure, purpose, offices, governance, established theology, and approved Standards, the Reformed Church in America categorically and unequivocally welcomes the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the offices, commissions, positions, synods, classes, consistories, ministries, and operations of the Reformed Church in America.

Reasons:
1. The Book of Church Order states in the Preamble that the purpose of the Reformed Church “is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works” (2017 edition, p. 1) “All” necessarily includes LGBTQ people.
2. The Book of Church Order states in the Preamble that the purpose of the RCA “is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained
by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards” (2017 edition, p.1). These established means to maintain good order and proper discipline are silent in matters related to whether LGBTQ people are excluded from the process the RCA uses to maintain good order and proper discipline.

3. “God is not a God of disorder but of peace”—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people (1 Corinthians 14:33, NIV). “All” necessarily includes LGBTQ people. Therefore, order is a way to express unity and achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ as all people—including LGBTQ people—seek to fulfill the mission of the RCA. The Reformed Church in America practices a theology that is lived out in the ways all people live and work together. Order does not presume homogeneity but unity in spite of diversity (Romans 12:5).

In response to Overture 2, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**OV 18-2**

To deny Overture 2. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

1. The Preamble of the *BCO* states that the purpose of the RCA, together with all other churches of Christ, is “to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works.” The emphasis is on the purpose of the RCA to minister to all people with the gospel of Jesus Christ and is not suggestive that the word “all” categorically and unequivocally qualifies everyone to the offices, commissions, positions, synods, classes, consistory boards, ministries, and operations of the Reformed Church in America.

**FURTHER AMEND BCO DEFINITION OF OFFICE OF MINISTER OF WORD AND SACRAMENT**

3. The Classis of Schenectady overtures the General Synod to further amend the following section of the *Book of Church Order*, pending the approval of a change from the 2017 General Synod (*MGS 2017*, R 17-44, pp. 268–269) to ratify the current language (new additions underlined, deletions struck):

**Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 4a**

a. A minister serving a congregation is a pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory board of elders, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

Reasons:

1. The board of elders is charged with providing “for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments” as well as guarding “the sacraments of the church
from being profaned” (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8 [2017 edition, p. 13]).

2. While the consistory is “guided by the following requirements in their provision of services of worship” to include the sacrament of baptism and the administration of the Lord’s Supper (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11, [2017 edition, pp. 15–16]), this is only to occur following the decision of the board of elders.

3. It is important that in a time where the roles of elder and minister are confused (i.e., the role of commissioned pastors), the order offers clarity on responsibilities in order to preserve the parity of offices.

In response to Overture 3, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-3
To deny Overture 3, (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. In the Book of Church Order, the administration of the Lord’s Supper is clearly a responsibility of the consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 2, Section 11(c) [2017 edition, p. 16]).
2. BCO Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 5, “Responsibilities of the Board of Elders,” doesn’t contain any instructions of administering the sacraments. The Lord’s Supper is not mentioned at all in this article.

AMEND RULES FOR SEATING GENERAL SYNOD DELEGATES

4. The Classis of Dakota overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to amend the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod in regard to the Seating of Delegates (Book of Church Order Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103]):

An amendment to Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1, Seating of Delegates, to add subsection d:

d. To be seated, the clerk of the classis must confirm that during the preceding year:

1. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members are actively living in a same-sex relationship.
2. No congregations have allowed same-sex weddings in their sanctuary, facilities, or upon their property.
3. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members have officiated a same-sex marriage or union.

Reasons:
1. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament or classis members engaged in such practices are living in contradiction of the RCA’s constitution that marriage is between one man and one woman, for we have indeed affirmed that this is what the Standards of Unity teach: “To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails
the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman” (MGS 2017, R 17-29, p. 161 [adopted]).

2. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament or classis members engaged in such practices are living in contradiction to the RCA’s theological statements (General Synods of 1978, 1979, 1994, 1998, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017) in regard to sexuality that an active same-sex sexual relationship is consistently described as a practice outside the will of God. At the same time, marriage is affirmed on more than one occasion to be “between one man and one woman,” found in some of the actions of synod-approved studies. Yet there has not been any approved theological statement of the General Synod that approved same-sex sexual activity or same-sex marriages as God-honoring.

4. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament engaged in such practices are living in contradiction of the vows ministers of Word and sacrament take upon their ordination and installation into their respective office of upholding the theology and constitution of the Reformed Church in America. “I accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life. I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God. I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. I will submit myself to the counsel and admonition of the classis, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of my understanding of the Christian faith. I will conduct the work of the church in an orderly way and in accordance with the Liturgy and the Book of Church Order” (BCO, Formulary #3, “Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament” [2017 edition, p. 130]).

5. Presently, the General Synod does not seat a classis if the classis has not fully paid its assessments for that year. Theological and constitutional reasons should result in the same practice (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103]).

In response to Overture 4, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-4
To amend the Bylaws of the General Synod in the Book of Church Order by adding the following as subsection “d” to Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103], under “Seating of Delegates,” for submission to the 2019 General Synod for final approval (additions are underlined):

d. To be seated, the clerk of the classis must confirm that during the preceding year:

1. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members are actively living in a same-sex relationship.
2. No congregations have allowed same-sex weddings in their sanctuary, facilities, or upon their property.
3. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members have officiated a same-sex marriage or union.

Reasons:
1. The classes that have ministers of Word and sacrament or classis members engaged in

2. Presently, the General Synod does not seat a classis if the classis has not fully paid its assessments for that year. Actions contrary to RCA theological statements and Standards could reasonably result in the same practice (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 103]).

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

4. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members have actively discouraged infant baptism.

5. No ministers of Word and sacrament or other classis members have actively led a functionally Unitarian worship service.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to refer OV 18-4 as follows:

To refer OV 18-4 to the 2020 Vision Group as part of the information they consider as they prepare to bring final recommendations in 2020.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To refer OV 18-4 to the 2020 Vision Group as part of the information they consider as they prepare to bring final recommendations in 2020.

**INTERPRETATION OF “HISTORIC AND FAITHFUL WITNESSES”**

5. The Holland Classis overtures the General Synod to direct its Commission on Theology to present an interpretation of the sentence, “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.” This sentence is used in the Declaration for Licensed Candidates (BCO, Appendix, Formulary #1 [2017 edition, p. 129]), the Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (BCO, Appendix, Formulary #3 [2017 edition, pp. 130–131]), the Declaration for a General Synod Professor (BCO, Appendix, Formulary #7 [2017 edition, pp. 134–135]), and the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (BCO, Appendix, Formulary #16 [2017 edition, p. 141]). We request that the interpretation presented by the commission address these questions as well as any other relevant question that arises within the commission: What has been the historical understanding of this sentence (i.e., why is this sentence in these declarations)? What had been understood that the person was declaring about the Standards when the declaration was made? What does “historic” mean? What does “faithful” mean? Has the understanding of the meaning of this declaration changed after the 2017 General Synod declaration about the interpretation of the Heidelberg
Catechism Q&A 108–109? If so, what is that understanding? Does the declarant affirm the action of the 2017 General Synod when the declarant states, “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God?”

Reasons:
1. It is important that this sentence has a common interpretation and understanding for the sake of all persons who are required to make this declaration in front of a classis or General Synod. The sentence’s meaning has come into question because of the action of the 2017 General Synod that stated an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109. This declarative sentence has been understood by some to mean that the Standards were interpreted in their context at the time the Standard was written. The General Synod in 2017 provided a present-day interpretation to the Heidelberg Catechism. It interpreted the Standard in a present-day context rather than a historical context.
2. The sentence “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God” has been contained within the Declarations since 1973, if not earlier. We wonder what it means in this new century to say these words?
3. The action of the 2017 General Synod took a new step to provide a current interpretation to the catechism. With its action, the synod has opened the gateway to be challenged to provide contemporary understandings to other questions and statements in our Standards, such as the value and priority of infant baptism. Will other such contemporary interpretations alter the meaning of the sentence within the Declarations?
4. The Belgic Confession Article 36 states, “the government’s task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.” The Reformed Church in America has not provided a contemporary interpretation of this sentence but recognizes that the sentence is part of the historic record of the document. Likewise, Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80, which condemns the Mass, remains as a witness in the catechism without contemporary interpretation or alteration. Are these items now required to have a contemporary interpretation that is approved by the General Synod so that we understand their meaning, as was done with Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109?
5. The commissioned pastors, ministers, General Synod professors, and licensed candidates should be able to be aware of and understand what they are declaring before their hearers when they recite this sentence.

In response to Overture 5, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-5**
To deny Overture 5. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. The paper in the Commission on History’s report (pp. 281–284) is sufficient for what the classis is seeking.
RESCIND R 17-29

6. The Holland Classis overtures the General Synod of 2018 to take the necessary action that has the effect of rescinding or nullifying R 17-29, the statement of the 2017 General Synod regarding Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 (MGS 2017, R 17-29, p. 161).

Reasons:
1. The action by the 2017 General Synod created significant ambiguity in the use and meaning of the vows for ministry, i.e., the Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and the Declaration for a General Synod Professor.
2. The action of the 2017 General Synod set a new protocol in the historic Reformed Church in America. The ramification of this protocol opens the way for the Standards to become contemporary pawns in a tug-of-war over the meaning of words.
3. Historic precedent calls for the present church to restrain itself from attempting to interpret historic standards in a present-day context. Examples:
   a. In 1972, the General Synod received an overture from Classis of Cascades [Overture #9] that “a thorough restudy of the answer to Question 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism be made with the intention of changing the answer to fit the situation today in order to foster Christian love and unity among sincere Christians.” The answer by the Synod: “Since the Heidelberg Catechism is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action” (MGS 1972, pp. 87–88).
   b. Also at the 1972 General Synod, the Classis of East Sioux sent an overture to the General Synod [Overture #32] “to take action which will provide that question and answer 98 of the Heidelberg Catechism be removed into a footnote with the explanation that those in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America need not commit themselves to the position of not using visual aids in the teaching ministry of the church. Question 98 reads as follows: Q. — ‘But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity?’ A. — ‘No; for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have his people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of his Word.’” The answer of the General Synod: “Since the Heidelberg Catechism is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action” (MGS 1972, p. 99).
   c. The Classis of East Sioux also sent Overture #33: “… to take action which will provide that in the Belgic Confession, Article XXXVI, the following words be removed into a footnote with the explanation that those ordained into the ministry of the Reformed Church in America need not commit themselves to this position. Concerning Magistrates: ‘And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed, and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must, therefore, countenance the preaching of the word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone as he commands in His Word.’” The answer by the Synod: “Since the Belgic Confession is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action” (MGS 1972, pp. 99–100).
   d. The 1972 General Synod Minutes also record this action: “A motion from the floor was ADOPTED to refer overtures 9, 32, and 33 to the Theological

d. Report of the Theological Commission to the 1973 General Synod:

Overtures from the Classes of Cascades and East Sioux … suggesting changes to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, were referred to the Commission for study and report.

The Commission has studied and discussed the matter of revisions to the historic standards of the church. While we recognize that certain minor changes and omissions have been made in recent editions of the doctrinal standards with regard to matters where history has changed the evaluation of the church, we believe it is desirable to maintain the integrity of these standards as historical witnesses to the biblical faith. Therefore, we support the recommendation of the Overtures Committee that the Church refrain from revision of these great historic documents. In this light we wish also to reaffirm our support of the church’s effort to add to our historic doctrinal standards a new confession of faith (*MGS 1973*, p. 194).

In other words, the Synod has stated that we are to refrain from attempts to contemporize these historic documents.

4. The use of a General Synod declaration in 2017 to force a contemporary meaning on a word that is contained in a four-centuries-old sentence is a grievous error to the catechism, an affront to our commonly-held RCA understanding of the value of the Standards, and merely a foil in our current discussion of human sexuality.

5. The legislative action of 2017 only brings confusion in the church. Some assume the statement means more than what is true of General Synod statements. Some observers assume such a statement to be a stance of the church, when it is simply an opinion of one General Synod.

6. To rescind the action is a recognition that the 2017 General Synod overstepped its limits.

In response to Overture 6, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-6**  
To direct the Commission on History, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to provide greater clarity on the role of the General Synod in interpreting our Standards of Unity, and to report back to the General Synod of 2019. (NOT ADOPTED)

Reasons:

1. We need a broadly thought-through understanding of the use of our Standards of Unity by the General Synod.

2. We need a broadly thought-through understanding of the use of our Standards of Unity in addressing contemporary issues.

3. To discourage the perpetual revisiting of this issue or other issues in future synods.
ELIMINATE OFFICE OF GENERAL SYNOD PROFESSOR

7. The Classis of Central California overtures the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to eliminate the fourth office of General Synod professor.

The office of General Synod professor involves representing “the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry,” as well as offering “the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole.” In section 3, it continues that General Synod professors shall “have the confidence of the churches … ,” and in the Declaration for a General Synod Professor, the newly elected professor states, “I promise to walk in the Spirit of Christ, in love and fellowship within the church, seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Sections 1 and 3 [2017 edition, p. 70]; Appendix, Formulary # 7 [2017 edition, p. 134]).

This concise definition of the General Synod professor office and its role has made it clear to a portion of the RCA that a majority of the professorate is no longer fulfilling their office and has become separated from the RCA churches, its officers, and its members by losing their confidence in the professorate and the agencies they represent. In their 2016 report to the General Synod about unity being our calling, it’s ironic that a majority of the professorate members openly promote disunity within the RCA by being “Room for All” supporters and are using their office to instill progressive and unorthodox doctrine into the minds of our ministerial candidates. An example has been the allowance for Dr. Brownson to continually use Western Theological Seminary (WTS) as a platform to promote an unhistorical living tradition of the holy catholic church in regard to human sexuality. WTS allowed Dr. Brownson to teach a class on Scripture & Human Sexuality in the fall of 2017, which is promotion of his open defiance to the stated RCA position of marriage being between one man and one woman and that homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures. Our numerous General Synods have spoken on where the RCA stands, even with the approval of R 17-29, “To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman” (MGS 2017, p. 161). Some in our professorate and the agencies they represent seem to miss the message, therefore not adhering to the RCA’s Standards. This has become a great grievance within the RCA, and the tolerance for it needs to come to an end as classes seek to send their candidates to non-RCA seminaries.

Reasons:
1. Members of the professorate (collective of General Synod professors) are openly promoting disunity within the RCA through their allegiance to “Room for All,” thus breaking fellowship within the church and not adhering to their vows of “seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”
2. General Synod professors have lost the confidence from a portion of the RCA as they continue to promote a contradictory position of human sexuality and marriage to our ministerial candidates.
8. The Great Lakes City Classis overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to prepare amendments to the RCA Book of Church Order that would remove the office of General Synod professor from our polity for report to the 2019 General Synod.

Reasons:
1. In 2011, the Reformed Church in America expanded the role of the office of General Synod professor so that they have a disproportionate influence in General Synod meetings. The regular delegates to General Synod include five General Synod professor delegates, drawn from each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1 [2017 edition, p. 65]). “A General Synod professor who is present at the session of the General Synod, but who is not a regular delegate from the professorate, shall be recognized as a corresponding delegate” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 9, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 120]).
2. Close examination of Calvin’s practice in Geneva shows major differences from the situation of the church today, providing little support for our current practice.
3. Moving the membership of those presently in the office of General Synod professor to the classis will actually strengthen their ministry and service in the RCA.
4. The RCA is the only denomination having the office of General Synod professor, making it difficult to consider union with the Christian Reformed Church in North America or any other Reformed body.
5. The process for discipline of a General Synod professor is cumbersome and makes it less likely that the General Synod will take on its responsibility of oversight.

In response to Overtures 7 and 8, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-7
To direct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on History and the Commission on Church Order, to study and report to General Synod 2019 the necessity of and biblical basis for the office of General Synod professor as well as the implications for the RCA if the office were to be eliminated; and further,

To instruct these commissions to review and consider decreasing the allowed number of General Synod professor delegates to General Synod with the intent of ensuring proportionate representation.

Reasons:
1. These steps address some of the concerns raised in Overtures 7 and 8 without making drastic changes to our polity without proper study and due process.
2. This addresses the concern of disproportionate General Synod representation from the office of General Synod professor.
3. The office of General Synod professor has tremendous influence. It is wise to regularly review and improve upon our process of ongoing evaluation and the process of installing new members into the office of General Synod professor.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt OV 18-7.
OV 18-7
To direct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on History and the Commission on Church Order, to study and report to General Synod 2019 the necessity of and biblical basis for the office of General Synod professor as well as the implications for the RCA if the office were to be eliminated; and further,

To instruct these commissions to review and consider decreasing the allowed number of General Synod professor delegates to General Synod with the intent of ensuring proportionate representation. (NOT ADOPTED)

OV 18-8
To direct the GSC to develop a plan for appropriate theological evaluation of our current General Synod professors, and to evaluate and recommend changes to the process by which General Synod professors are theologically evaluated and received into the office of General Synod professor.

Reasons:
1. These steps address some of the concerns raised in Overtures 7 and 8 without making drastic changes to our polity without proper study and due process.
2. This addresses the concern of disproportionate General Synod representation from the office of General Synod professor.
3. The office of General Synod professor has tremendous influence. It is wise to regularly review and improve upon our process of ongoing evaluation and the process of installing new members into the office of General Synod professor.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt OV 18-8.

OV 18-8
To direct the GSC to develop a plan for appropriate theological evaluation of our current General Synod professors, and to evaluate and recommend changes to the process by which General Synod professors are theologically evaluated and received into the office of General Synod professor. (NOT ADOPTED)

AMEND BCO ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS FOR AGENCIES AND COMMISSIONS

9. The Classis of Central California overtures the General Synod to amend the Bylaws of the General Synod (Book of Church Order Chapter 3, Part I, Article 4, Section 2, “Eligibility” [2017 edition, p. 108]) by inserting the following:

Membership on General Synod agencies and commissions shall be open to all confessing members of the RCA who uphold our Constitution, General Synod statements, positions, and interpretations, which includes
the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman. An employee may not hold membership on the agency or commission to which that person is accountable unless specifically provided in the agency constitution or bylaws; nor may an executive employed by the General Synod or any of the regional synods hold other than ex-officio membership on the General Synod Council.

Reasons:
1. The General Synod bylaws provide the process for amendments in Article 11, which do not require a two-thirds classis approval and can provide General Synod accountability for its agencies and board members. “The Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod may be amended at any stated meeting of the synod by vote of a majority of all the members present, provided that due notice of the proposed amendment has been submitted in writing at a previous stated session and has received the approval of a majority at that session. An amendment to the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order shall go into effect upon announcement by the president of the Synod of favorable action under this provision” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 [2017 edition, p. 122]).
2. Confessing members who are representing and working under the authority of General Synod on our General Synod agencies and commissions shall uphold our Constitution and General Synod statements, positions, and interpretations. An example is General Synod 2017–passed R 17-29, which states: “To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman” (MGS 2017, p. 161). Therefore, our General Synod agency and commission members must uphold this position whether individual members disagree with the statement or not. Members are not working under the authority of lower assemblies but on behalf of General Synod. Neither shall any member put the agenda of any non-RCA organization above the work of the General Synod. It is a known fact that this practice takes place, so an amendment of this nature will help with consistency. Further General Synod statements and positions can be found at www.rca.org/positions.

In response to Overture 9, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**OV 18-9**
To refer Overture 9 to the 2020 Vision Group.
(ADOPTED)

PROVIDE GUIDE ON DECLARATIVE AUTHORITY

10. The Great Lakes City Classis overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order to provide a guide in the workbook for each future General Synod meeting that clarifies the authority and scope of the declarative authority of the General Synod.

Reasons:
1. At the 2017 General Synod, there were a number of overtures requesting that the General Synod make a number of declarations. With the exception of one overture, it was ruled that those overtures were requesting the General Synod to do something that was outside of its scope.
2. Yet the General Synod clearly does have declarative authority. The Preamble of the Book of Church Order states: “All authority exercised in the church is received from Christ, the only Head of the church. The authority exercised by those holding office in the church is delegated authority. Their appointment to their special tasks is by the Spirit of the Lord, and they are responsible first of all to the Lord of the church. Their authority is of three kinds: ministerial, declarative, and spiritual. Ministerial authority is the right to act as Christ’s servants. Declarative authority is the right to speak in his name within the limits set by Scripture. The church shall declare what is in the Word and act upon it, and may not properly go beyond this. Spiritual authority is the right to govern the life and activity of the church and to administer its affairs” (italics added for emphasis; 2017 edition, p. 2). The reports made to the 2013 General Synod by three commissions of the RCA on the subject of “Constitutionality” (MGS 2013, pp. 354–363) and the 2014 paper addressing the question of General Synod Authority on Doctrine and Interpretation of Scripture (MGS 2014, pp. 240–242) provide helpful guidance on this question that can easily be forgotten. It would be helpful to include a brief summary of these papers in the General Synod workbook.

In response to Overture 10, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18–10**

To deny Overture 10. (ADOPTED)

Reason:

1. There is a lack of clarity for implementation.

**DECLARE DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE CONSTITUTIONAL**

11. While our denomination has recently attempted to produce a definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman in a form that has constitutional authority, it is the opinion of the Classis of British Columbia that this definition already is constitutional.

Therefore, the Classis of British Columbia overtures the General Synod 2018 to recognize that existing marriage liturgies of the RCA express the theological standards of the church and therefore have constitutional standing within our churches. Further, we request that the General Synod Council or designated representative send a clarifying letter to all the classes.

Reasons:

1. The Liturgy is part of our Constitution (as per the Preamble to the BCO [2017 edition, p. 1]).
2. Every liturgical order is an expression in liturgical language of an underlying theology. As stated in the 2013 General Synod report on “Constitutionality in the Reformed Church in America”: the Constitution “embodies our shared theological values and commitments,” and again, “the Standards, the Liturgy, and the Government contain theology, our theology” (MGS 2013, p. 354). Reformed liturgy has always been based on Reformed theology as far back as the 1568 Synod of Wesel of our Dutch mother church, which produced the first edition of the “Netherlands Liturgy.”
3. However, when the 2013 report makes a distinction between “constitutional liturgies” (e.g. sacraments, ordination), whose use is required in the RCA, and other liturgies (such as on marriage) which are not “constitutional,” this has been understood by
many in the church to mean that such other liturgies have no constitutional standing at all. This cannot be. “The shared theological values and commitments” (see reason #2) are embodied to some extent in every liturgy approved for use in the RCA, and to that extent have constitutional standing.

4. For the sake of the seriousness of the issue before us, we must affirm the obvious: the theological core of the marriage liturgies of the RCA is that Christian marriage is between one man and one woman. The specific language of these liturgies can be and has been revised by simple majority votes at the General Synod. For example, the wording of the 1987 marriage liturgy has the words: “Christian marriage is a joyful covenancing between a man and a woman.” Older liturgies have the expression “holy wedlock.” Removing words such as “joyful” and “holy wedlock” do not necessarily affect the Standards, but removing the words “a man and a woman” do (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 87 and 109). The Standards are unalterable and so are the specific parts of the marriage liturgies that reflect those Standards.

5. Therefore, unless and until, by a two-thirds majority vote, the General Synod and the classes decide to alter or adjust our Standards of Unity, the core theological truth of Christian marriage as between a man and a woman has the standing of constitutional authority in our churches, classes, and seminaries.

In response to Overture 11, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-11
To deny Overture 11. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. While the committee finds the spirit of the overture meritorious, the issues it aims to address will be considered more comprehensively as part of the work of the 2020 Vision Group.

CHANGE NATURE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT

12. Zeeland Classis overtures the General Synod to change what has been known as the “theological education assessment” to a “theological asking.”

Reasons:
1. It is our belief, as those who hold to the General Synod’s stated positions regarding human sexuality, that we are not being served well regarding the above by those who receive this funding.

2. This change would allow congregations who do not feel that they can support the teachings of organizations receiving this funding to withhold this support rather than feeling pressured to leave the RCA.

In response to Overture 12, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-12
To deny Overture 12. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Dialogue is already occurring and our committee encourages continued and deeper dialogue.
2. This overture will disproportionately affect the MFCA by significantly reducing their funding.
3. Currently, the MFCA has no significant means of funding outside the theological education assessment.

AFFIRMATION REGARDING INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

13. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester overtures the General Synod to affirm that the Bible is God’s living Word, which, rather than being static, is continually reinterpreted by the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of human beings, and that this reinterpretation reveals a continuous arc toward greater mercy, acceptance, and justice, reflecting a divine love that has no limit and transcends our human formulations.

Reasons:
1. We must commit ourselves anew to stand as Reformed—not fundamentalist—Christians.
2. Scripture, in numerous instances, models its own reinterpretation: Hosea knew what Scripture commanded regarding sacrifices and offerings, and yet God speaks through him to say, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6; to understand this prophetic word is Jesus’ explicit command to the Pharisees in Matthew 9:13). Jesus continually reframes the law in terms of its intent to bless people by helping them love God, neighbor, stranger, and enemy. Peter and the other apostles knew without question what the law commanded regarding dietary laws and consorting with Gentiles, but the Holy Spirit moved to direct them away from the letter of the law toward its ultimate purpose (see Acts 10:1–11:18), which Paul stated simply, that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).
3. Scripture implicitly reveals the slowness and struggle of God’s people to comprehend God’s true nature. The self-revelation of God occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures under the shadow of human culture and practices. In the New Testament, Peter and others backslide from the revelation of God’s wider welcome, and the dispute between circumcised and uncircumcised continues to obsess the church; nevertheless, the Spirit moves the church at last to heed God’s will. Jesus himself intimates that the church will be given understanding beyond what even he has spoken, through the Holy Spirit: “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything …” (John 14:25-26a), and, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth …” (John 16:12-13a).
4. When the church tries to stop this process of leading, sanctification, and transformation by the Holy Spirit, it becomes concretized, constricted in spirit, and fearful in heart. God has sent prophets of reform, as we note God called Martin Luther 500 years ago to summon the church away from the idolatry of its own self-satisfied certainty.
5. We must address the ways in which we choose particular passages of Scripture to interpret literally in order to confirm our own preconceptions or prejudices. This slavish misuse of Scripture blinds us to the true intent of the gospel and the leading of the Spirit.
6. LGBTQ inclusion discussion at the 2016 Special Council and at General Synods 2016 and 2017 was obstructed by disputes about scriptural interpretation. This and other issues will remain intractable until we reclaim a reasonably unified understanding of Scripture.
7. Similar overtures to General Synod 2017 were not given sufficient consideration or a serious response.

In response to Overture 13, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-13**

To deny Overture 13. (ADOPTED)

**Reason:**

1. While the committee finds the spirit of the overture meritorious, the issues it aims to address will be considered more comprehensively as part of the work of the 2020 Vision Group.

**CLARIFY ROLES OF CLASSIS AND MFCA IN CERTIFICATE OF FITNESS FOR MINISTRY PROCESS**

14. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

- a. A candidate for the ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not officially related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found by the candidate’s supervising classis in consultation with the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) to be qualified, and is adjudged by the supervising classis to be a fit candidate for the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency—MFCA a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination. The MFCA shall ensure candidates demonstrate adequate academic preparation and denominational identity, including a thorough understanding of the history, polity, liturgy, and confessions of the RCA and an adherence to the same. In the event that the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

**Reasons:**

1. As currently written, Chapter 1, Part II, Section 2a is not clear about who judges the fitness of a candidate for ministry (2017 edition, p. 46). These proposed changes would locate the final authority of a candidate’s fitness for ministry within the supervising classis for which the candidate was initially brought under care.

2. The BCO states clearly in other areas that the classis is the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development as well as calling ministers to churches...
within its bounds, specifically in Sections 7–9 of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2: “Sec. 7. The classis shall exercise a general supervision over all students of theology subject to its jurisdiction. Sec. 8. The classis shall examine students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. Sec. 9. The classis shall ordain, install, commission, transfer, suspend, depose, declare demitted, declare inactive, and declare retired ministers” (italics other than section headings added; 2017 edition, p. 30).

3. The Preamble of the BCO reminds us that governance in the Reformed tradition is presbyterial, consisting of consistory, classis, regional synod, and General Synod. Crucially, “the governmental functioning of these of offices takes place, not apart from, but in harmony with the understanding of the mission of the church and the nature of its ministry” (italics added; 2017 edition, p. 1). Furthermore, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser. Consistories, classes, and synods work together in mission and ministry within their shared boundaries” (italics added; 2017 edition, p. 3).

15. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the Book of Church Order regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 2

c. The General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis shall determine that the candidate meets minimum competencies as determined by the standards established by the General Synod and designated as indispensable for the proper exercise of the ministerial office of the church. If a candidate comes under the jurisdiction of a new agent of the General Synod, the classis in which the candidate is enrolled shall apply to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency on behalf of the candidate. If the candidate has completed less than half the process toward reception of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, the relevant agents of the General Synod shall effect the transfer. If the candidate has completed half the process or more, the original agent shall award the Certificate in consultation with the supervising classis. If the applicant has previously been asked to terminate studies, has withdrawn under duress, or has been denied the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry at a Reformed Church in America seminary or the MFCA, further supervision and/or examination of the applicant shall only be carried out by or with the consent of the seminary or agent within whose program the candidate had previously been enrolled. Any further supervision and/or examination will occur in partnership with the supervising classis.

Reason:

1. This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.
16. The Classis of Rockland-Westchester respectfully overtures General Synod to recommend to the classes for approval the following changes to the *Book of Church Order* regarding the roles of the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency in supervising students of theology in the Approved Alternate Route and awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 4

  e. When the candidate has completed the program, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry by the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency and the supervising classis. The method of assessment shall be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

  f. When the candidate passes the examination, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry. In the event that the MFCA and supervising classis disagree about a candidate’s readiness for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for reasons other than academic preparation, the supervising classis shall determine the outcome.

Reason:
1. This language clarifies and affirms the role of the supervising classis as the ultimate arbiter for overseeing a ministry candidate’s development and how the supervising classis and MFCA work together to prepare candidates for ministry.

In response to Overtures 14, 15, and 16, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

**OV 18-14**
To direct Overtures 14, 15, and 16 to the Commission on Church Order with instructions that, in consultation with the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (present body)/Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (proposed body), the commission review the overtures and, if warranted, that the commission present possible amendments to the *Book of Church Order* to the 2019 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. It is important to connect all the agents of General Synod on issues regarding the granting of certificates of fitness for ministry.

**SEEK PATH TO RECONCILIATION WITHIN RCA**

17. The Reverend Classis of Passaic Valley respectfully overtures the Reverend General Synod to strongly encourage the classes to immediately cease all conversations of a division of the denomination and instead begin to seek a path to reconciliation. We affirm the understanding of living in unity, purity, and peace as stated in our membership promises. We believe it is both biblically supported as well as a witness to a divided nation and world for the RCA to return to our common unity in Christ as the only means to preach the gospel in the world today.
1. 2 Corinthians 5:18 states, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation …”
2. In Preparatory Service I: Before the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper, it states, “Let us acknowledge our sin before our merciful God, with full intention of amending our lives. Let us make restitution for all injuries and wrongs done to others. Let us forgive those who have offended us, as we ourselves have been forgiven. All children of the covenant, be reconciled with one another and then come joyfully to the banquet” (Worship the Lord, p. 18).
3. Through the historic description of the tenants of the faith (the five “Solas”), we profess that our life together is formed by Christ alone and not according to a human or common understanding of an appropriate response to questions of life in the twenty-first century.
4. If we continue on the path to separation, how many times will we divide over social issues upon which we do not agree? We believe that with the power of the Holy Spirit we can indeed engage in discussion with one another to come to unity—not necessarily unanimity—in service to a world that needs the witness of our blessings in order to be a blessing to those around us (Genesis 12:2-23).
5. We concur with, support, and recommend the Pastoral Letter to the Reformed Church in America from November 7, 2017, written by former general secretary Wes Granberg-Michaelson.
6. As we learn about and long for the promised shalom of God, we must ourselves be willing to gather in humility, gracious kindness, and good order to struggle together to find our way to be together God’s church in the world and not be splintered by our disagreements. For that reason, we invite all of the Reformed Church in America to seek reconciliation and God’s peace.

In response to Overture 17, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-15**
To deny Overture 17. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. While the committee finds the spirit of the overture meritorious, the issues it aims to address will be considered more comprehensively as part of the work of the 2020 Vision Group.

**DEFINITIVE RESOLUTION AND DIRECTION TO LGBTQ ISSUES**

18. The Classis of Rocky Mountains overtures the 2018 General Synod to request the GSC, the regional synods, and each classis to engage in discussions regarding a definitive path forward for the Reformed Church in America at their next stated meetings. Given our current state of contention and division regarding scriptural interpretation and application of LGBTQ individuals’ status and participation issues at all levels of denominational polity, the time has come to determine the future of the RCA. These issues have been detrimental to the creative energy and efficiency of the denomination, particularly during recent years, and we need to progress toward a resolution that is compatible with the scriptural interpretational beliefs of all involved.

Though the questions submitted via R 17-18 at the 2017 General Synod were
meaningful for discussion, in their present format they do not lead toward definitive resolution of these issues. Given that, a set of questions for further discussion at all levels is proposed herein. Results of these discussions are to be summarized and shared with the 2019 General Synod by the general secretary and/or his appointed representative. This should be accomplished in consultation with the GSC, regional synod executives, and classis pastoral and/or elder representatives as appropriate.

The questions proposed for discussion are:

1. Does scriptural interpretation provide that alternative sexual lifestyle behavior is a “disputable matter” rather than one that is indisputable? (See Romans 14.) If so, what are the reasons, and what should the related action be? A possible resolution could be the development of “conscience clauses” within each level of church polity (church, classis, regional synod, General Synod) to establish policy for scriptural acceptability of alternative sexual lifestyle behavior. The resultant action might then be the maintaining of the unity of the Reformed Church in America as one denominational body, allowing for differences in scriptural interpretation of these issues.

2. Does scriptural interpretation provide that alternative sexual lifestyle behavior is not a “disputable matter” but one over which to “break fellowship” and begin disciplinary action? (See 1 Corinthians 5.) If so, what are the reasons, and what should the related action be? A possible resolution could be to begin disciplinary procedures through our judicial system, as outlined in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 2.

3. Does scriptural interpretation provide that alternative sexual lifestyle behavior is not a “disputable matter” but one over which to “separate for mission” and initiate the process of a peaceful separation? (See Acts 15:36–41.) If so, what are the reasons, and what should the related action be? A possible resolution could be the orderly creation of different denominational entities that would be compatible with their own scriptural viewpoints and convictions surrounding LGBTQ issues.

As with any proposal having significant import to the future of the denomination, the entire process should be constantly covered in prayer, focused on Holy Scripture, and provide an open and accepting environment for authentic and honest discussion within relevant assemblies and with one another to further God’s purposes within the Reformed Church in America and the world we are called to serve.

Reasoning:
The 2017 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America requested, via R 17-18, that a denomination-wide discussion take place “in light of our current state of contention and division” (MGS 2017, p. 136). The RCA provided three questions to address in this discussion:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

As a denomination, if we engage only in generalities like those of the questions above, we cannot achieve significant progress toward meaningful resolution of LGBTQ issues. If we do not ask the right questions, our denominational discussions will continue to be largely unproductive in resolving our differences, and we will find ourselves—yet again—“kicking the proverbial can” further down the road.

The Rocky Mountain Classis Executive Team (RMCET) asserts that if we, as a denomination, want to move toward resolution, we have to do three additional, specific things, which the questions of R 17-18 do not address:

1. Name the “current state of contention and division.”
2. Discuss the actual nature of the contention.
3. Resolve clearly at each level of polity how we believe the Lord is calling us to move forward as a denomination.

Naming the Issues

The RMCET believes there is already general agreement regarding our denominational dilemma. The issues aren’t simply beliefs and convictions about the LGBTQ community. The issues aren’t just the authority of Scripture on these issues. From the RMCET’s perspective, the most important reality to name is this: we have leaders within the RCA (pastors, church planters, elders, professors, and teachers) who have extremely divergent convictions regarding LGBTQ issues. We do not have unity in belief or practice.

On one side of the LGBTQ debate are the self-identified “conservatives” or “traditionalists” (pastors, church planters, elders, professors, and teachers) who see these issues through a lens of righteousness and sin. These leaders hold a traditional view of marriage and sexuality: any sexual activity between two persons of the same sex is considered sin. These leaders see their position as clearly supported in Scripture, as well as through a historical, orthodox interpretation.

On the other side of the LGBTQ debate are the self-identified “liberals” or “progressives.” These leaders (pastors, church planters, elders, professors, and teachers) believe that a same-sex covenantal relationship can fall under the blessing of God. They are “open and affirming” of these relationships, including marriage. They advocate for gay persons in same-sex marriages to serve at every level of leadership within the church. Some of these leaders are currently advocating for constitutional change within the RCA, allowing the denomination as a whole to become “open and affirming.” Other progressive leaders simply want to live out their convictions without facing reprisal or discipline by the RCA.

Three Pauline Resolutions

In the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, we find him handling a number of different issues and disagreements. Depending on the nature of the problem, he gave different counsel and wisdom. Paul prayerfully considered each situation and then specified a course of action based on the nature of the circumstances. Paul utilized three basic approaches to solve various issues and the RMCET believes these three approaches can be used as a framework to promote resolution of the issues the denomination faces at this time.
1. Disputable Matters
This phrase comes from Paul in Romans 14. He confronted a few controversial issues at the time and said, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters” (Romans 14:1, NIV). One matter that Paul considered “disputable” was if it was appropriate for a follower of Christ to eat food sacrificed to an idol. He encouraged the Christians not to quarrel but to love one another even though they might disagree on this issue:

> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. (Romans 14:13, NIV)

> Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Romans 14:19, NIV)

Thus, a legitimate, important discussion is not necessarily what everyone believes regarding homosexuality but rather if this could be a “disputable” issue and if we would need to love one another well in the midst of disagreement. If Paul were the leader of the RCA today, would he speak verses 13 and 19 to us about LGBTQ matters?

Notice that Paul had his convictions about this subject (verse 14) yet decided not to argue his point. Instead, he argued for unity in the midst of diverse opinions.

If we believe that the issues surrounding homosexuality fall into the category of “disputable matters,” then we should let the words of Jesus in his priestly prayer be a lens through which we proceed:

> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. (John 17:22-23a, NIV)

A modern day “disputable matter” in the RCA is infant baptism. Although the denomination has clear views on the subject, in practice, we allow our leaders and churches to operate with diverse convictions and practices. The RMCET asks, couldn’t we handle issues surrounding homosexuality in the same manner as we do with infant baptism? We think there are leaders on both sides of the LGBTQ issue who would advocate such a pastoral approach. Let’s allow them to express the reasons why they believe we could handle our present conflict as a “disputable matter.” If so decided, this should not simply be a temporary fix until one side “wins” but an established, permanent approach.

2. Breaking of Fellowship
Another Pauline approach is not to encourage unity in the midst of diversity but instead to deal with sin. Paul rebuked the Corinthian church for celebrating sexual sin rather than removing the perpetrator from their midst.

> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? (1 Corinthians 5:1-2, NIV)
Paul did not invite discussion on this matter. He had already passed judgment (verse 3) and was reprimanding the church for inaction. This is not unlike the words of the resurrected Christ to the church in Thyatira: they tolerated a false prophetess and her teachings (see Revelation 2:20).

If we believe that the issues surrounding homosexuality fall into the category of “breaking of fellowship,” we can heed the words of Jesus in Matthew 18. Dealing with sin is the lens through which we consider the matter.

If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17, NIV)

A modern day example of this approach is the exclusiveness of Christ. The RCA has removed pastors or churches for being Universalists. No one suggested this was an issue about which to live in unity. It had to be dealt with and the person(s) “removed from community” if they did not repent. Is homosexuality this kind of issue?

Let us ask this question to those on both sides of the issue. There are both conservatives and progressives who do not believe we can live with different approaches to this matter. The progressives think LBGTQ matters are a subset of social justice—trying to be fair to all in a diverse society. Therefore, they say, “We must do everything to ensure justice for LGBTQ people. We cannot compromise on this.” If, on the other hand, homosexual activity is exclusively a matter of righteousness and sin, then the conservatives say, “We must not compromise or tolerate it in any way.” Let us allow people with these convictions to discuss their points of view. Why do they believe that this is a “deal-breaker” for them and not a “disputable matter”?

3. Separate for Mission

Think now about one more approach Paul used to deal with disagreements. It is less clear and precise but worthy of consideration. In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas successfully advocate for Gentile believers at the Jerusalem Council. Then, just after that, surprisingly and somewhat sadly, Paul and Barnabas disagree about whether to bring John Mark on their next journey. (John Mark had abandoned them previously.) Their disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas separated.

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:39-40, NIV).

Barnabas and Paul still considered each other “brothers in Christ.” They were still connected to the church of Antioch and to each other. Yet they separated to pursue God’s next mission in different directions with different companions. Later we learn that this separation was only for a time; somehow, it was resolved (see 1 Corinthians 9:6 and 2 Timothy 4:11).

No RCA example of this comes to mind; however, another denomination may provide one. Our Episcopalian/Anglican sisters and brothers have separated over these very same LGBTQ issues. They avoided a complete split by establishing a
three-year agreement of separation, though they are still unsure how this will be resolved in the coming years.

The RMCET suggests that a similar separation could be considered. If the RCA is not yet confident in calling the LGBTQ issues “disputable,” or as something we must break our unity over, why not weigh the pros and cons in a time-bounded separation?

As a denominational, pastoral response, this course of action at least seems worthy of consideration. What might this look like for the RCA? How could we begin the process of separation and still maintain the possibility to explore and evaluate further? People of this perspective should be able to share their thoughts.

Determining a Way Forward

The RMCET is not writing from a “conservative” or a “progressive” position. We just long for resolution to this current conflict in order to focus time, energy, and other resources on our core mission. Yes, we do have strong theological convictions about homosexuality but are undecided regarding the best way forward. Discussing these Pauline, pastoral responses in the context of the questions proposed in the accompanying overture could be fruitful in determining the direction we as a denomination should take.

If a majority of the assemblies who will have this discussion on LGBTQ matters found themselves supporting one of the three options described above, it would bring more clarity and direction for future General Synods to proceed meaningfully.

Recommended Process and Questions to Determine a Way Forward

Seeking the presence and the counsel of the Holy Spirit, the RMCET submits this suggested process for discussion at each denominational level:

1. **Forming the discussion:** Distribute this overture and the support paper, which builds the argument for shaping our discussion around Paul’s three pastoral responses.

2. **Pre-discussion study and prayer:** In preparation for the discussion, invite participating members at all denominational levels to study and pray through the following three passages: Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 5, and Acts 15.

3. **Questions for discussion:** At each denominational level, discuss the following questions and which of the three positions in the overture your entity would consider as valid and why. Provide your assembly’s position in writing to the General Synod and/or general secretary prior to March 31, 2019. Also, respond if the assembly does not support any of these three positions and the reasons why.
   a. What do you think makes an issue a “disputable matter”? What makes an issue one over which to “break fellowship”? What makes an issue something over which to “separate” in order to focus on mission?
   b. In your opinion, do you think the questions and convictions surrounding the LGBTQ community should be handled as a “disputable matter,” a “breaking fellowship” matter, or a “separate for mission” matter? Why or why not?
   c. In what ways would the RCA be able to “live in unity in the midst of disagreement” with regard to the LGBTQ community?
d. What are the options or possibilities before the RCA if we ultimately decide to “break fellowship” over these issues?

e. In light of this discussion, what do we believe is God’s intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

f. Is there enough unity within our classis (or other assembly) to make a recommendation on how to move forward, or should we simply report the content of our discussion?

g. If we have enough unity as a classis (or other assembly), what recommendations can we make?

In response to Overture 18, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-16
To urge each classis, at a stated meeting, to engage in discussions regarding a definitive path forward for the Reformed Church in America using the questions noted in Overture 18. Results of these discussions are to be summarized and shared with the 2020 Vision Team by March 31, 2019.

Reasons:
1. This study will be complimentary to the work of the 2020 Vision Team.
2. The study provides opportunity for input across the denomination.

A motion was made and supported to refer OV 18-16 to the 2020 Vision Team.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the motion to refer.

OV 18-16 was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt OV 18-16.

OV 18-16
To urge each classis, at a stated meeting, to engage in discussions regarding a definitive path forward for the Reformed Church in America using the questions noted in Overture 18. Results of these discussions are to be summarized and shared with the 2020 Vision Team by March 31, 2019. (ADOPTED)
19. The Great Lakes City Classis overtures the General Synod to commend the attached Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality [see pp. 155–160] to all RCA churches and classes for reflection, study, and response for the next two years as a means of deepening our understanding of biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway toward a new standard of unity on the questions regarding marriage that have divided us, and that the Commission on Theology be instructed to gather responses from the churches and classes within the RCA and to file reports to the General Synod on this discussion each year that the General Synod meets, beginning in 2019.

Reasons:
1. Creeds and confessions are not meant to be exhaustive statements of everything that Christians believe and practice. Rather, as church history unfolds and issues are raised, confessions are written as the church seeks to interpret and apply Scripture faithfully. For example, the need for a christological creed arose precisely because people began saying new things about Jesus’ identity that didn’t fit with Scripture. So why don’t we already have a creed or confession about marriage? In part, because it simply hasn’t been an issue until recently.

2. It is hard to think of a topic that has maintained more agreement throughout church history than defining marriage as between a man and woman and condemning all forms of same-sex sexual activity. Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant thinkers have been united on their views on this subject until the last few decades as deeper divisions developed in how we read and interpret Scripture and what discipleship and transformation by Christ actually look like.

3. The 2017 General Synod approved the following motion: “To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman” (MGS 2017, R 17-29, p. 161). A better and more permanent solution to our disagreements about God’s design for marriage can be found in the adoption of a confessional statement on marriage and sexuality.

4. The Belhar Confession, the newest standard of unity of the Reformed Church in America, was adopted by General Synod in 2009 and ratified in 2010 after a period of study as a means of deepening the RCA’s commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies. Adoption of a doctrinal statement on human sexuality will help to bring clarity to the church’s teaching on human sexuality and will strengthen our ties with our ecumenical partners who share a commitment to defend a traditional view of marriage.

ADOPT CATECHISM ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY AS STANDARD OF UNITY

20. The New Thing Classis humbly overtures the 2018 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to adopt the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality as the fifth Standard of Unity of the Reformed Church in America.

Reasons:
1. Adding to the constitution of the Reformed Church in America by adopting an additional doctrinal Standard (please see pp. 155-160 for the text of the Great Lakes
Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality) is not something that should be undertaken lightly. We recognize that not every controversial issue requires adopting a statement that is binding upon our officeholders and embedded into the fabric of our denomination. However, our denomination has become so embroiled in discussion and disagreement on human sexuality that at many levels—especially our higher assemblies—we are almost entirely focused inward. Instead of discussions at General Synod on how to effectively reach the lost and minister to the broken, we discuss orderly separation and seasons of restraint on leaving the denomination. The 2017 General Synod saw a record number of overtures, and a large number of them were focused on the issue of human sexuality. No longer do we see in the various commissions of our denomination and gatherings of our assemblies discussing how to present the timeless truths of the gospel in an effective way to the world; but rather, the emphasis is narrowed to the issue of human sexuality to the point of excluding the mission of the church “in calling all persons to life in Christ, and in proclaiming God’s promise and commands to all the world” (Book of Church Order, Preamble [2017 edition, p. 2]).

2. In addition to this being a time of great confusion—both within and without the church—we realize that, especially for our beloved denomination, this is a time of significant division. For decades, we have been debating the issue of human sexuality. While the position of our denomination has yet to change, many people act as though our position has changed and act with blatant disunity toward their fellow brothers and sisters by officiating same-sex marriage ceremonies or by the ordination of those in committed same-sex relationships. A Special Council and season of restraint on this issue were openly disregarded by regions of our denomination, and some classes responded by seeking to dual-affiliate with other denominations or even ordaining someone in a committed same-sex relationship who had their Certificate of Fitness revoked. As pastors, classes, and regional synods act divisively toward the church body, we accept that a new Standard of Unity is needed for our church. The time has come for our church to live out the implications of our Constitution that “the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America” (BCO, Preamble [2017 edition, p. 1]) by adopting a catechism that is deeply biblical, culturally relevant, pastorally useful, and doctrinally sound on the issue of human sexuality.

3. Catechism, from the verb catechize, is the process of learning by which people are instructed in the doctrines of the Christian faith. As a church, we already recognize the importance of catechism as it relates to the faith of a Christian, hence our adoption and sincere appreciation of the Heidelberg Catechism. It isn’t simply that its contents warm our souls; it is the accessibility of its teaching that blesses the church. So too with the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality: its doctrine warms our soul as it both convicts and encourages us, while at the same time it blesses the corporate church and individual families with a tool that is especially necessary during this time of great confusion.

4. Indeed, as we survey the confusion in the world around us, and regrettably, throughout much of our denomination, we recognize that the time is right for a new catechism. While this isn’t something that our denomination has done frequently, historical Protestantism has not avoided the creation of catechisms for clarity of teaching. In 2012, when The Gospel Coalition released the New City Catechism, they addressed the inevitable “why another catechism” question that so many had. They wrote:

Most people today do not realize that it was once seen as normal, important, and necessary for churches to continually produce new catechisms for their own use. The early Scottish churches, though they had Calvin’s Geneva Catechism of 1541 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, went on to
produce and use Craig's Catechism of 1581, Duncan's Latin Catechism of 1595, and The New Catechism of 1644, before eventually adopting the Westminster Catechism.

The Puritan pastor Richard Baxter, who ministered in the 17th century town of Kidderminster, was not unusual. He wanted to train heads of families to instruct their households in the faith. To do so, he wrote his own Family Catechism that was adapted to the capacities of his people and that brought the Bible to bear on many of the issues his people were facing at that time (The Gospel Coalition, “Introducing New City Catechism,” www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/introducing-new-city-catechism).

We echo their sentiment: we wish to see a catechism that is “adapted to the capacities of” our church and brings “the Bible to bear on” the issue our people are facing at this time. We believe, wholeheartedly and without reservation, that the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality does just that. It is biblical, theologically sound, it is Reformed, and it is a good fit for our confessional identity.

5. Simultaneously, we understand that to adopt a new Standard of Unity makes this catechism become—for us—a timely and timeless piece of doctrine. Just as Dort was relevant in the seventeenth century and continues to be relevant today, this new catechism will also be relevant for generations to come. We believe the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality will be a useful catechism for the local church, classes, regional synods, and the entire denomination from this point forward until Christ comes to judge the living and the dead.

In response to Overtures 19 and 20, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-17**

To deny Overtures 19 and 20. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. These overtures are redundant in light of the recommendation to be considered in response to Overture 24.

DECLARE COMMITMENT TO PERSONAL RECONCILIATION OVER DISCIPLINE

21. The Mid-Hudson Classis respectfully overtures General Synod to declare the following: “We call upon all members of the RCA to honor the spirit of Christ’s words in Matthew 18:15-17 by seeking personal reconciliation before pursuing any further forms of formal discipline or constitutional change.”

Reason:
1. We, the members of the Mid-Hudson Classis, believe Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18 emphasize that the better part of the wisdom is to deal with conflict relationally. However, we also realize better relationships across the RCA cannot be pursued through a single assembly (General Synod) that only meets once a year, with only a small portion of the church present in its deliberation. To that end, we hope General Synod will recognize its limited capacity to hold the RCA together during its current state of conflict and instead point all members of the RCA (particularly those who are in conflict with each other) back to the nature and form of Christian discipline in
the Book of Church Order, which starts with Matthew 18:15-17. Too often we have focused on Christian discipline in its formal forms and forgotten that all Christians (regardless of judicatory) are called to work out their conflicts with each other first in personal relationship. The fact that this focus has shifted in our discourse about human sexuality reveals we do not have the relationships necessary to conduct Christian discipline faithfully, and we are out of order with the spirit of our covenantal bonds. Moreover, anyone who has sought formal forms of discipline or tried to change the Constitution to do so without first engaging in a restorative, pastoral communication with those they believe have erred are, in fact, working outside the vows they have made before God and the church. We strongly urge those who continue to believe in the witness of the RCA and truly want to work for peace to be empowered by General Synod to relationally (through pastoral and restorative means) admonish those who have sought conflict resolution without first engaging in rebuke and admonishment on a personal level.

In response to Overture 21, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-18
To call upon all members of the RCA to honor the spirit of Christ’s words in Matthew 18:15 by seeking personal reconciliation. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. We believe Jesus’s instructions in Matthew 18 emphasize that the better part of the wisdom is to deal with conflict relationally. However, we also realize better relationships across the RCA cannot be pursued through a single assembly (General Synod) that only meets once a year, with only a small portion of the church present in its deliberation. To that end, we hope General Synod will recognize its limited capacity to hold the RCA together during its current state of conflict and instead point all members of the RCA (particularly those who are in conflict with each other) back to the nature and form of Christian discipline in the Book of Church Order, which starts with Matthew 18:15-17. Too often we have focused on Christian discipline in its formal forms and forgotten that all Christians (regardless of judicatory) are called to work out their conflicts with each other first in personal relationship. The fact that this focus has shifted in our discourse about human sexuality reveals we do not have the relationships necessary to conduct Christian discipline faithfully, and we are out of order with the spirit of our covenantal bonds. Moreover, anyone who has sought formal forms of discipline or tried to change the Constitution to do so without first engaging in a restorative, pastoral communication with those they believe have erred are, in fact, working outside the vows they have made before God and the church. We strongly urge those who continue to believe in the witness of the RCA and truly want to work for peace to be empowered by General Synod to relationally (through pastoral and restorative means) admonish those who have sought conflict resolution without first engaging in rebuke and admonishment on a personal level.
BCO PROVISION FOR BAPTISM OF CHILDREN WHEN PARENTS ARE NOT MEMBERS

22. The Regional Synod of Albany respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology to explore changes to Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 5, Section 2 of the Book of Church Order, so that the requirements for an infant/child to receive the sacrament of baptism may be expanded to include provisions that allow for the baptism of children whose parents are not confessing members of the church.

Reasons:
1. Chapter 1, Part 1, Article 5, Section 2a states that the board of elders “shall consider requests for infant baptism, providing at least one parent or guardian is a confessing member of the church to which the request is presented. A request for baptism from a parent or guardian who is not a confessing member of the church to which the request is made shall first be submitted for approval to the governing body of the church where the parent or guardian has membership.” This presupposes that every child who may be a candidate for baptism has a parent or guardian who is a member of a church. However, in the complexity of the twenty-first century church and world, it is entirely possible for a child to participate in the life and ministry of a church even though that child’s parent or guardian has no faith commitment. These children should not be prohibited from receiving the Sacrament that signs and seals them in the visible membership of the holy catholic church.

2. Our Reformed understanding of baptism is rooted in God’s covenant. In declaring God’s covenant with Abraham, God said, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you” (Genesis 17:7). In his Pentecost sermon, the apostle Peter proclaimed, “For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). These Scriptures place no limits on those whom God calls to be included as a child of God’s covenant promises.

3. In the “Order for the Sacrament of Baptism,” the minister or elder asks this question of the parent(s) or guardian(s): “Do you promise to instruct this child/these children in the truth of God’s word, in the way of salvation through Jesus Christ; to pray for them, to teach them to pray; and to train them in Christ’s way by your example, through worship, and in the nurture of the church?” The minister or elder asks this question of the members of the congregation: “Do you promise to love, encourage, and support these brothers and sisters by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer and service?” The wording of these questions implies that, since the second is addressed to the faith community, the first is being addressed to the person(s) who have custody of that child. As previously noted, not every child has a custodian who is a member of a church.

In response to Overture 22, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-19
To deny Overture 22. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. We recognize the pastoral difficulties with this issue; however, the overture does not appear to be consistent with our covenantal theology.
TASK FORCE FOR GRACE-FILLED AND ORDERLY REALIGNMENT

23. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to create and authorize a task force with representation from each of the regional synods to research potential futures (courses of action) in order to recommend steps toward implementation of a grace-filled and orderly realignment that will include the possibility of our churches, classes, and regional synods uniting with other Reformed bodies.

Reasons:
1. The RCA has not found a constitutional way forward on the issues that separate us.
2. Without a resolution of the divisive issues, the denomination may have to endure endless judicial actions.
3. If no effective action is taken, we expect that large numbers of churches will leave the RCA, and many of our church plants will choose not to organize as RCA churches.
4. This overture is designed to implement a process that may bring peace to the church sooner rather than later. Planning for a positive future of unity and peace is better than watching our denomination fragment into many pieces. Our ability to be honest and clear about where we stand, even if in different places, is a gift and an aid for the mission of the church.

In response to Overture 23, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-20
To deny Overture 23. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. While the committee finds the spirit of the overture meritorious, the issues it aims to address will be considered more comprehensively as part of the work of the 2020 Vision Group.

COMMEND CATECHISM ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY FOR STUDY

24. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes overtures the General Synod to commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by RCA churches and classes for the next five years as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway toward unity in mission and ministry through the possible adoption of a new standard of unity following this period of study.

Reasons:
1. Creeds and confessions are not meant to be exhaustive statements of everything that Christians believe and practice. Rather, as church history unfolds and issues are raised, confessions are written as the church seeks to interpret and apply Scripture faithfully. For example, the need for a Christological creed arose precisely because people began saying new things about Jesus’ identity that didn’t fit with Scripture. So why don’t we already have a creed or confession about marriage? In part, because it simply hasn’t been an issue until recently.
2. It is hard to think of a topic that has maintained more agreement throughout church history than defining marriage as between a man and woman and condemning all forms of same sex sexual activity. Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant thinkers
have been united on their views on this subject until the last few decades, as deeper divisions developed in how we read and interpret Scripture and what discipleship and transformation by Christ actually look like.

3. The 2017 General Synod approved R 17-29 (*MGS 2017*, p. 161), which states, “To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman.” A better and more permanent solution to our disagreements about God’s design for marriage will be to move toward the adoption of a confessional statement on marriage and sexuality.

4. The Belhar Confession, the newest standard of unity of the Reformed Church in America, was adopted by General Synod in 2009 and ratified in 2010 after a period of study as a means of deepening the RCA’s commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies. Adoption of a doctrinal statement on human sexuality will help to bring clarity to the church’s teaching on human sexuality and will strengthen our ties with our ecumenical partners who share a commitment to defend a traditional view of marriage.

In response to Overture 24, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

**OV 18-21**

To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry.

Reasons:

1. Creeds and confessions are not meant to be exhaustive statements of everything that Christians believe and practice. Rather, as church history unfolds and issues are raised, confessions are written as the church seeks to interpret and apply Scripture faithfully. Or example, the need for a Christological creed arose precisely because people began saying new things about Jesus’s identity that didn’t fit with Scripture. So why don’t we already have a creed or confession about marriage? In part, because it simply hasn’t been an issue until recently.

2. It is hard to think of a topic that has maintained more agreement throughout church history than defining marriage as between a man and woman and condemning all forms of same sex sexual activity. Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant thinkers have been united on their views on this subject until the last few decades, as deeper divisions developed in how we read and interpret Scripture and what discipleship and transformation by Christ actually look like.

3. The Belhar Confession, the newest standard of unity of the Reformed Church in America, was adopted by General Synod in 2009 and ratified in 2010 after a period of study as a means of deepening the RCA’s commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and other Reformed bodies. Adoption of a doctrinal statement on human sexuality will help to bring clarity to the church’s teaching on human sexuality and will strengthen our ties with our ecumenical partners who share a commitment to defend a traditional view of marriage.
4. The reflection and study on this document could stimulate conversations that could result in the development of a contrasting catechism using a different hermeneutic. The intent of this is to foster a deeper discussion of the RCA position on this topic.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-21 as follows (deletions are stricken, additions are underlined):

To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality to the Commission on Theology for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding in consultation with outside organizations, including but not limited to Christians for Biblical Equality, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, the American Psychological Association, and our Formula of Agreement partners, and to direct the Commission on Theology to report to General Synod 2019 how both biblical teaching and general revelation in regard to human sexuality and gender might lead us to finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-21 as follows (deletions are stricken):

To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry.

A motion was made and supported from the floor to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-21 as follows (additions are underlined):

…finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry, and further, to refer both the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality and response by the Commission on Theology to the 2020 Vision Task Force.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.
OV 18-21 in its original form was again before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt OV 18-21.

**OV 18-21**

To commend the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality for reflection, study, and response by the Commission on Theology and RCA churches and classes as a means of deepening our understanding of the biblical teaching on human sexuality and finding a pathway forward toward unity in mission and ministry. (ADOPTED)

**SEEK RECONCILIATION WITH ANABAPTIST CHURCHES**

25. The Regional Synod of New York respectfully overtures the General Synod to instruct the Commission on Christian Unity to begin a process seeking reconciliation—one which would have application with the local congregation on through to our wider ecumenical witness—with the Anabaptist churches, in which the RCA officially acknowledges our role in fracturing the Body of Christ.

Reasons:

1. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

2. The RCA position regarding our Belgic Confession: With regard to the harsh words about Anabaptists and others in Article 36, the RCA stated that “in publishing the Articles of Faith, the Church determined to abide by the words adopted in the Synod of Dordrecht, as most expressive of what she believes to be truth; in consequence of which, the terms alluded to could not be avoided. But she openly and candidly declares that she by no means thereby intended to refer to any denomination of Christians at present known, and would be grieved at giving offence, or unnecessarily hurting the feelings of any person.” To “openly and candidly declare” needs to be fleshed out more relevantly as in seeking reconciliation.

3. The Preamble of the *Book of Church Order* states,

   The Reformed churches confess that the church of Jesus Christ in the world is one church, the “Holy Catholic Church.” The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head. Their oneness in him is a “communion of the saints” with Christ and with one another in the divine blessings (p. 2).

   And continues [in A Historical Note, BCO p. 5],

   The RCA is grateful to be recognized as a church that emphasizes giving an account of the hope we have in Christ Jesus in word and deed; the RCA values faithful and articulate theology and has demonstrated a deep commitment to
ministries of mission. The RCA celebrates its bond of community with all other churches of Christ and values the heritage it shares with other faith communities who call on the God of Abraham.

We need to live into our constitutional identity.
4. The Belhar Confession calls us to reconciliation.
5. The RCA finds itself amidst a culture where the spirit of division is running rampant to and fro around the church. In light of the divisions and the consequences of sin, we are called to be bearers of God’s reconciling work in Christ.
6. While our confessional identity need not change, in an ever-changing world, we need to continually testify to the hope that is within us, to live in the nuances of our differing theological perspectives even within the one body of Christ.

In response to Overture 25, the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance recommended:

OV 18-22
To deny Overture 25. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. Our committee is unaware of a fracture between the RCA and the Anabaptists.
2. The Regional Synod of New York may resubmit an overture that will clarify the fracture between the RCA and the Anabaptists.

FROM THE REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND NEW BUSINESS

Proposal 1 from the Report of the Interim General Secretary and Proposals 2 and 3 from the Report of the President were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business.

In response to Proposal 1 from the Report of the Interim General Secretary, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended the following:

OV 18-23
To appoint a 2020 Vision Group to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

• Staying together
• Radical reconstituting and reorganization
• Grace-filled separation

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are “for” rather than what they are “against” and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.
As the vision group engages these options, its work should include, but not be limited to:

- A commitment, as much as is possible, to the unity of the church in its being, spirit, covenantal relationship, mission, and kingdom witness in the world
- An understanding regarding the foundational role that biblical hermeneutics and Reformed exegesis play in the life and witness of the church, and a commitment to articulate how those methods are operative in the church’s way forward
- An analysis of the role that the RCA’s theology, Standards of Unity, and liturgies play in the present and future life of the church

The vision group will consist of 10-12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary will serve as an ex-officio member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed $250,000.

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020.

Reasons:
1. This recommendation shows a desire to move forward into dialogue with an emphasis on God’s intended future for our denomination rather than standing still in argument or debate.
2. Broad consultation has gone into the development of this proposal.
3. This proposal gives the context for a holistic and comprehensive process for addressing issues present in a number of overtures to this synod into dialogue.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-23 as follows (deletions are stricken):

- Grace-filled separation

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are ‘for’ rather than what they are ‘against’ and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.

As the vision group engages these options, . . .

**VOTED:** To not adopt the amendment.
A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-23 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

…for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

- Staying together
- Radical reconstituting and reorganization
- Grace-filled separation

To present an interim report to the 2019 General Synod that outlines plans, structures, timelines, and outcomes for each of the two options for the purpose of choosing one option to be recommended for final approval to the 2020 General Synod.

This process should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it…

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-23 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

. . . This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given. . .

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To not cease debate.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-23 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

The vision group will consist of 10-12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary will serve as an ex-officio member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed $250,000.
A point of order was raised questioning the propriety of making sequential amendments to the same recommendation. In response the president instructed the delegate who made the foregoing motion to combine all of his intended amendments into a single motion.

In response a revised motion was made by the delegate and supported to amend OV 18-23 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

. . . The vision group will consist of 10-12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup…

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report with potential recommendations that identify the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt OV 18-23.

OV 18-23
To appoint a 2020 Vision Group to work, in consultation with whatever staff, commissions, councils, agencies, and/or outside consultants the vision group deems necessary, to identify possible scenarios, strategies, and consequences for these future options for the Reformed Church in America:

- Staying together
- Radical reconstituting and reorganization
- Grace-filled separation

This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of one denomination with three or more affinity assemblies within it. Care should be given to the administrative, legal, financial, real estate, and emotional burdens of each option. Any potential new bodies should be identified by what they are “for” rather than what they are “against” and should be consistent with Reformed theology. This should be done in ways that affirm all parties. This must be bathed in denomination-wide, hope-filled prayer that God will show a way.

As the vision group engages these options, its work should include, but not be limited to:
• A commitment, as much as is possible, to the unity of the church in its being, spirit, covenantal relationship, mission, and kingdom witness in the world
• An understanding regarding the foundational role that biblical hermeneutics and Reformed exegesis play in the life and witness of the church, and a commitment to articulate how those methods are operative in the church’s way forward
• An analysis of the role that the RCA’s theology, Standards of Unity, and liturgies play in the present and future life of the church

The vision group will consist of 10-12 members named by the interim general secretary and general secretary, in consultation with GSC, and its makeup should reflect the wide diversity of the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary will serve as an ex-officio member without vote. Expenses for the vision group and any attendant costs, such as consulting or legal fees, will be taken out of GSC reserves, not to exceed $250,000.

The vision group shall present semi-annual reports to the GSC, an interim report to the General Synod of 2019, and a final report with recommendations to the General Synod of 2020. (ADOPTED)

In response to Proposal 2 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended the following:

**OV 18-24**
To urge the general secretary to explore possibilities for establishing a global church planters’ leadership collaborative to facilitate ongoing interactions between North American church planters and counterparts in selected countries where the RCA is engaged with indigenous global mission partners. The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reasons:
1. We believe that future interactions between the RCA’s North American church planters, their Brazilian counterparts, and others elsewhere would be mutually beneficial for all concerned, boosting kingdom impact.
2. While the Christian population percentage in North America and Europe has declined since 1970, the church has been flourishing in parts of Africa, South America, and Asia.

In response to Proposal 3 from the Report of the President, the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended the following:

**OV 18-25**
To urge the general secretary to help facilitate the launch of small church leadership collaboratives in at least three different RCA regional synods. Each leadership collaborative would seek to foster ongoing interactions among leaders of small churches (averaging
fewer than 100 in worship). The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod. (ADOPTED)

Reason:
1. Ministry in congregations with fewer than 100 in worship can be uniquely challenging. Smaller budgets, reduced personnel availability, and isolated geography can contribute to exhaustion and discouragement among the leaders of these important churches. The advisory committee maintains that the networking and resources available via formal learning communities can equip and strengthen the congregational leaders serving in these critical contexts.

In response to the item of new business referred to it by the Committee of Reference (regarding the transfer of City Classis to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics), the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business recommended:

OV 18-26
To transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants, and all ministers and candidates under care from the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (RSMAt) by a date suitable to all parties but no later than September 30, 2018.

Reason:
1. The mutual understanding of representatives of City Classis, the Regional Synod of the Far West, and the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is that City Classis can best serve the kingdom as a part of the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics.

A motion was made and supported to amend OV 18-26 as follows (additions are underlined):

To transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants, and all ministers and candidates under care of City Classis from the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (RSMAt) by a date suitable to all parties but no later than September 30, 2018.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

OV 18-26 as amended was before the house.

A motion was made and supported to cease debate.

VOTED: To cease debate.

VOTED: To adopt OV 18-26 as amended.

OV 18-26
To transfer City Classis, including its eight organized churches, two church plants, and all ministers and candidates under care of City Classis from the Regional Synod of the Far West (RSFW) to the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics (RSMAt) by a date suitable to all parties but no later than September 30, 2018. (ADOPTED)
APPENDIX: GREAT LAKES CATECHISM ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

1 Q: Is human sexuality a good thing or not?
A: It is good! We see in Scripture that God created us male and female as part of the creation order,
that our sexuality is an inherent part of being human,
and that our sexuality is part of what God calls “very good” in the beginning.¹

Moreover, God created man and woman as full partners,
together bearing God’s image²
and together receiving God’s blessing and call to
“Be fruitful and increase in number;
fill the earth, and subdue it.
rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky
and over every living creature that lives on the ground.”³

2 Q: But isn’t the body or the “flesh” the root cause of our sin and temptation?
A: Certainly not! Our sin problem is not ultimately a body or sex problem;
it is a heart problem—
we do not desire God as we should
and so we desire other things in a way we should not.⁴

3 Q: May we then look to our bodies and sexual desires to learn what is right?
A: No. Our expressions of sexuality are distorted and twisted by sin.
Sin warps us in many ways,
including our desires, thoughts, and actions pertaining to our sexuality.
Because our sexuality is affected by the fall,
we should not act on our desires, inclinations, or thoughts
without first testing them by what Scripture teaches is honorable, right, pure,
and lovely.⁵

4 Q: So Scripture is the source from which we learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in our sexual lives?
A: Yes. Scripture is the infallible rule for our lives.⁶
This means that we look to it to understand who God is and who we are called to be as God’s people.

In this world, we are called to test all teaching about marriage and sexuality
by Scripture,
and we must not put human writings,
custom or tradition,
the majority opinion,
the thinking of our own time and place,
or even past decisions of the church,
above the truth of God,
For God’s truth is above everything.⁷

¹ Gen. 1:31
² Gen. 1:27
³ Gen. 1:28
⁴ Jer. 17:9; James 1:14-15
⁵ Phil. 4:8
⁶ Belgic Confession, art. 7
⁷ Belgic Confession, art. 7
5 Q: Who should we consider our family?
A: Though many may consider their biological family their first family, Jesus teaches us that those who are his disciples, who are united by one Lord and one baptism into God’s covenant people, should be considered our primary family.

6 Q: Does this mean our earthly families are unimportant?
A: No. In fact, Scripture teaches us that we are to honor our parents,8 and that we should faithfully love our spouses and children.9 Nevertheless, we are called to seek first the kingdom of God.10 God’s mission and vocation must shape all my relationships. Though earthly families are good and a blessing, they may become an idol if we make them our ultimate priority or loyalty. All earthly loyalties and obligations, including those of family, must be subject to the lordship of Jesus.

7 Q: Since marriage and family are good, is it necessary to be married?
A: No. During his earthly ministry, Jesus showed us that true human fulfillment does not need to include marriage or sex. Yet, the life of Jesus most certainly included close, intimate relationships with those he called family.

8 Q: But why do many people in my church expect young adults to get married and raise a family?
A: The goal for all Christians is not marriage, but, whether married or single, to live decent and chaste lives.11 In the beginning, God blessed marriage and he calls many Christians to live out their discipleship in the context of marriage. Nevertheless, Christians sometimes idolize marriage and family and promote the unbiblical teaching that a person can only find fulfillment and happiness in the context of a marriage and family. However, this expectation is contrary to Scripture, which teaches that many Christians will be unmarried,12 whether through choice or circumstance, and that they live a true, fully human life, as our Savior did.

9 Q: How then should we view the single, celibate life?
A: Singleness can serve as a sign and reminder to married people that our most basic calling is to seek first the kingdom of God,13 not our earthly families.

8 Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1
9 Eph. 5:21-6:4
10 Matt. 6:33; Matt. 12:46-50
11 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 108
12 1 Cor. 7:29-40
13 1 Cor. 7:33-35; Matt. 6:33
In addition, the single person’s life points us ahead to the life to come, when we will neither marry nor be given in marriage.  

10 Q: Why did God institute marriage between man and woman?  
A: Though many see marriage simply as a path to personal fulfillment, happiness, or self-realization, or a relationship that may be dissolved if they are dissatisfied, Scripture teaches that God instituted marriage between a man and woman as a sign of Christ and the church, as a state of mutual help for life’s journey, as a relationship in which married Christians are sanctified, and in order to provide for the continuation of the human race and the raising of children into a life of faith in Jesus Christ.

11 Q: Should we view the duties and obligations of marriage and family as a hindrance to the truly spiritual life?  
A: No. When properly understood, we see that faithful devotion to one’s spouse and faithful care of one’s children are not merely “earthly” or “natural” matters but are in fact key elements of a faithful walk with Christ. Furthermore, the married person is a sign and reminder to single people that, just as a husband or wife has obligations to their spouse and family, so we all have obligations to the family of God.

12 Q: What is the meaning of sexual union?  
A: God created man and woman to be able to unite not only our bodies, but our very lives and selves as husband and wife. In marriage, husbands and wives give themselves completely to one another, and the one-flesh sexual union embodies the fact that these two persons are no longer two, but one flesh.

13 Q: But isn’t sexual union just a physical act?  
A: No. It is certainly more than that. In fact, when we reduce sex to a merely physical or biological act, we end up reducing other image-bearers of God to mere objects to be used.

We see this abuse and hatred of our neighbor all around us, in pornography, prostitution, rape,

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14 Matt. 22:30  
15 Eph. 5:31-32  
16 Gen. 2:18  
17 John 13:34; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3; Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 5:5; 1 Cor. 7:4-5; Gal. 6:2; 1 Thess. 5:11  
18 Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3  
19 Deut. 6:4-9  
20 Eph. 5:21-6:4  
21 Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31  
22 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 5
promiscuity,
cohabitation apart from marriage,
and sexual union outside of the covenant of marriage.

14 Q: How, then, should we understand sexual union?
A: Sexual union is a part of the total giving of oneself—
    body and soul, indeed one’s whole self—
to one’s spouse,
just as God in Christ gave himself completely to his bride, the Church.\(^{23}\)

And just as God is a faithful God who gives himself to us in covenant,\(^{24}\)
so sexual union is a covenantal act
that commits one to faithful, lifelong love to one’s spouse.\(^{25}\)

Sexual union is also meant to be a free act, entered into without coercion,
but freely and graciously,
as God in Christ freely and graciously loves us.\(^{26}\)

And finally, God created husband and wife so that
they fruitfully participate in the miracle of new life.\(^{27}\)
Just as God’s life and creativity brought us forth,\(^{28}\)
so children are not to be seen as a nuisance or impediment
to the marriage relationship
but as gifts of God,\(^{29}\)
disciples to be raised in the training and instruction of the Lord.\(^{30}\)

15 Q: Does Scripture limit marriage and sexual union to a husband and wife?
A: Scripture consistently teaches that the difference
between a woman and man in marriage is essential
to properly represent, symbolically, Christ and the church,
to the one-flesh act of sexual union
and one-flesh relationship of covenantal marriage,
and for the bringing of children into the world.

In Scripture, bodies matter.
We are saved by the body of Christ, broken for us,
and his blood, shed for our sins.
Without Christ’s body, we cannot be saved.

Furthermore, in the sacraments, we see that the material elements matter.
God does not merely give us grace through invisible means
but gives us visible signs and seals,
which are not empty and hollow signs
but which have their truth in Jesus Christ,

\(^{23}\) Phil. 2:5-8
\(^{24}\) Ex. 34:6-7
\(^{25}\) Mal. 2:16,
\(^{26}\) Rom. 8:32
\(^{27}\) Gen. 1:28; Ps. 139:13-14
\(^{28}\) Gen. 2:4-7, 18-22; Job 10:8-9.
\(^{29}\) Ps. 127:3-5; Gen. 21:1; Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19; Ps. 139:13-14
\(^{30}\) Eph. 6:1-4; Deut. 6:4-9
without whom they would be nothing.\textsuperscript{31}

In a similar way, bodies matter in marriage,
which is defined in part by the sexual difference
of male and female, who together—body and soul—bear the image of God
and symbolize Christ and the church.
Thus, marriage is not defined merely by the will or desire of any individual
but by the recognition that our Creator and Redeemer God has
instituted marriage
to take a certain form, with certain kinds of bodies:
“A man leaves his father and mother
and is united to his wife,
and they become one flesh.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{16 Q: Does Scripture really condemn all same-sex sexual activity?}
A: Yes. Scripture consistently and categorically
condemns sexual activity between persons of the same sex as immoral.
Genesis 1-2 presents the male-female relationship as God’s design for marriage.
The Torah given by God to Israel teaches that same-sex sexual activity
is wrong.\textsuperscript{33}
Jesus re-affirms the teaching of Genesis on marriage,
that marriage is between a man and woman.\textsuperscript{34}
The early church condemns same-sex sexual activity
when they condemn “sexual immorality,”
a term that points back to Leviticus 18 and encompasses all forms of sexual sin,\textsuperscript{35}
and the New Testament writers re-affirm the sexual ethics of Torah,
including specific condemnations of incest, adultery, and same-sex sexual activity.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{17 Q: Does the Bible especially condemn same-sex sexual activity above other sins, sexual or otherwise?}
A: No. Scripture never singles out same-sex sexual activity
as a worse sin than others.

\textbf{18 Q: What should characterize our attitudes and actions toward those who are same-sex attracted, whether inside or outside the church?}
We must first remember that there is a difference between being same-sex attracted,
and acting sexually on that attraction.
Just as there is a difference between being attracted to people of the opposite sex,
And acting sexually on that attraction.

Furthermore, though Scripture condemns sexual sin, it also condemns
all forms of mockery,
degrading words and thoughts,
economic oppression,

\textsuperscript{31} Belgic Confession, art. 33
\textsuperscript{32} Gen. 2:24
\textsuperscript{33} Lev. 18:22
\textsuperscript{34} Matt. 19:1-10
\textsuperscript{35} Acts 15:19-20
\textsuperscript{36} 1 Cor. 5:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Tim. 1:10
abuse, threats, and violence
against anyone based on their sexual identity or activity. 37

Anyone involved in such behavior must repent
and walk in obedience to Jesus’ command to love.

19 Q: What about those who fail to keep fully Scripture’s teaching on marriage and sexuality? How should we view them?
A: We must first remember that “they” are us! 38
   We are all sinners
   saved by God’s extravagant grace.
We must therefore see all people with the eyes of Jesus,
who looks on us with compassion.

We must also remember that we should not expect people who are not disciples of Jesus
to act as though they are.
Indeed, Scripture teaches us that we should expect to interact and associate
with those who are idolaters and sexually immoral
as part of our daily life in this world. 39

But as disciples of Jesus, we are also called
to teach, rebuke, correct, and even discipline one another, 40
for we know that without discipline,
we dare not call ourselves the church of Jesus Christ. 41
And we do not love one another in this way merely
for the sake of following the rules or keeping human traditions
but because God’s life-giving Spirit empowers and equips us
for a life of faith and gratitude, 42
for which we were made and to which we are called.

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37 Belhar Confession, art. 4. Luke 6:31; Lev. 19:9-18; Prov. 6:16-19
38 Romans 2:1-4
39 1 Cor. 5:9-10
40 Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11
41 Belgic Confession, art. 29
42 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32 & 33
Report of the General Synod Council on Discipleship

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report for ends policy E-2: Cultivating Transformation in Christ follows.

ENDS POLICY E-2: CULTIVATING TRANSFORMATION IN CHRIST

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities in the work of cultivating transformation that results in faithful and passionate disciples of Jesus.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus’ command to make disciples is the church’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. Transformed disciples become more like Christ as they read and reflect on God’s Word, pray and listen to God, spend time in community with other Christ followers, and engage in Christ’s mission. The RCA’s commitment is to help in providing accessible environments, processes, resources, and relationships that can be used by local congregations to foster—in cooperation with the Holy Spirit—more fully devoted followers who willingly and boldly live and love like Jesus.

The discipleship pathways uniquely created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations. Transformation will be manifest in our relationships with one another, our increasing love for each other, our sacrifice for the cause of Christ, our willingness to influence our world for the gospel, and how we advocate for justice with compassion in communities where we live and serve. As we live and love like Jesus, it will impact how we reach out to those who live on the margins, to those who have been disempowered in our society, and to those who have no voice in the broken world in which we reside.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

“Go and make disciples of all nations” is a pretty clear instruction from Jesus. In Transformed & Transforming, the discipleship priority area is called Cultivating Transformation in Christ—with Jesus’ words at its heart. As we follow Jesus as disciples, both leadership and mission follow.

The Transformational Processes (discipleship) guiding coalition, led by Jill Ver Steeg, is a team of people who are passionate about changing lives and communities for greater kingdom impact. This is a team of 12 practitioners in the field of discipleship who help shape the goals of this priority area and the approach to accomplishing them through coaching, webinars, resourcing, writing, teaching, and facilitating. The guiding coalition is working passionately toward the goal of every RCA congregation having a discipleship pathway, process, or environment in place to grow disciples who make disciples who bring
greater kingdom impact and deeper transformation, both personally and systemically.

The Transformational Processes guiding coalition is focusing on the following seven processes to help congregations create a discipleship pathway in their context.

**Discipleship Coaching**

The purpose of discipleship coaching is to explore the question, “How am I growing in my capacity to participate in what God is doing?” This question is asked of the individual being coached in order to get at the next question, “How is the church growing in its capacity to participate in what God is doing?” The goal is to guide the person being coached toward greater discipleship in his or her own life in order to facilitate discipleship movements in his or her church and community. Coaching often happens monthly for 12 sessions, based upon the need(s) of the person being coached.

**Discipleship Connection (Taste and See) Events**

The purpose of a discipleship connection event is to help congregations discern and dream about what future ministry could look like. It serves as an on-ramp for a discipleship learning community. This is a group of 12 to 20 churches in relatively close geographical proximity who share current discipleship challenges and celebrations, together creating a sense of urgency around seeing greater transformation in their context. The goal of a discipleship connection event is to paint a picture of a future with greater ministry impact and invite churches to take a next faithful step toward that future.

**Discipleship Pathway Learning Communities**

A discipleship pathway learning community is a cluster of eight to ten RCA congregations in relatively close geographical proximity that each gather a team of three to five people, including the pastor, to learn about discipleship together. Each congregation in the learning community will develop its own unique pathway(s) through which people will be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into passionate, outwardly focused followers of Jesus who live for the sake of others.

**Discipleship Leadership Communities**

Teams of three to five staff and leaders from RCA congregations engage in this two-year process; each leadership community will have between five and seven congregations, drawn from all geographic regions of the RCA. Teams from the pilot group of eight RCA congregations completed their two-year process at the end of April 2016. Reports from all eight congregations were extremely positive. Four of those eight congregations are now serving as “discipleship bases of operation” where ongoing learning, coaching, resourcing, and partnerships are happening for wider impact. Another discipleship leadership community launched in October 2016.

**Faithwalking Learning Communities**

Faithwalking is the personal transformation component of Ridder: Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal). Many RCA congregations lead Faithwalking experiences with neighboring congregations as one dimension of their discipleship pathway. A long-term goal will be to expand Faithwalking to non-Ridder congregations through the development of learning communities.
3DM Learning Communities

3DM learning communities consist of ten to twelve RCA, CRC, and other neighboring congregations that gather four times over the course of two years, implementing what they learn between gatherings. Each congregation will learn and employ the 3DM missional community process as a primary way to focus on multiplying disciples, leaders, and mission. The RCA also partnered with 3DM to train a total of 12 pastors in 3DM by June 2017.

VantagePoint3 Learning Communities

This is a one-year learning community of three to five RCA congregations in which each congregation will learn from and with one another as they employ VantagePoint3’s primary introductory resource, The Journey, which focuses on discipleship and leadership development.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Launch two discipleship learning communities with ten to fifteen RCA and CRC congregations.
- Launch four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities.
- Train five to seven pastors for leadership in 3DM.
- Twelve to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a 3DM learning community.
- Launch one to two Faithwalking retreats, involving six to eight RCA and other congregations.
- Hold five connection events focused on cultivating transformation.

Progress

- Discipleship learning communities:
  - The discipleship learning community that launched in East and West Sioux Classes in September 2016 at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa, continues. Nine congregations are involved in this learning community.
  - A discipleship learning community launched in the Rochester, New York, area in June 2017. Two congregations are participating in this learning community.
  - A discipleship learning community launched in George, Iowa, in January 2018. Two congregations are participating in this learning community.
  - A discipleship/local missional engagement learning community launched in Fulton, Illinois, in February 2018. Six congregations are involved in this learning community.
- Four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities have launched, one each in Albany, Mid-America, New Jersey, and New York. A total of 18 congregations have participated.
- Fifteen pastors (from California, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin) are in the process of being trained for leadership in 3DM.
- Thirteen RCA congregations—from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, to Okoboji, Iowa, to Edmonds, Washington—are participating in a 3DM learning community.
- Approximately eight Faithwalking retreats, involving 25 RCA congregations,
Discipleship connection events have been held in Orange City, Iowa; Holland, Michigan; Rochester, New York; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Fulton, Illinois; George, Iowa; Ames, Iowa; and Bridgewater, New Jersey. A joint next generation/discipleship connection event was held in Pella, Iowa.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Forty to fifty RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Five to ten RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- Two Growing Generosity leadership communities will be in process or completed.
- Six Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities will have been launched or completed.

Progress

- Fourteen RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Nineteen RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Fifty-five to sixty-five RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Eleven RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- One Growing Generosity leadership community with four congregations concluded in May 2017.
- Four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities have been completed, representing eighteen congregations.
- One joint next generation/discipleship learning community has launched.
- One joint discipleship/local missional engagement learning community has launched.
- One joint discipleship/leadership development learning community with Native American Ministries has launched.
Thirty-five to forty-five congregations have participated in a discipleship connection (Taste and See) event.

Twenty RCA pastors are currently in a discipleship coaching relationship.

**New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)**

- Twenty to twenty-five RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Forty to fifty RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Sixty-five to seventy-five RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Twenty-five to thirty-five RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Twenty to thirty RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- Eighty-five to one hundred RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship connection (Taste and See) event.
- Forty to fifty RCA pastors are currently in a discipleship coaching relationship.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in the discipleship/leadership/mission pilot in the Far West Region.
- Fifteen to twenty RCA congregations have participated in Organic Outreach as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Seventy-five to one hundred RCA pastors and/or ministry leaders are involved in discipleship coaching.
- Two Growing Generosity leadership communities will have convened between 2018 and 2020. The first one will launch in November 2018 (there will be four sessions between November 2018 and May 2020).
- Ten Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity (CCCG) learning communities will be facilitated from 2018 to 2023. The next two CCCG learning communities will begin in the fall of 2018.

**NEXT GENERATION ENGAGEMENT**

Rick Zomer assumed leadership of this team as the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement in February 2016. Rick was called to serve in another capacity outside the RCA in February 2018. Currently, the next generation work for the RCA is being executed by the discipleship guiding coalition. The purpose of Next Generation Engagement is to empower young adults, ministry teams, and congregations to create a culture where people of all ages serve in leadership positions at the church, classis, and denominational levels. The goal is to create an environment where the emphasis moves from merely keeping people in the church when they reach adulthood to equipping congregations both to fully include younger members in the church and to reach out to those who have left the church.

**Next Generation Connection Events**

Clusters of RCA churches in the same geographical area gather for a one-day process to examine their current reality regarding young adults’ presence and involvement in their congregations. In addition, participants are given the opportunity to envision ways to increase the number and involvement level of young adults in their church.
Next Generation Learning Communities

Plans have been developed and clusters of churches have been asked to consider an 18- to 24-month process focused on three specific goals: creating a shared understanding of their congregation’s current reality as it relates to young adults, considering steps for connecting across generations, and developing plans to commit to ministry with young adults in their church and regions.

Growing Young Learning Community

Growing Young is a transformational process that is offered by the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), housed at Fuller Theological Seminary. RCA churches are given the opportunity to engage in a one-year process with other congregations from across North America. The goal is to have congregations identify and implement specific steps to engage young adults in connection and leadership in their church.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Launch one high-quality learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Recruit and complete a Growing Young learning community with at least two RCA churches.
- Design and execute six connection events focused on involvement and leadership pathways for emerging adults in the local church.
- Recruit a Next Generation guiding coalition composed of individuals with a diversity of ages and contexts within the RCA and begin meeting quarterly.

Progress

- Two central Iowa churches began a Next Generation discipleship learning community in February 2018.
- One RCA church from Zeeland Classis is participating in a Growing Young learning community with Fuller Theological Seminary.
- Connection events were held in Lafayette, Indiana, and Sheldon, Iowa. Congregations were given the opportunity to consider collaborating on a learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Three people are currently part of the Next Generation guiding coalition.
- A Next Generation presentation and discussion was featured during the fall meeting of Rocky Mountain Classis.
- The RCA, CRCNA, and Fuller Youth Institute developed a strategy and cost structure for a shared Growing Young/Next Generation learning community to be held in 2018–2019 at the RCA’s Michigan Regional Center.
- The director of Next Generation Engagement was invited to attend a Regional Synod of New York event with a faculty member from Fuller Theological Seminary focused on emerging adults.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- Thirty congregations will have participated or will be participating in a learning community and will have a next generation ministry that is resourced.
- One hundred fifty congregations will have attended a Next Generation connection event and will have been invited to participate in a learning community as a next step toward developing a next generation strategy and ministry.
Onboarding of the FYI collaboration is complete and Growing Young resources have been introduced to 20 congregations through participation in the onsite cohort experience or through specific FYI-resourced connection events.

Progress

- Ten congregations have participated or are participating in a learning community and will have a next generation ministry that is resourced.
- Sixty to seventy congregations have attended a next generation connection event and have been invited to participate in a learning community as a next step toward developing a next generation strategy and ministry.
- Fifteen congregations have been introduced to the Growing Young resources through the cohort experience or FYI connection events.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

*Due to the change in leadership, new goals will be set once a new leader for Next Generation Engagement is in place.*

Each spring, the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report on ends policy E-3: Equipping Emerging Leaders follows.

ENDS POLICY E-3: EQUIPPING EMERGING LEADERS

The RCA will identify potential leaders and encourage and equip potential and existing leaders for missional, congregational, and pastoral leadership. These leaders will reflect the full diversity of the RCA with regard to such things as gender, age, race, ability, and cultural backgrounds, with a special emphasis on youth.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

Women and men who are open to being used by God help guide the church as they actively pursue God’s purpose for congregations and ministries. Leaders willingly and passionately live out their calling and giftedness to accomplish a missional vision that brings a gospel of grace and hope to a lost and broken world.

The RCA commitment is to help develop leaders, based on a foundation of discipleship, who:

- know how to lead themselves (their leadership is focused on their inward journey).
- know how to lead others (they are equipped to lead and influence in a God-ordained direction, increasing their leadership gift).
- know how to reproduce new leaders (they view leadership development as a key component of their call to be a leader).

This commitment to leadership development requires environments and accessible opportunities for growth and learning that will help lead RCA congregations forward in mission.

The RCA vision for leadership sees the leadership potential in all followers of Jesus Christ. It helps to raise up servant leaders who develop a courage and competence to lead in the church and in the world in a multiplicity of environments and with an openness to equip and empower all people to be influencers for Christ’s kingdom. This leadership vision has a special focus on empowering people who may not have leadership positions, privilege, power, or even access to them, but who have been called and gifted by God to serve boldly. It is a vision that especially is committed to the next generation and developing leaders for the church of the future.

OVERVIEW

Three initiative teams work within the Equipping Emerging Leaders strategic priority: Emerging Leaders, which focuses on leadership mobilization and development; Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches, which focuses on supporting the spiritual transformation and health of the leadership teams of RCA congregations; and Women’s Transformation and Leadership, which focuses on full inclusion of the gifts and influence of women.
EMERGING LEADERS

The Emerging Leaders team is guided by a coalition of local pastors and lay leaders representing different regions of the RCA. GSC staff member Eddy Alemán has been leading this since 2014. The work of Emerging Leaders is to increase the awareness that God is calling all people—youth, young adults, and adults—to become leaders in the church and to help RCA congregations develop and design leadership development processes uniquely fitted to their own vision, context, and need. We believe that through this process, RCA congregations will thrive and be spiritually renewed and transformed, and young emerging leaders of today and tomorrow will be identified, developed, equipped, and mobilized to impact their local communities and the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Leadership Development Connection Events

A leadership development connection event is an informational and instructional gathering of one full day or just a few hours. Its purpose is to introduce pastors and congregational leaders in a region or classis to ways in which they might get involved in developing leaders in their local congregations. The desired outcome for these gatherings is for pastors and congregational leaders to join a learning community or a leadership community or to participate in a leadership collaborative.

Leadership Development Leadership Communities

Leadership development leadership communities consist of up to 11 congregations from all geographic regions of the RCA that are already engaged in leadership development and want to further increase their effectiveness. Each congregation commits a team of three to five staff members, pastors, and lay leaders to engage with this two-year process.

Leadership Development Learning Communities

Groups of three to six RCA congregations in different geographical areas will gather for six one-day meetings over the course of two years to learn from one another around different areas of leadership. Each congregation will develop its own leadership development pathway uniquely designed for its own vision, context, and need. Each participating congregation will form a leadership development learning community team of three to five people to be part of the process. Congregations are encouraged, when forming their teams, to include a variety of people with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, etc.

RCA Leadership Collaboratives

Clusters of 12 leaders from RCA congregations in relatively close geographical proximity will commit to a 12-month, 18-month, 24-month, or 36-month leadership collaborative to deepen their personal leadership skills. This experience will provide education, support, and accountability for each participant’s leadership journey. Deciding to participate is a commitment to grow, to invest, to share, and to change. The focus for these leadership collaboratives will be on personal leadership development for greater kingdom impact in their local context, helping participants grow in their leadership skills, discern God’s call for their lives, and clarify their next steps in ministry. The leadership collaboratives will be varied in focus depending on the group’s needs or interests; possible focuses include children and family ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry, multicultural ministry, or developing a strategic ministry plan.
This process will include both in-person gatherings and video conference calls. Each participant will commit to personally contributing to the process and to peer coaching.

These collaborative groups will focus on three key areas of leadership:

1. Personal leadership: leading from the inside out, developing the capacity to lead oneself before leading others.
2. Organizational leadership: providing the competencies and skills required of effective leaders.
3. Reproducing leadership: helping leaders develop more leaders, not just followers.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Hold five connection events.
- Launch two learning communities in different areas of leadership development.
- Launch two leadership collaborative cohorts.
- Launch one leadership development leadership community.
- Collaborate with seven classis leaders to create an elder/deacon leadership training process.

Progress

- Six leadership development connection events took place:
  - One in the Classis of Queens on June 24, 2017.
  - One for West Michigan Hispanic pastors on July 27–28, 2017. All participants were from different classes.
  - One at Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on September 14, 2017.
  - One in the Classis of California on October 7, 2017.
  - One in the Classis of Ontario on October 21, 2017.
  - One in Sioux Center, Iowa, on April 4, 2018.
- One leadership development learning community launched in Central California in October 2017.
- Two leadership development leadership collaboratives launched.
  - One leadership collaborative launched with 14 leaders in West Michigan in January 2018. The leadership collaborative meets once a month and focuses on leadership development and preaching.
  - One leadership collaborative was scheduled to launch in May 2018 in the Classis of Queens. It will focus on developing elders and deacons as leaders in the local church.
- One leadership development leadership community launched on February 21, 2018. Six RCA churches are participating in this leadership community. It will be an 18-month cohort that meets five times. Here are the descriptions participants received for each session:
  - Meeting #1 (February 21, 2018): Essentials for Developing Your Leadership Pathways
    This gathering lays out the essential structure and foundations of any effective plan for leadership development. You’ll work on the incorporation of discipleship, creating ministry flow charts, and clarification of your specific goals. After this session, you’ll complete a comprehensive audit of your current systems and a clarification of your vision for moving forward.
  - Meeting #2 (June 20, 2018): Process Skills for Developing Leaders
Our second learning community session focuses on the coaching and mentoring skills necessary for developing individual leaders to their fullest potential. Here we’ll not only cover essential communication skills such as listening and asking good questions, but we’ll also look at team leadership and the role of supervision for key leaders. The key outcome of this session will be practicing and solidifying skills for developing individual leaders.

- **Meeting #3 (October 24, 2018): Engaging Your Key Ministry Areas**
  Our third session will lead into the development of an apprentice system, how to identify new candidates for leadership, and how to strengthen existing leaders across your system. We’ll look at biblical models of growing ministries, as well as a show-how system you can use for training leaders. From here you’ll work with key leaders across various ministry areas in your church to engage them in identifying key issues and needs within their sphere of influence.

- **Meeting #4 (January 23, 2019): Designing Your Leadership Pathways**
  After examining your own leadership style and strengths, we’ll look at how you can leverage those to lead the change process within your organization. We’ll look at creating ownership of ministry, bridging to implementation, and how to conduct a strategic planning workshop. Your team will then gather before the final session to engage in a thorough strategic planning workshop.

- **Meeting #5 (May 22, 2019): Sharpening Your Leadership Pathways**
  During our final session, each team will present their plan for developing leadership pathways within their congregations. They will receive feedback affirming and strengthening that plan in a process of continuing improvement as implementation moves forward.

- Seven classis leaders worked with Eddy Alemán to develop a resource called *Elder and Deacon Leadership Development Journey*. This resource is designed to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the church. The resource was completed in fall 2017 and is available both online and upon request. The resource is based on the following principles:
  - Grassroots
  - Research-based
  - Easy to contextualize
  - Field-tested
  - User-friendly
  - Flexible

### Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- Thirty congregations will have participated in a two-year learning community and are now actively engaged in identifying, equipping, and developing leaders for the work of ministry in the local church and in the world. These congregations will have a clear pathway to develop leaders that is unique to their local vision, context, and need.

- Seven RCA congregations will have completed a two-year leadership development leadership community and are engaged in replicating the process with other RCA congregations. Ten more congregations will be participating in the second cohort of the leadership development leadership community.

- Seventeen congregations are fully participating in an RCA leadership development leadership community, with 17 pastors and 85 church leaders fully engaged in creating leadership development processes to help churches identify, develop, and mobilize young, emerging, and current leaders.
Twenty-seven RCA and CRC congregations are participating in the Reformed Leadership Initiative in six congregational leadership learning networks of ten to twelve congregations each. One of these congregational leadership learning networks will be in Korean and one will be in Spanish.

Forty-eight pastors and church leaders of diverse gender, age, ethnicity, and contexts will have participated or will be participating in a leadership collaborative.

One hundred and twenty congregations from different regions will have participated in a leadership development connection event.

In collaboration with seven classis leaders, the Emerging Leaders team will have created an elder/deacon leadership training process. This will be a resource for RCA congregations to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the church.

Progress

Leadership development learning communities:
- Five RCA Hispanic congregations completed a leadership development learning community in West Michigan. The meetings took place from July 2015 to November 2016. Participating congregations were Alas Conexion Church in Grand Rapids, My Father’s House Church in Holland, La Casa de Mi Padre in Wyoming, Iglesia Alas de Aguila in Allendale, and Iglesia Alas de Aguila in Wyoming.
- Four RCA African American congregations in the New York area completed a two-year leadership development learning community that launched in May 2016 and ended in November 2017. Participating congregations were Mott Haven Reformed Church in the Bronx, Highbridge Reformed Church in the Bronx, Reformed Church of Prince Bay in Prince Bay, and First Reformed Church of Astoria in Astoria.

Leadership development leadership communities:
- Six RCA congregations completed the first leadership development leadership community done in collaboration with Leadership Network. This leadership community took place in Dallas, Texas, from December 2014 to June 2016. Participating congregations were Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount, California; Grace Church Ann Arbor in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Good News Community Church in Okoboji, Iowa; Orchard Hill Reformed Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa; Sunnybrook Community Church in Sioux City, Iowa; and Beechwood Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.
- Six RCA congregations are participating in the RCA leadership development leadership community that is meeting in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area from February 2018 through May 2019. Participating congregations are South Blendon Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Elevation Church in Wyoming, Comunidad Cristiana de Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, My Father’s House Church in Holland, Comunidad Cristiana Internacional en Wyoming, and Nepali-Speaking Community Church in Grand Rapids.

Six congregations in the Detroit Kingdom Enterprise Zone participated in a two-year leadership development learning community that launched in August 2016 and ended in February 2018. These congregations are First Christian Reformed Church Detroit in Detroit, Dearborn Christian Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Dearborn, Hesed Community Church in Detroit, Grace Church in Allen Park, Center Point in Columbus (Ohio), and Word Encounter Church in Detroit.

Six Reformed Leadership Initiative cohorts (Congregational Leadership Learning Communities, or CLLNs) were launched between September 2016 and January 2017.
○ One is a Spanish-language CLLN with 12 participating congregations.
○ One is a Korean-language CLLN with eight participating congregations.
○ Four are geographically based CLLNs (in New Jersey, Ontario, Central Iowa, and Central California) with a total of 27 participating congregations among them.

• Leadership collaboratives:
  ○ Six RCA churches in Iowa completed an 18-month leadership collaborative focused on children and family ministries. Participating churches were Adventure Life Reformed Church in Alton, Bethel Reformed Church in Aplington, Cedar Hills Community Church in Cedar Rapids, Crossroads Church in Norwalk, Orchard Hills Reformed Church in Cedar Falls, and Trinity Reformed Church in Allison.
  ○ One Hispanic leadership collaborative launched in California in May 2017.
  ○ Emerging Leaders also launched a TUMI (The Urban Ministry Institute) site in fall 2016 in Los Angeles in collaboration with World Impact, where more than 20 emerging leaders are being equipped to minister in urban centers.

• Two hundred fifteen RCA congregations have participated in 18 leadership development connection events in different regions.

• Seven classis leaders worked with Eddy Alemán to develop a resource called Elder and Deacon Leadership Development Journey. This resource is designed to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the church. The seven classis leaders that worked together to develop this resource were Jeff Ludington and Eric Moreno from the Classis of California, Chris Godfredsen from the Classes of East and West Sioux, Fred Bates from the Classis of Southwest, Lyle Zumdahl from the Classis of Wisconsin, Dale Assink from the Classis of Central Plains, and Mike Gafa from the Classis of North Grand Rapids.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

• Four hundred fifty congregations will have participated in a two-year learning community and are now actively engaged in identifying, equipping, and developing leaders for the work of ministry in the local church and in the world. These congregations will have a clear pathway to develop leaders that is unique to their local vision, context, and need.
• One hundred twenty congregations will have completed a two-year leadership development leadership community and are engaged in replicating the process with other RCA congregations.
• Four hundred fifty pastors and church leaders of diverse gender, age, ethnicity, and contexts will have participated or will be participating in a leadership collaborative.
• Six hundred congregations from different regions will have participated in a leadership development connection event.

THRIVING LEADERS, THRIVING CHURCHES

Andy Bossardet has been leading this as the coordinator for equipping thriving congregations since December 2016. Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches is guided by a coalition of pastors, staff, and regional synod staff. The team’s focus is to empower leaders and congregations to take the next faithful step in their ministries, navigating the complexities of leading change. This empowerment is delivered through high-impact coaching, learning communities focused on personal and corporate transformation, support systems for pastors and congregations in transition, and equipping in vision discernment.
Ridder: Churches Learning Change

Ridder: Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal) is a partnership of Western Theological Seminary, the RCA, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America that helps leaders develop the tools to confront unhealthy models that hinder personal and congregational growth. Ridder is comprised of two intensive 30-month modules; congregations commit to one module at a time. Each module consists of five retreats, each about six months apart, with coaching and homework between retreats. Participating congregations choose a leadership team of four to six congregants plus the pastor. There are six regional centers in Ridder: Churches Learning Change supporting Modules 1 and 2. With the ending of the Lilly grant that funded the startup of Ridder: Churches Learning Change, the process has morphed into more regionally contextual expressions.

Maximizing First-Call Potential

To maximize their potential, pastors in their first call engage with a coach and a peer group in self-directed learning based on challenges and opportunities in the ministry context. Covenants of support and accountability are drawn up between congregations and pastors to empower the first-call pastors in their learning. The first-call process lays the foundation for thriving congregational and pastoral ministry through a combination of individual work with the pastors and a learning community involving a congregational team. This work is being done in partnership with the Lilly Endowment (Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant). This year marked a new partnership in the Albany Synod Fellowship Program.

Pastors and Congregations in Transition

The Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches team is developing new, more effective ways to serve churches and pastors that are in the midst of a ministry transition. This will include training mechanisms for transitional ministers and vocational assessment for pastors between ministries, as well as clarifying the role that each partner in the RCA plays in helping ministers and congregations through transitions. For now, the focus has been on classes and providing training and resources for classis supervision. New work is beginning on empowering search teams through quality consultation and written resources.

Coaching

The initiative is developing a catalytic coaching network that will be made up of all the coaches who are working with the various learning community pilots. A catalog of best practices has been developed, and a small cadre of catalytic coaches is in effect.

The team also plans to maximize current content-neutral training through better tracking and assessment of coaches. By tracking relationships, we will be able to more easily assess coaches and provide ongoing training and accountability for desired ministry outcomes across the RCA. Salesforce (the RCA’s database system) will provide a great platform for helping coaches succeed.

Congregational Vitality Pathways

Congregational Vitality Pathways (CVP) is a tool created by the Evangelical Covenant Church and utilized by the Far West Region to help congregations discern and live into God’s vision for their church. Health and vitality are measured by ten markers. CVP uses assessment tools, events, and an empowered vitality team to help a congregation
move toward its goals. RCA congregations engaging with CVP are intended to do so in a learning community format.

The Ezra Project

The Ezra Project is a learning community designed to empower and encourage African American pastors in the RCA. The learning community would involve five pastors who would spend time with African American pastors in thriving ministries, learning personal, organizational, and multiplying leadership content over the course of a year. Ezra graduates would then become facilitators and teachers for the next cohort of Ezra pastors.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Complete module of Ridder: Churches Learning Change.
- Complete phase one of the Ezra Project.
- Launch learning community for Congregational Vitality Pathways.
- Launch one leadership collaborative.
- Ten churches will utilize the Transformational Church Assessment Tool (TCAT).
- Launch one learning community for pastors in their first call.

Progress

- The most recent modules of Ridder: Churches Learning Change were completed as conversations ceased about continuing the movement after the end of the Lilly grant and central staff.
- Phase one of the Ezra Project was completed in January 2018, with current participants committing to quarterly virtual meetings.
- One Congregation Vitality Pathways learning community outside the Far West Region is happening, involving two churches in the Regional Synod of the Heartland.
- One leadership collaborative has been launched for specialized transitional ministers.
- Four churches have utilized the TCAT this year.
- In partnership with the Regional Synod of Albany, one learning community has launched involving six pastors in their first call.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- One hundred fifty churches will have engaged Ridder, either having completed both modules or actively engaging the process.
- At least three First Call learning communities will have been launched and the Albany Synod Fellows Program will be supported.
- A partnership of classes, regional synods, and others will have created resources for all stages of pastoral transition. At least 50 congregations will have benefitted from one or more of these resources.
- Two learning communities for Congregational Vitality Pathways will have been launched with at least eight churches participating outside the Far West Region.
- Phase two of the Ezra Project will have been completed; the original six pastors will have completed the Ezra Project and ten more will have been recruited.
- Twenty congregations will have used the Transformational Church Assessment Tool as a connection event toward ongoing transformation and (potentially) another learning community.
Progress

- One hundred sixteen congregations have completed at least one module of Ridder: Churches Learning Change. Those congregations are split across six regions, representing 12 learning communities. Additionally, there is a team of RCA chaplains participating in Ridder in the Great Lakes (a first for Ridder). At the time of this report, each of the six regional centers for Ridder: Churches Learning Change are recruiting. Those recruiting efforts will have wrapped up by General Synod 2018, meaning that the goal of 150 is well within reach.
- First Call learning communities
  - The first learning community for first-call pastors wrapped up Albany in May 2017. A new learning community of six congregations launched in November 2017 for a two-year learning experience. Graduates of the first round are being employed as guides and content facilitators for the second round.
  - A second group of four first-call pastors are partnering with Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches to create retreats and times of connection. These pastors are serving in multiple regional synods.
- Transitional ministry
  - Classis supervisor training has been sent to classis clerks and posted to the RCA website at www.rca.org/ministryservices. Pilot training included approximately 20 supervisors in the regional synods of New York and Mid-America. Response has been positive for the training videos—they have been viewed a total of 314 times (across five videos).
  - Seven transitional ministers and regional staff in the regional synods of the Far West, Heartland, and Mid-America have joined a leadership collaborative around specialized transitional ministry. That leadership collaborative launched in December 2017.
- Two churches are engaged with Congregational Vitality Pathways in the Regional Synod of the Heartland. Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches is committed to partnering with these congregations through resourcing.
- The Ezra Project was significantly affected by the passing of GSC staff member Tony Campbell. The first leadership collaborative wrapped up in January 2018. With disrupted grant funding for phase two, the first leadership collaborative will continue to meet virtually for encouragement and support while we strategize how to recruit for a future collaborative.
- To date, ten churches from the Regional Synods of Mid-America, the Great Lakes, and Canada have utilized the Transformational Church Assessment Tool as a discernment tool. Pastors from those churches have reported positive results in their own strategic goals and ministry development.
- Catalytic coach training has been completed, and the coaching catalog has been given to every initiative leader for use with their learning and leadership communities. The coach training video was filmed during a live training and has been used in at least one classis training event. Further, catalytic coaching has been provided for learning communities in all three priority areas.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

- A new system for ongoing support for new ministers will have helped 30 new pastors and their congregations.
- Ridder: Churches Learning Change will have impacted 90 additional churches (which will have graduated or are currently in the process).
- Leadership collaboratives will network specialized transitional ministers; 40 specialized transitional ministers will have participated in a network.
• The catalytic coaching network supporting other learning communities will include ten coaches with ongoing training opportunities and feedback loops.
• Forty additional congregations will have gone through a mission discernment process (with TCAT or another process).
• Phase two of the Ezra Project will have impacted ten churches in an ongoing leadership collaborative.

WOMEN’S TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has been established as part of Transformed & Transforming to help the Reformed Church in America pursue a vision for the full inclusion of women’s gifts and influence in all areas of the church and beyond. Liz Testa leads the Women’s Transformation and Leadership team. Lorraine Parker serves as part-time administrative assistant and Lesley Mazzotta is the educational consultant and lead facilitator. A cross-sector group of RCA leaders serves as the guiding coalition for Women’s Transformation and Leadership, helping to champion the mission, create new processes, and provide critical insights and advisement.

We are committed to ensuring that women of all generations and geographical and cultural contexts are able to experience transformation, be raised up for leadership, and live vibrantly into their God-given potential. As we encourage, equip, and empower women to fully and freely use their gifts and be developed as leaders, we usher in a vision of God’s reign where brothers and sisters work together to build the body for mission in the world. An essential component of this mission is that we equip congregations to welcome the gifts that women bring and invest in healthy, flourishing ministry partnerships between men and women.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has the following components:

• A ministry initiative to help the RCA pursue the full inclusion of the gifts and influence of women in the life of the church and as an integral part of Transformed & Transforming.
• A hub for opportunities that encourage, equip, and empower all women in their callings and connect them more deeply with God, each other, and the church.
• A place for congregations to begin or continue a journey of recognizing and exploring the gifts that women bring, designing ways to equip women for ministry, and creating a healthy, thriving ministry environment where men and women can serve together.
• A catalyst for change, opening the RCA as a whole and women as individuals to the Spirit’s movement in women’s lives and ministries.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership lives out its vision by:

• Ensuring women have barrier-free access to RCA resources and opportunities.
• Celebrating the rich history of women in the RCA, past and present, through the Women’s Sankofa journeys, the “RCA Women: A Legacy of Leadership” booklet, and our She Is Called campaign.
• Being an innovation incubator for new ideas such as the Lenten devotional video series, the She Is Called social media campaign, and the We Are Speaking call to action statement.
• Encouraging and equipping women through transformational connection events and the Honoring Our Stories story-sharing process.
• Offering congregational learning communities to empower women to lead in ministry.
• Developing a learning process that will help congregations to welcome the gifts women bring and to nurture healthy, thriving ministry partnerships between men and women.

• Supporting established and emerging female leaders through leadership collaboratives, mentoring, clergy networks, and opportunities to connect and collaborate.

• Offering an annual global experience for women. Trips to Oman, Israel/Palestine, and Italy have been offered so far. Bahrain/India, South Africa, and Scotland are being explored along with “multiplier” trips to the original three countries for 2018 through 2020.

• Providing tuition assistance to female seminarians through the Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund.

• Connecting women virtually through Facebook groups and a quarterly e-newsletter.

• Creating a dynamic web resource featuring blogs by women; historical, biblical, and theological support for women in ministry; and ways for congregations, classes, and synods to intentionally integrate women’s gifts, voices, and leadership.

• Collaborating with RCA seminaries, the Commission for Women and other commissions, other Transformed & Transforming initiatives, and other GSC staff to empower women in ministry and intentionally include their gifts, influence, and leadership in our assemblies.

• Helping to create lasting change via the We Are Speaking statement, a call to the church to end harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women and girls (and others), in partnership with Local Missional Engagement.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

• Hold three to five connection events that encourage, equip, and empower female RCA lay leaders and clergy to live into their God-given callings.

• Develop and pilot a learning process, curriculum, and resources focused on equipping congregations to more fully include women’s gifts and influence.

• Complete a learning community focused on strengthening and expanding women’s leadership in church and society.

• Continue the pilot of the women’s leadership collaborative 18-month process in English, Korean, and Spanish, and develop a “Train the Trainer” model in English and Spanish.

• Create global women’s experience trips for 2018–2019.

• Develop, along with other RCA and CRC partners, a year of celebration of women’s gifts and leadership in the RCA, including the She is Called campaign and special activities at General Synod 2018.

Progress

• Since March 2017, the following regional connection events have taken place, each customized for the local context and leadership needs:
  o The third annual Celebration of Women in Church Leadership at Western Theological Seminary.
  o Women on the Move in the Bronx, New York.
  o Women’s Connection Dinner at General Synod in Holland, Michigan.
  o Her Story in Artesia, California.
  o Women’s Stories Day at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
  o Honoring our Stories in Monument, Colorado.
Women’s Sankofa Journey through New York City and New Jersey.
Empowering our Stories in Grand Haven, Michigan.

For 2018, connection events are currently in development with local partners in Canada; the Mid-Atlantics; Orange City, Iowa; New York City; Midland, Michigan; and Mesa, Arizona.

A delegation of coalition members attended the Commission for Biblical Equality’s conference, “Mutual by Design,” in July 2017 to inform the development of a learning community model that assists congregations who want to explore and discern women’s leadership in the church. This has led to a comprehensive learning process called “Building God’s Church Together” that includes web resources, connection events, mini-leadership collaboratives, and learning communities to equip congregations to welcome the gifts women bring and develop healthy, thriving ministry partnerships between men and women.

Our year-long “Doing a New Thing” pilot learning community in New York City was completed in January 2018. Five congregations discovered the new ministries God is calling them to develop and invest in. The five congregations and their team leaders were Bethany Memorial Reformed Church (Sharon Atkins), Dewitt Reformed Church (Irma Williams), Church on the Hill (Blaine Crawford), Elmendorf Reformed Church (Patricia Singletery and Belinda Perry), and Middle Collegiate Church (Lynn Min and Marte Samuelson).

Six women’s leadership collaboratives launched in February 2017 and will be completed in August 2018. Women meet virtually and at an in-person gathering for personal, organizational, and multiplying leadership development over the course of a year and a half. A trilingual, in-person gathering was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in July 2017. Among the six cohorts there are three languages (English, Spanish, and Korean), five facilitators, and 42 participants, involving 47 women total.

Of the six cohorts, one is composed of all clergy, three are elders, deacons, and lay women, and two are mixed groups.

The five facilitators are from three regions: two from New York, two from the Far West, and one from the Heartland. The facilitators are Lesley Mazzotta (lead facilitator), Marla Rotman, Susan Hetrick, Ock Kee Byun, and Karla Camacho.

The 42 participants are from seven regional synods: five from New York, two from Canada, four from Mid-America, three from the Mid-Atlantics, ten from the Far West, eleven from the Heartland, and seven from the Great Lakes (three participants are CRC-affiliated).

Mini leadership collaboratives have been launched and are offered seasonally. These two-month, six-session virtual small groups gather women from across the denomination around a focused leadership topic, such as whole-hearted leadership or leadership in beloved community. Our last mini leadership collaborative was held in fall 2017, and another is planned for 2018.

The 2017 women’s global experience to Italy has continued as a pilot leadership development process in which the travelers continue to meet and develop ways to bring what they learned about refugees and trafficked women back to their faith communities. One traveler, Patricia Johnson, was recently featured in RCA Today magazine explaining her experience with Nigerian women in Italy and how she is now fully engaged in her home church’s mission to help women in similar circumstances in the U.S.

For the year of celebration of women’s gifts and leadership in the RCA:

The We Are Speaking call to action to end harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women and girls was created as a godly, gracious response to the #metoo and #churchtoo social movements. This statement was
created in partnership with Local Missional Engagement and has proven to be a truly unifying statement that more than 750 leaders from across the RCA and beyond have signed. Monthly webinars, web resources, and ongoing discussions with ministry groups are examples of the ways we are continuing to lead change and encourage all our assemblies to create safe space for stories and concrete action steps toward ending the culture of silence and shame that has pervaded our faith communities.

- In celebration of the great diversity of women’s God-given gifts and callings, the She Is Called campaign launched in 2017. This multi-faceted campaign includes videos, a Facebook page, the #sheiscalled hashtag, “biblical women & me” t-shirts, and ongoing stories of the many ways God calls women and girls to serve in the church and beyond.

- The Women’s Transformation and Leadership guiding coalition has worked diligently together since its convening in November 2016. They were asked to present at the Transformed & Transforming summit held at Camp Geneva in August 2017 as a model of how a cross-sector group can champion the initiative’s mission and opportunities in their regions. This guiding coalition has been integral in the development of culture-shifting projects such as She Is Called, We Are Speaking, and Building God’s Church Together.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- More than 2,000 women across the denomination will have been positively impacted by connection events.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations will have engaged in learning communities to explore and discern women’s leadership and the culture shift necessary to support this process.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations will have participated in learning communities to develop intentional leadership training and mentoring processes for women.
- Eighty-five to one hundred women will have participated in women’s leadership collaboratives.
- Three to four global mission experiences will have equipped 50 to 60 women and their congregations for deeper missional engagement.

Progress

- Between June 2014 and June 2018, at least 2,000 women will have been positively impacted by a variety of customized connection events across North America.
- Our year-long “Doing a New Thing” pilot learning community in New York City was completed in January 2018. Five congregations discovered the new ministries God is calling them to develop and invest in.
- The “Building God’s Church Together” learning process, which includes connection events, mini leadership collaboratives, and learning communities, is being developed and will launch in northwest Iowa in July 2018, impacting a minimum of ten to fifteen congregations.
- Seventy-five women have participated in a variety of long and shorter-term women’s leadership collaboratives. The eighteen-month, three-language pilot women’s leadership collaborative made up of six cohorts (four English, one Korean, and one Spanish) will be completed in August 2018. A multiplier model (training local facilitators) in English and Spanish is being developed and will be piloted in fall 2018, launching in Mesa, Arizona. Seasonal two-month mini leadership collaboratives are held at least twice annually.
Since 2015, Women’s Transformation and Leadership has offered three annual global experiences visiting mission partners in Oman, Israel/Palestine, and Italy, impacting more than 35 female travelers and their faith communities. Future women’s global experiences are being explored for South Africa, Bahrain/India, and Scotland. Since our first women’s trip to Oman, the goal has been to support the women traveling in their leadership and passion for mission as well as to create a learning community-type process before, during, and after the trip. Lesley Mazzotta, who served as the co-leader of that inaugural experience, has gone on to create four subsequent women’s trips with the Al Amana Centre in Oman. We are grateful for the collaboration of Volunteer Engagement and Global Mission as we continue to research and develop women-focused, safe, transformational experiences that equip and empower leaders from many different contexts.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has experienced Spirit-led innovation, growth, and culture shifts since June 2014 when our ministry initiative was launched. Our new goals are a continuation of this movement, and our delivery systems will be customized to meet the unique needs of each region.

- Twenty-five to thirty connection events continue to provide an empowering space for thousands of women and girls to share stories, build relationships, and experience transformation.
- “Building God’s Church Together” congregational learning processes will create a deep culture shift as 75 faith communities gather to explore how to more fully welcome the ministry gifts of women and create space for those gifts to be developed as well as invest in developing healthy, thriving ministry partnerships between men and women.
- “Doing a New Thing” congregational learning communities will help 25 churches discover the “new thing” God is calling them to, in and through their women leaders.
- Multi-language, long- and short-term leadership collaboratives will strengthen and equip hundreds of diverse women leaders in all regions through virtual sessions and train-the-trainer events for local facilitators to be equipped to lead in their context.
- One to two annual women’s global experiences will have transformational, leadership, and missional components that ensure that the 75 individual female travelers and their faith communities experience lasting impact.
- Attention to Spirit-led opportunities for healing and unifying the body and participation in God’s reconciling work in the world will be actively sought through projects such as We Are Speaking and the She Is Called campaign.
RETIRE MINISTERS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

During 2017, 46 ministers of Word and sacrament retired from active service. Those who retired were recognized by General Synod through its endorsement of appreciation for their years of faithful and dedicated ministry in the church.

L 18-1
To adopt the following resolution:

These individuals have loved Christ and fed his sheep. They have devoted themselves to spreading the Word and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Their contribution to a needy world is rich beyond measure; their record is on high.

The Reformed Church in America, with admiration, deep affection, and overflowing thanks to God, celebrates their lifelong service.

Paul Akers
Whiting, New Jersey

Barbara Alexander
Laurelton, New York

Jhonny Alicea-Báez
Benton, Arkansas

David Bast
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Nancy Beardslee
New Brunswick, New Jersey

Abram Blaak
Brantford, Ontario

Dawn Boelkins
Holland, Michigan

Stephen Breen
Orange City, Iowa

Nancy Ann Callender
Hastings-on-Hudson, New York

Gerald Davelaar
Seal Beach, California

Marcia Elders
Grandville, Michigan
Kenneth Eriks
Holland, Michigan

Newton Fairweather
Tamarac, Florida

Victor Folkert
Conroe, Texas

Robert Gram
Rhinebeck, New York

Shirley Heeg
Shelby, Michigan

Dennis Hietbrink
Sheldon, Iowa

Suzanne Hodges
Springville, New York

Hae Taik Kim
Yaphank, New York

Larry Klaaren
New Lenox, Illinois

Roger Krutz
East Greenbush, New York

George (Chung Chih) Lai
Fair Lawn, New Jersey

Thomas Larkin
Pequannock, New Jersey

Nyla Lewis
Lakeville, Minnesota

Sandra Masters
Laredo, Texas

Nancy McClure-Long
Muskogee, Oklahoma

Philip Noordmans
Clovis, California

Michael Otte
Little Falls, New Jersey

Richard Otterness
Syracuse, New York
John Paarlberg
Loudonville, New York

Daniel Plasman
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jack Ritsema
Dumont, Iowa

Carlos Rivera
Hempstead, New York

John Schmidt
Holland, Michigan

Peter Semeyn
Westmont, Illinois

Jacqueline Smallbones
Orange City, Iowa

David Su
Elmhurst, New York

Dean Ulmer
Emery, South Dakota

Patricia (Pacia) Vamvas
Savannah, Georgia

Steven Vander Molen
Holland, Michigan

Bruce Van Dusseldorp
Denver, Colorado

David Van Lant
Norwalk, California

Robert Vrooman
Alexandria Bay, New York

Charles Wiessner
Louisburg, North Carolina

Bruce Wilterdink
Beloit, Wisconsin

Mary Wisner
Holland, Michigan
(ADOPTED)
NECROLOGY

John David Page, Jr. January 29, 2017  83
Paul Esbenshade Hostetter February 3, 2017  89
Jack D. Cooper February 23, 2017  87
William J. Bouwer February 25, 2017  82
Arvin Wilfred Roos February 26, 2017  95
Jan Walter van Arsdale February 28, 2017  79
Earl L. Smith March 11, 2017  72
Gerald Gordon Dykstra March 14, 2017  95
Leonard James DeBeer March 14, 2017  83
Rodney James Koopmans March 15, 2017  71
Robert “Bob” Wayne Barrowclough March 19, 2017  77
John David Muyskens April 1, 2017  82
John Edwin Brouwer April 3, 2017  82
Angeline Jennie Calsbeek April 21, 2017  88
Anne L. Guild-Donovan April 26, 2017  84
George Brown, Jr. April 30, 2017  74
Ruth Adene Fries Robbins May 5, 2017  81
Jarod Van Wagenen, IV May 13, 2017  80
Fred Mold June 16, 2017  90
Jacob Dykstra June 29, 2017  87
Eric J. Schulze July 1, 2017  90
David Smith July 2, 2017  49
Antoine “Tony” L. Campbell July 18, 2017  62
Leonard Jones July 25, 2017  91
Gordon S. Cook July 27, 2017  85
Stanley Eldon Perea July 29, 2017  68
Julius Otto Brandt August 4, 2017  95
Thomas Danney August 5, 2017  73
Franklin Spoolstra August 21, 2017  85
Gerard De Loof September 29, 2017  95
James Stralow September 21, 2017  74
John Itzen September 29, 2017  92
Francis A. De Jong October 11, 2017  82
Allan M. Koller October 28, 2017  72
Lewis R. Scudder III November 1, 2017  76
Philip Stephan Sickler November 4, 2017  70
Clarence Liang November 7, 2017  82
Tony Lopez November 7, 2017  79
Peter Je Chul Ko November 15, 2017  84
Roy Wagoner December 2, 2017  89
Paul Alderink December 9, 2017  91
Paul Colenbrander December 18, 2017  93

John David Page, Jr.

John David Page, Jr. was born on November 7, 1933, in South Norfolk, Virginia. He studied at King College in Briston, Tennessee, from which he graduated in 1956. He received his theological education at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, from which he graduated in 1960.
Mr. Page was licensed and ordained by the Presbytery of Norfolk in 1960. He pastored the following congregations: Broadmoor Presbyterian, Chesapeake, Virginia, from 1958 to 1961; Sunnyside Presbyterian, Winchester, Virginia, from 1961 to 1962; Burnt Presbyterian, Winchester, Virginia, from 1961 to 1965; Community, Feasterville, Pennsylvania, from 1965 to 1967; and First Reformed, Scotia, New York, from 1967 to 1992.

Mr. Page died on January 29, 2017, in Glenville, New York. He was 83 years old.

Paul Esbenshade Hostetter

Paul Esbenshade Hostetter was born on April 11, 1927, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He studied at Wheaton College, from which he graduated in 1950. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1954. He received an M.A. from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1973 and also studied at the Hartford Seminary Foundation from 1959 to 1960, Michigan State University from 1967 to 1968, and Fuller Theological Seminary from 1985 to 1986.

Mr. Hostetter was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Chicago in 1954. He served as a short-term missionary in Sudan from 1954 to 1958 and as the director of the Literacy Center in West Pakistan from 1960 to 1965. He also served as a missionary in Chiapas, Mexico, from 1973 to 1980. He pastored University Reformed in East Lansing, Michigan, from 1967 to 1968 and Midland Reformed in Michigan from 1968 to 1973. He then served as the minister of missions and evangelism at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, from 1981 to 1985. Mr. Hostetter was a professor of missiology at Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1985 to 1997 and an editor and writer at Words of Hope in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1996 to 2003. He also served as the president of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes in 1996.

Mr. Hostetter died on February 3, 2017. He was 89 years old.

Jack D. Cooper

Jack D. Cooper was born on December 10, 1929, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1963. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966.

Mr. Cooper was licensed by the Classis of South Grand Rapids in 1966 and ordained by the Classis of Schoharie the same year. He pastored the following congregations: First, Amsterdam, New York, from 1966 to 1969; Glenmont, New York, from 1969 to 1983; and Fifth, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1988 to 1994.

Mr. Cooper died on February 23, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was 87 years old.

William J. Bouwer

William J. Bouwer was born on May 27, 1934, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1956. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1959.

Mr. Bouwer was licensed by the Classis of North Grand Rapids in 1959 and ordained by the Classis of Kalamazoo the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Lakeland, Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1959 to 1965; West Side, Cicero, Illinois, from 1965 to 1973; First, Oostburg, Wisconsin, from 1973 to 1989; and First, Lansing, Illinois,
from 1989 to 1996. He also served as the stated clerk of the Particular Synod of Mid-America from 1966 to 1999.

Mr. Bouwer died on February 25, 2017. He was 82 years old.

**Arvin Wilfred Roos**

Arvin Wilfred Roos was born on September 25, 1921, in Rock Rapids, Iowa. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1943. He received his theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1949.

Mr. Roos was licensed by the Classis of West Sioux in 1949 and ordained by the Classis of Montgomery the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Trinity, Amsterdam, New York, from 1949 to 1952; Princetown, Duanesburg, New York, from 1952 to 1958; First, Prairie City, Iowa, from 1958 to 1960; First, Irvington, New Jersey, from 1960 to 1964; and Perl-Mack, Denver, Colorado, from 1964 to 1969. He was dismissed to the Presbyterian church in 1971 and served Presbyterian congregations in Hazelton and Steele, North Dakota, from 1971 to 1977; Currie and Tracy, Minnesota, from 1977 to 1985; and Strasburg, North Dakota, from 1986 to 1993.

Mr. Roos died on February 26, 2017, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was 95 years old.

**Jan Walter van Arsdale**

Jan Walter van Arsdale was born on August 8, 1937, in Pottsville, Pennsylvania. He studied at Dickenson College and at Waynesburg College, from which he graduated in 1960. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1965.

He pastored the following congregations: Mamakating, Wurtsboro, and Cuddebackville, New York, from 1965 to 1966 and Trinity, Newark, New Jersey, from 1966 to 1971. He was dismissed to the Presbyterian church in 1971.

Mr. van Arsdale died on February 28, 2017, in Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania. He was 79 years old.

**Earl L. Smith**

Earl L. Smith was born on April 13, 1944, in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. He studied at Northwestern College, from which he graduated in 1976. He received his theological education at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1981.

Mr. Smith was licensed by the Classis of Minnesota in 1977 and ordained by the same classis in 1981. He pastored the following congregations: Bussing, McKee, Kentucky, from 1982 to 1985; Immanuel, London, Ontario, from 1985 to 1992; Maranatha, Wainfleet, Ontario, from 1992 to 1995; Umonhon, Macy, Nebraska from 1995 to 2007; and Oneida United Methodist Church, Oneida, Wisconsin, until his retirement in 2013.

Mr. Smith died on March 11, 2017. He was 72 years old.

**Gerald Gordon Dykstra**

Gerald Gordon Dykstra was born on September 14, 1921, in Ashkum, Illinois. He studied
at the University of Illinois, from which he graduated in 1943. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1949.

Mr. Dykstra was licensed by the Classis of Illiana in 1949 and ordained by the Classis of Rochester the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Clymer Hill, New York, from 1949 to 1954; Owasco, New York, from 1954 to 1960; Mount Pleasant, Schenectady, New York, from 1960 to 1968; American, Primghar, Iowa, from 1968 to 1981; and Comanche, Lawton, Oklahoma, from 1981 to 1985.

Mr. Dykstra died on March 14, 2017, in Primghar, Iowa. He was 95 years old.

Leonard James DeBeer

Leonard James DeBeer was born on November 25, 1933, in Le Mars, Iowa. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1955. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1958. He received an S.T.M. from New York Theological Seminary in 1974.

Mr. DeBeer was licensed by the Classis of West Sioux in 1958 and ordained by the Classis of West Central the same year. He pastored Perl-Mack Community Church in Denver, Colorado, from 1958 to 1964 and Faith Community in Detroit, Michigan, from 1964 to 1966. He served the RCA’s General Program Council as the secretary for professional development from 1968 to 1973. He did specialized ministry in pastoral counseling in New York City, New York, from 1973 to 1987 and in Rutland, Vermont, from 1987 to 1995.

Mr. DeBeer died on March 14, 2017, in Bend, Oregon. He was 83 years old.

Rodney James Koopmans

Rodney James Koopmans was born on October 22, 1945, in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1967. He began his theological education at Western Theological Seminary in 1967, later studied at New York Theological Seminary, and completed his education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1971.

Mr. Koopmans was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Wisconsin in 1971. He pastored the following congregations: Gardiner, New York, from 1971 to 1977; Fishkill, New York, from 1982 to 1997; and St. Croix, Virgin Islands, from 1997 until his death. He also served the church in Oman from 1977 to 1982. In St. Croix, he was the director of My Brother’s Table, a soup kitchen in Frederiksted that served the homeless a noon meal.

Mr. Koopmans died on March 15, 2017, in St. Croix, Virgin Islands. He was 71 years old.

Robert “Bob” Wayne Barrowclough

Robert “Bob” Wayne Barrowclough was born on December 29, 1939, in Hawthorne, New Jersey. He studied at Princeton University, from which he graduated in 1961. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1965.

Mr. Barrowclough was licensed by the Classis of Paramus in 1965 and ordained by the Classis of Newark the same year. He completed a mission with the Jicarilla Apache tribe in New Mexico before pastoring North Reformed Church in Newark, New Jersey, as
associate pastor from 1965 to 1972 and as senior pastor from 1973 to 2005. He also ran Bessie Green Community, Inc. which provided food, shelter, and clothing to the poor. In retirement, he served as pastor at Cedar Crest Chapel, Pompton Plains, New Jersey, from 2007 to 2015.

Mr. Barrowclough died on March 19, 2017, in Wyckoff, New Jersey. He was 77 years old.

John David Muyskens

John David Muyskens was born on April 19, 1934, in Sheldon, Iowa. He studied at Northwestern Junior College and at Central College, from which he graduated in 1956. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1959. He earned a Th.M. in 1962 as well as a D.Min. in 1978 from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Mr. Muyskens was licensed by the Classis of Minnesota in 1959 and ordained by the Classis of Raritan the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Pottersville, New Jersey, from 1959 to 1967; First, Union City, New Jersey, from 1967 to 1975; and First, New Brunswick, New Jersey, from 1975 to 1999.

Mr. Muyskens died on April 1, 2017. He was 82 years old.

John Edwin Brouwer

John Edwin Brouwer was born on September 7, 1934, in Inwood, Iowa. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1959. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1962.

Mr. Brouwer was licensed by the Classis of Minnesota in 1962 and ordained by the Classis of Germania the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Logan, Dell Rapids, South Dakota, from 1962 to 1969; Grace, Corsica, South Dakota, from 1969 to 1977; and First, Randolph, Wisconsin, from 1977 to 1987. He was dismissed to the United Methodist Church in 1987.

Mr. Brouwer died on April 3, 2017, in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was 82 years old.

Angeline Jennie Calsbeek (née Smit)

Angeline Jennie Calsbeek was born on September 13, 1928, in Davis, South Dakota. She studied at Northwestern Junior College and at Hope College, from which she graduated in 1953. She served as an elementary school teacher in Inwood, Iowa, and in Holland, Michigan, before becoming a missionary for the RCA.

Ms. Calsbeek served in the mission field with her husband, Harvey, in Mescalero, New Mexico, from 1954 to 1962 and in Dulce, New Mexico, from 1962 to 1966.

Ms. Calsbeek died on April 21, 2017, in Balaton, Minnesota. She was 88 years old.

Anne L. Guild-Donovan

Anne L. Guild-Donovan was born on April 27, 1932, in Oradell, New Jersey. She studied at Rockland Community College and at Ramapo College, from which she graduated in 1976. Her theological education was received at Union Theological Seminary, New York
City, from which she graduated in 1979. She earned a D.Min. from Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1987.

Ms. Guild-Donovan was licensed by the Classis of Rockland-Westchester in 1978 and ordained in 1979 by the same classis. She began her ministry as an administrative assistant at Spring Valley, New York, from 1970 to 1975 and as assistant pastor at the Presbyterian church in Palisades, New York. She then continued her ministry in a variety of chaplaincy positions: Central Islip Psychiatric Center, Central Islip, New York, from 1979 to 1980; interim, United Methodist Church, Islip, New York, 1980; administrative assistant, Christianity/Crisis, New York, New York, 1981; and Rochester Psychiatric Center, Rochester, New York, from 1982 to 1994.

Ms. Guild-Donovan died on April 26, 2017. She was 84 years old.

George Brown, Jr.

George Brown, Jr. was born on December 19, 1942, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1969. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1969. He earned a Th.M. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1971 and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University in 1989.

Mr. Brown was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Philadelphia in 1969. He pastored an RCA church in Pottersville, New Jersey, from 1969 to 1973 and also served as minister of education at Peapack, Gladstone, New Jersey, from 1971 to 1973 and at Central, Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1973 to 1988. He began his teaching career as an adjunct professor at Western Theological Seminary from 1975 to 1976 and from 1983 to 1988. He served as the dean of faculty at Western from 1988 to 1997 and as the G.W. & Eddie Haworth professor of Christian education and associate dean from 1997 to 2012. He was also a General Synod professor from 1997 to 2013.

Mr. Brown died on April 30, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was 74 years old.

Ruth Adene Fries Robbins (née Workman)

Ruth Fries Robbins was born on October 9, 1935, in Muskegon, Michigan. She studied at Rutgers University, from which she graduated in 1976. Her theological education was received at McCormick Theological Seminary, from which she graduated in 1983. She also earned a Th.M. from New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1986.

Ms. Robbins was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Raritan in 1983. She pastored the following congregations: First, Rocky Hill, New Jersey, from 1983 to 1993; Rocky Hill, New Jersey, from 1994 to 1996; interim, Harlingen, Belle Mead, New Jersey, from 1997 to 1999; and Staten Island, New York, in 1999.

Ms. Robbins died on May 5, 2017, in Rocky Hill, New Jersey. She was 81 years old.

Jared Van Wagenen IV

Jared Van Wagenen IV was born on November 16, 1936, in Cooperstown, New York. He studied at Middlebury College, from which he graduated in 1960. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1962.

Mr. Van Wagenen was licensed by the Classis of Schoharie in 1962 and ordained by the

Mr. Van Wagenen died on May 13, 2017, in Lawyersville, New York. He was 80 years old.

Frederick Mold Jr.

Frederick Mold Jr. was born on June 17, 1926, in Jersey City, New Jersey. He studied at Muhlenberg College, from which he graduated in 1950. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1955. He received a certificate in pastoral counseling from the Presbyterian Synod of New Jersey in 1974.

Mr. Mold was licensed by the Classis of South Bergen in 1955 and ordained by the Classis of New Brunswick the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Middletown, New Jersey, from 1955 to 1958; Freehold, New Jersey, from 1958 to 1979; and Tinton Falls, New Jersey, from 1986 to 1991. Mr. Mold served at New Brunswick Theological Seminary as vice president from 1979 to 1985 and as an adjunct professor in 1986 and from 2002 to 2009. He served as the stated clerk of the Classis of New Brunswick from 1957 to 1992 and as treasurer from 1957 to 2009. He also served as the stated clerk of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantics from 1990 to 2010.

Mr. Mold died on June 16, 2017, in Hamilton, New Jersey. He was 90 years old.

Jacob Dykstra

Jacob Dykstra was born on September 26, 1929, in Los Angeles, California. He studied at George Pepperdine College, from which he graduated in 1951. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1954.

Mr. Dykstra was licensed by the Classis of California in 1954 and ordained by the Classis of Rochester the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Emmanuel, Whitby, Ontario, from 1954 to 1957; First, Decatur, Michigan, from 1957 to 1959; First, Chatham, Ontario, from 1959 to 1964; Immanuel, London, Ontario, from 1964 to 1968; Steen, Minnesota, from 1968 to 1972; South Blendon, Hudsonville, Michigan, from 1972 to 1977; Mount Greenwood, Chicago, Illinois, from 1977 to 1984; and Unity, Muskegon, Michigan, from 1984 to 1994.

Mr. Dykstra died on June 29, 2017, in Dyer, Indiana. He was 87 years old.

Eric John Schulze

Eric John Schulze was born on June 17, 1927, in Edmonton, Alberta. He studied at Moravian College, from which he graduated in 1950. His theological education was received at Moravian Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953. He also studied at St. Stephens College from 1950 to 1951, Vancouver School of Theology in 1969, and Fuller Theological Seminary from 1980 to 1981.

Mr. Schulze was ordained a deacon by the Moravian church in 1953 and a presbyter in 1961. He was received by the Classis of Cascades in 1972. He pastored the following congregations: Moravian, New Sarepta, Alberta, from 1953 to 1959; Heimtel Moravian, Edmonton, Alberta, from 1955 to 1959; Moravian, Calgary, Alberta, from 1959 to 1962;
Moravian, Bruderheim, Alberta, from 1962 to 1967; Spring Gardens Moravian, Antigua, West Indies, 1967; Fredericksted Moravian, St. Croix, Virgin Islands, from 1967 to 1968; Moravian, Vancouver, British Columbia, from 1968 to 1972; Calgary, Alberta, from 1972 to 1978; and Lincoln Ave, Pomona, California, from 1978 to 1982. He served as a chaplain at Marquardt Manor from 1982 to 1994 and as a contract pastor at First, Lynden, Washington, from 1994 to 2010. He was also a visiting pastor for the Board of Pensions from 1994 to 2005.

Mr. Schulze died on July 1, 2017. He was 90 years old.

David Smith

David Smith was born on June 25, 1968, in Morrison, Illinois. He studied at Sauk Valley Community College and at Trinity Christian College, from which he graduated in 1990. His theological education was started at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he studied from 1992 to 1996, and completed at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1998.

Mr. Smith was ordained by the Classis of Illinois in 1998. He began his ministry as associate pastor at First, Pella, Iowa, from 1998 to 2001 and at Faith, Dyer, Indiana, from 2001 to 2009. He then served as pastor at Crete, Illinois, from 2010 to 2015 when he transferred to the Presbyterian Church in America.

Mr. Smith died on July 2, 2017, in Crete, Illinois. He was 49 years old.

Antoine “Tony” L. Campbell

Antoine “Tony” L. Campbell was born on December 24, 1954, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He earned his bachelor’s degree at the United States Naval Academy. His theological education was received at Yale School of Divinity.

At the time of his death, Mr. Campbell was serving as the associate general secretary and director of missional engagement for the General Synod Council.

Mr. Campbell died on July 18, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was 62 years old.

John “Jack” Edward Buteyn Jr.

John “Jack” Edward Buteyn Jr. was born on July 18, 1944, in Harvey, Illinois. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1966. His theological education started at Princeton Theological Seminary and was completed at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1970.

Mr. Buteyn was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Bergen in 1970. He pastored the following congregations: Immanuel Community, Lansing, Michigan, from 1970 to 1975; Abbe, Clymer, New York, from 1975 to 1978; and Plano, Texas, from 1978 to 2009. He also served the Protestant Church in Oman after his retirement.

Mr. Buteyn died on July 20, 2017, in Plano, Texas. He was 73 years old.

Leonard Jones

Leonard Jones was born on June 13, 1926, in Stafford Springs, Connecticut. He studied
at Rutgers University, from which he graduated in 1950. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953.

Mr. Jones was licensed by the Classis of Paramus in 1953 and ordained by the Classis of New Brunswick the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Six Mile Run, Franklin Park, New Jersey, from 1953 to 1963 and Franklin, Nutley, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1981.

Mr. Jones died on July 25, 2017. He was 91 years old.

Gordon S. Cook

Gordon S. Cook was born on December 23, 1931, in Flushing, Queens, New York. He studied at Yale University, from which he graduated in 1953. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1960. He also earned a Th.M. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1968 and a D.Min. from Andover Newton Theological Seminary in 1977.

Mr. Cook was licensed and ordained by the Classis of North Long Island in 1960. He began his ministry as a chaplain in the United States Navy and served from 1960 to 1981. He was director of education at the Marine Corps base at Camp Butler in Okinawa from 1987 to 1991. He then served as a lecturer in English at the university in Ryukyus and at Okinawa Christian Junior College from 1993 to 1999. He was also an instructor at Caldwell Community College in North Carolina following his retirement.

Mr. Cook died on July 27, 2017. He was 85 years old.

Stanley Eldon Perea

Stanley Eldon Perea was born on February 19, 1949, in Antonito, Colorado.

Mr. Perea was ordained by the Classis of Rocky Mountains in 1992. He served as pastor of the Church of the Rockies, Denver, Colorado, from 1991 to 1998 and as the coordinator of urban ministries in the RCA from 1998 to 2001. He also served as the director of HIS Ministries and the Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana (AETH: Hispanic Theological Education Association).

Mr. Perea died on July 29, 2017, in Bloomfield, Colorado. He was 68 years old.

Julius Otto Brandt

Julius Otto Brandt was born on June 30, 1922, in Holland, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1954. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1975.

Mr. Brandt was licensed by the Classis of Holland in 1957 and ordained by the Classis of Pleasant Prairie the same year. He pastored Immanuel Reformed Church in Belmond, Iowa, from 1957 to 1961 and Faith Reformed Church in Lynden, Washington, from 1961 to 1977. He then served as a missionary in the RCA's mission at the National Evangelical Church in Kuwait from 1977 to 1987.

Mr. Brandt died on August 4, 2017, in Lynden, Washington. He was 95 years old.
Thomas Danney

Thomas Danney was born on March 25, 1944, in Buffalo, New York. He studied at the Buffalo Bible Institute from 1965 to 1966 and at Houghton College, from which he graduated in 1967. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1981. He also earned an M.S.W. at Fordham University in 1973.

Mr. Danney was ordained by the Classis of Palisades in 1981. He pastored the following congregations: Bergen Point Community, Bergen, New Jersey, from 1981 to 1989 and First, Nyack, New York, from 1989 to 2011.

Mr. Danney died on August 5, 2017. He was 73 years old.

Franklin Spoolstra

Franklin Spoolstra was born on August 2, 1932, in Chicago, Illinois. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1963. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966. He also earned an M.A. from Governors State University in 1976 and an Ed.D. from the University of Sarasota in 1977.

Mr. Spoolstra was licensed by the Classis of Chicago in 1966 and ordained by the Classis of Kalamazoo the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Three Oaks, Michigan, from 1966 to 1969; Calvin, Cutlerville, Michigan, from 1969 to 1973; Mount Greenwood, Chicago, Illinois, from 1973 to 1977; Riverside Park, Hammond, Indiana, from 1977 to 1981; St. Stephens ELCA, Rockford, Michigan, from 1989 to 1990; Hope Community, Rockford, Michigan, from 1990 to 1992; St. Stephens, Rockford, Michigan, from 1992 to 1998; and Rockford Springs Orthodox Presbyterian in 1998. He also had a private practice in psychology from 1981 to 1986 and served as program director for the Salvation Army from 1989 to 1991; as clinical director for Tri County Hospital from 1991 to 1994; and as a director for Forest View Psychiatric Hospital.

Mr. Spoolstra died on August 21, 2017, in Rockford, Michigan. He was 85 years old.

Gerard De Loof

Gerard De Loof was born on December 6, 1921, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1949. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1952.

Mr. De Loof was licensed by the Classis of Kalamazoo in 1952 and ordained by the Classis of North Grand Rapids the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Casnovia, Michigan, from 1952 to 1956; Bethany, St. Petersburg, Florida, from 1956 to 1961; Southridge, Kalamazoo, Michigan, from 1961 to 1968; Chancellor, South Dakota, from 1968 to 1979; and Bethel, Ellsworth, Minnesota, from 1979 to 1986. He served as a senior pastor for the Board of Pensions from 1988 to 1993 and as contract pastor at First, Monroe, South Dakota, from 1992 to 1999.

Mr. De Loof died on September 19, 2017, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He was 95 years old.
James Stralow

James Stralow was born on July 7, 1943, in Morrison, Illinois. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1965. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1968.

Mr. Stralow was licensed by the Classis of Illinois in 1968 and ordained by the Classis of Muskegon the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Ravenna, Michigan, from 1968 to 1975; Rehoboth, McBain, Michigan, from 1976 to 1982; and Forreston, Illinois, from 1982 to 2009.

Mr. Stralow died on September 21, 2017, in Freeport, Illinois. He was 74 years old.

John Itzen

John Itzen was born on November 19, 1924, in Herman, Minnesota. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1950. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1953.

Mr. Itzen was licensed by the Classis of Germania in 1953 and ordained by the Classis of South Long Island the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Merillon Neighborhood, Garden City Park, Long Island, New York, from 1953 to 1957; Readington, New Jersey, from 1957 to 1966; Faith, Levittown, Pennsylvania, from 1966 to 1988.

Mr. Itzen died on September 29, 2017, in Levittown, Pennsylvania. He was 92 years old.

Francis A. De Jong

Francis A. De Jong was born on January 15, 1935, in Leighton, Iowa. She studied at Central College, from which she graduated in 1957. She received an M.A. from McCormick Theological Seminary in 1960.

Ms. De Jong was licensed by the Classis of Queens in 1979 and ordained by the same classis in 1980. She served as the director of Christian education at Spring Valley, New York, from 1960 to 1962 and at Wyckoff, New Jersey, from 1962 to 1970. She worked in campus ministry for United Ministry in Higher Education at Morehead State University from 1970 to 1973 and at the State University of New York at Fredonia, New York, from 1973 to 1977. She then served as the chaplain for Central College from 1977 to 1997.

Ms. De Jong died on October 11, 2017, in Pella, Iowa. She was 82 years old.

Allan M. Koller

Allan M. Koller was born on February 12, 1945, in London, England. He studied at the City College of New York, from which he graduated in 1965. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1973. He also earned a Ph.D. from Fordham University in 1977, an M.S. from Long Island University in 1984, and an M.S. in 1988, an M.Phil. in 1989, and an Ed.D. from Columbia University in 1990.

Mr. Koller was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Brooklyn in 1973. He pastored the following congregations: Crescent Place, Yonkers, New York, from 1973 to 1988; Williamsbridge Road, Bronx, New York, from 1981 to 1988; the Methodist church in
Walker Valley, New York, from 1989 to 1999; and the Presbyterian church in Florida, New York, after that. Mr. Koller also served as the director of pastoral care at City College of New York from 1985 to 1987; as assistant professor at Dominican College, Orangeburg, New York, from 1987 to 1992; as academic administrator at Chapel Field Christian High School, Pine Bush, New York, from 1992 to 1998; and as a math instructor at Orange County Community College, Middletown, New York. He was also a staff chaplain for the 77th Regiment at Fort Totten, New York.

Mr. Koller died on October 28, 2017, in Washingtonville, New York. He was 72 years old.

Lewis Rousseau Scudder III

Lewis Rousseau Scudder III was born on April 12, 1942, in Kuwait. He studied at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1963. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966. He also received an M.A. from American University in Beirut, Lebanon, and did doctoral studies at McGill University Institute for Islamic Studies in Montreal, Quebec.

Mr. Scudder was licensed and ordained by the Classis of Holland in 1966. He served as a missionary for the RCA in the Middle East from 1966 to 1990. He pastored the Union Church of Istanbul, Turkey, from 1990 to 1994 and served with the Middle East Council of Churches on Cyprus from 1994 to 2008.

Mr. Scudder died on November 1, 2017, in Limassol, Cyprus. He was 76 years old.

Philip Stephan Sickler

Philip Stephan Sickler was born on June 5, 1947, in Kingston, New York. He studied at the University of Buffalo, from which he earned a B.A. and an M.Ed. His theological education was received at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Mr. Sickler taught social studies and English in the Buffalo public schools. He served as director of the Ontario Street Youth Center and organized “His Place,” a Christian coffee house ministry in Buffalo. He pastored the following congregations: Hope, Clifton, New Jersey, from 1978 to 1984 and Arlington, Poughkeepsie, New York, from 1998 to 2009.

Mr. Sickler died on November 4, 2017. He was 70 years old.

Clarence Liang

Clarence Liang was born on February 27, 1935, in Nong An, Jilin, China. He studied at King College, Bristol, Tennessee, from which he graduated in 1962. His theological education was received at Louisville Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966.

Mr. Liang was licensed by the Presbytery of Louisville in 1963 and ordained by the Presbytery of Iron Mountain in 1966. He was received by the Classis of California in 1989. He began his ministry as student pastor at Patterson Memorial Presbyterian in Guston, Kentucky, First Presbyterian, Irvington, Kentucky, and First Presbyterian, Cloverport, Kentucky, from 1965 to 1966. He then pastored the following congregations: Presbyterian, Patton, Missouri, and Whitewater Presbyterian, Sedgewickville, Missouri, from 1966 to 1970; Presbyterian, Ashmore, Illinois, from 1970 to 1975; First Presbyterian, Edwardsburg, Michigan, from 1975 to 1980; Presbyterian, Maple Plain, Minnesota, from 1980 to 1988;

Mr. Liang died on November 7, 2017, in Holland, Michigan. He was 82 years old.

**Antonio R. Lopez**

Antonio R. Lopez was born on September 13, 1938, in the Bronx, New York.

Mr. Lopez planted Iglesia de Cristo La Roca in Queens Village, New York, where he served as senior pastor and later merged the congregation with the Reformed Church in America under the care of the Hispanic Ministries Council.

Mr. Lopez died on November 7, 2017. He was 79 years old.

**Peter Je Chul Ko**

Peter Je Chul Ko was born on August 10, 1933, in Yeoju-si Gyeonggi-do, South Korea. His theological education was received at Chongshin Theological Seminary.

Mr. Ko was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hapdong) in 1968. He planted the Han Sung Reformed Church in Cresskill, New Jersey, in 1992 and served until his retirement in 2013.

Mr. Ko died on November 15, 2017. He was 84 years old.

**Roy Wagoner**

Roy Wagoner was born on November 3, 1928, in Rochelle Park, New Jersey. He studied at Central College, from which he graduated in 1953. His theological education was received at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1956. He also earned an M.A. at Columbia University in 1967.

Mr. Wagoner was licensed by the Classis of Bergen in 1956 and ordained by the Classis of Poughkeepsie the same year. He pastored the following congregations: First, Poughkeepsie, New York, from 1956 to 1958; Fair Lawn, New Jersey, from 1958 to 1964; and Trinity, West New York, New Jersey, from 1964 to 1971. He served as the administrator of the Reformed Church Home in Irvington, New Jersey, from 1971 to 1985 and as executive director of Reformed Church Ministries to the Aging in Highland Park, New Jersey, from 1985 to 1989.

Mr. Wagoner died on December 2, 2017. He was 89 years old.

**Paul J. Alderink**

Paul J. Alderink was born on November 5, 1926, in Holland, Michigan. He began his undergraduate education at Grand Rapids Junior College and completed it at Hope College, from which he graduated in 1950. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1955.

Mr. Alderink was licensed by the Classis of North Grand Rapids in 1955 and ordained by the Classis of Zeeland the same year. He pastored the following congregations: Jamestown, Michigan, from 1955 to 1960; First, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, from 1960 to
1963; Annville, Kentucky, from 1963 to 1971; and First, Platte, South Dakota, from 1975 to 1986. He also served as the director for Annville Institute, Annville, Kentucky, from 1972 to 1975 and as the executive coordinator for Jackson County Ministries, Annville, Kentucky, from 1986 to 1990.

Mr. Alderink died on December 9, 2017, in Holland, Michigan. He was 91 years old.

**Paul Colenbrander**

Paul Colenbrander was born on March 25, 1924, in Rock Valley, Iowa. He began his undergraduate studies at Northwestern College and completed them at Westmar College, from which he graduated in 1948. He received an M.A. from Colorado State University in 1953. His theological education was received at Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1966.

Mr. Colenbrander was licensed by the Classis of East Sioux in 1966 and ordained by the Classis of Holland the same year. He pastored Maplewood Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, from 1966 to 1977 and then served as a representative of the World Home Bible League until his retirement.

Mr. Colenbrander died on December 18, 2017, in Holland, Michigan. He was 93 years old.

Each spring, the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report on ends policy E-4: Christ’s Kingdom Mission follows.

ENDS POLICY E-4: CHRIST’S KINGDOM MISSION

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities to participate in Christ’s kingdom mission, both locally and globally.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations” (Psalm 67:1-2).

Mission becomes a way of life when we reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in neighborhoods, cities, and throughout the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we boldly give witness to the hope within us and willingly serve others by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in every corner of the world. The RCA commitment is to respond with God’s love to meet spiritual and individual needs around the globe. It is envisioning the people of the RCA as a movement of faithful followers who live and love like Jesus as they radically follow Christ in mission together.

Individuals and churches experience transformation as they open themselves to be used by God and reach out in giving and receiving, learning and sharing, and extending the kingdom of God through missional engagement. It means bringing the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the message, mobilizing RCA congregations to connect with global partners for greater kingdom impact, helping resource volunteers for expanding involvement in mission efforts, and extending compassion, mercy, and justice in places of discrimination, poverty, famine, disaster, and injustice. In a world of brokenness and need, we offer help, hope, and tangible expressions of God’s love.

OVERVIEW

Six initiative teams work within the Mission strategic priority: Local Missional Engagement, which helps congregations express the gospel of Christ in transformational ways in their local community; Global Mission Engagement, which equips congregations to increase their global mission impact; Church Multiplication, focused on reaching the spiritually disconnected with new churches that proclaim the gospel; Volunteer Engagement, which provides opportunities for volunteers of all ages to engage in service for Christ; and Cultural Agility and Advocacy, focused on equipping congregations for cultural competency and empowering them to advocate on behalf of the marginalized. RCA Disability Concerns also falls under the umbrella of the Mission strategic priority.

LOCAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Local Missional Engagement helps churches discern what God is doing in their church and in their communities and helps explore ways to bring those things together. Local Missional Engagement hopes to help churches unlock their missional imagination to see what is possible. Local mission also brings groups of churches together to explore what mutual mission looks like in their context. Effective local mission ministries can transform neighborhoods and cities. The Local Missional Engagement initiative is led by Eliza Cortés Bast.
Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Develop one new guiding coalition/leadership community process with emerging leaders around race and social justice, in collaboration with our undergraduate institutions.
- Launch two local impact areas that mobilize at least three congregations for collective impact on their community.
- Hold six to eight connection events.

Progress

- Local Missional Engagement (LME) has begun conversations with our educational institutions and some of our next generation engagement partners to begin a learning process that would be launched in fall 2018.
- Staff from Local Missional Engagement are meeting with the city of Zeeland, Michigan, for a proposed impact area around business development and next generation development for social entrepreneurship.
- As LME has continued to find ways to integrate mission as a holistic approach with the other strategic priority areas of Transformed & Transforming, we have moved to curating learning opportunities that highlight that approach in conjunction with other initiatives. Connection events have been and will be held as a collaboration between Local Missional Engagement and Women’s Transformation and Leadership, Disability Concerns, Cultural Agility and Advocacy, Next Generation Engagement, etc. Events have been and will be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Fulton, Illinois; Portage, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Sioux Center, Iowa; and New York City, New York. We also created online connection events around the We Are Speaking movement in partnership with Women’s Transformation and Leadership, an advocacy movement for women and girls who have experienced violence and their allies. Cultural Agility and Advocacy and LME are also developing an online experience that addresses ministry concerns in post-industrial cities.
- One Local Missional Engagement learning community presented in conjunction with Church Multiplication is in progress. Four church planters are working together to explore a stronger local mission focus in their church plants.
- Local Missional Engagement is also launching a learning community in conjunction with Transformational Processes with six churches in in Fulton, Illinois. The goal of this learning community will be to help close the gap on discipleship and local missional pathways.
- Local Missional Engagement has also partnered with Disability Concerns to launch a learning community around mental health issues and the church. Five churches are participating in this learning community.
- Through the Local Missional Engagement initiative, the RCA was awarded an implementation grant from the state of Michigan to initiate math interventions for students in the Wyoming, Michigan, area. Local Missional Engagement staff met with local superintendents, district leaders, and educators to help design a math program targeting the students in this low-income area who are struggling to perform at grade level in math. The RCA received the grant. However, due to transition in some of the Wyoming churches as well as internal RCA staffing transitions and losses, Local Missional Engagement asked the state of Michigan for a stay on the award for one year to see if agency could be moved to the local school system.
- Local Missional Engagement also partnered with Women’s Transformation and Leadership to bring forward the We Are Speaking initiative and its coordinated
resources, providing a rallying statement and clear response to the abuse and harassment of women and girls in our communities.

**Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)**

- For churches that have engaged in Local Missional Engagement learning and leadership communities:
  - By 12 months after the process, at least 50 percent of congregations will have adjusted ministry plans and begun work with key community partners.
  - By 18 months after the process, at least 50 percent of congregations will have begun new ministry projects and processes with key community partners and stakeholders.
- In the local impact areas, all churches will have identified their key community partners and stakeholders. Within six months of the process, all churches will have begun to implement their strategy to impact their local community. Within 12 months of the process, all churches will have adjusted resources to appropriately support their area’s focus.
- Local Missional Engagement will actively work with the rest of the Mission strategic priority area staff to create integrated, holistic learning environments and processes for churches to best assist them in their self-selection process of their missional pathway.
- Local Missional Engagement will develop and launch an experiment lab model for new approaches to local mission in learning and leadership communities.
- Two hundred RCA congregations will be equipped for increased local missional engagement with tangible missional impact, reflecting sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation that are holistically linked to discipleship (transformational engagement) and leadership development.
- Fifty congregations will have engaged in substantial and quantifiable local missional engagement, with identified and sustained community partnerships.

**Progress**

- In learning communities that were launched or completed from 2016 onward:
  - At least 50 percent of congregations who have completed learning communities are adjusting ministry plans and have begun work or conversations with key community partners, such as schools.
  - None of the Local Missional Engagement learning communities are yet 18 months out after the completion of their process.
- In our first impact area (started in 2014), churches in the Wyoming area had identified the school system as their key community partner. Although the work has continued on with the schools, there have recently been some shifts in the existing churches in this area that have caused the impact to slow down. Local Missional Engagement is reevaluating the strength of this strategy in Wyoming. As we are continuing to test this model, we used our position as a convening agent for ecumenical conversations around affordable housing and are identifying two other churches in the Midwest to spearhead work around economic development as a means of community partnership. The conversation is slow, staggered work as we have capacity, but we are working to give churches better agency in leading the work to create the best chances for long-term sustainability.
- Local Missional Engagement has been actively working in the Mission priority area to create joint learning opportunities to best integrate the work that is being done. We will complete our first learning community across the Mission area (jointly between Local Missional Engagement and Church Multiplication) this
summer. This learning community also joined with the Ezra Project 2.0 learning community for one of its shared learning opportunities. Local Missional Engagement is also working with RCA Disability Concerns, with whom we have launched an additional learning community combining advocacy and education around mental health issues, both inside and outside the church.

- In the past 18 months, Local Missional Engagement has participated in combined learning opportunities with Next Generation Engagement and Transformational Processes (in the Discipleship strategic priority area), along with the previously mentioned work with the Ezra Project and Women’s Transformation and Leadership. We are currently implementing a joint process between Global Mission and Volunteer Engagement that will provide an integrated methodology around a global visionary experience with one of our mission partners that can easily be translated into an ongoing local experience for a congregation. We hope that these integrated opportunities will become the new standard for Transformed & Transforming work, as we recognize that, in the healthiest churches, learning and work in the three strategic priority areas of Transformed & Transforming are linked.

- Local Missional Engagement has had more than 110 churches connected through one of our delivery systems in under three years. However, we have not yet found the best possible way to measure local impact for these churches.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

- LME will identify a pre- and post-process for learning opportunities for churches that allows those churches to self-identify their current local impact.
- The Local Impact Area process will be finalized, and at least five bi-national areas will be identified, with churches taking primary agency in the local work.
- Each regional synod will have an identified and trained local missional engagement coach in their area who can help equip, resource, and coach the local work with a strong understanding of each region’s context.
- Local Missional Engagement will have a curated “toolbox” of resources that will be useful within all of the initiatives in the Mission strategic priority (all of the initiatives listed in this report). This toolbox will give RCA congregations access to the content of the best contemporary resources for local mission.
- Local Missional Engagement will have a clearly identified and integrated strategy for local churches that provides learning around justice, compassion and aid, and evangelism.
- One hundred fifty RCA congregations will be equipped for increased local mission engagement with tangible missional impact, reflecting sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation.
- One hundred congregations will have engagement in substantial and quantifiable local missional engagement, with identified and sustained community partnerships.

GLOBAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

For more than 150 years, RCA Global Mission has been bringing the Word of God to people around the world. Hundreds of missionaries and volunteers have left the comforts of their own communities to be present in distant places, all in an effort to “live and love like Jesus.” We are excited to continue to live out that goal while we more closely engage with congregations.

The Global Missional Engagement initiative in Transformed & Transforming is focused on engaging and equipping congregations to serve Christ by serving our international
neighbors around the world. Through service, congregations have transformational experiences that equip them to become agents of transformation to the indigenous populations with whom they serve in our global community.

The Global Mission team is focused on providing clear pathways to help congregations explore their call from God in a global context, to develop the capacity to live out that call, and to develop partnerships with other congregations and missionary organizations in order to carry out God’s call for mission.

This initiative has three areas of focus:

1. Church equipping: Developing, implementing, and working with individual congregations and clusters of congregations to provide consulting services, expanding the work of RCA congregations around the world in quantity, quality, and impact.
2. Global strategies: Global Mission staff will develop strategic goals for RCA mission in Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe that have measurable outcomes in the next five years. These goals will lead to ministries of transformation that will bring congregations and indigenous populations closer to Christ.
3. Restructuring: Global Mission staff will continue to develop and identify missionaries and mission partners that will work with our congregations to achieve our strategic goals.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Revise the church engagement process in order to implement it with current Global Mission and development staff as a consultation service following the departure of the coordinator of Global Missional Engagement from RCA staff.
- Continue expanding the two existing strategic impact areas—Nicaragua and South Africa—by engaging more RCA churches and continuing progress toward the measurable goals established for each area.
- Begin another strategic impact area in Brazil, which will include a medical mission, church planting, and missionary training.
- Increase RCA church engagement in the above strategic impact areas.

Progress

- New consulting tools and systems are being developed for Global Mission and other RCA staff to present to churches interested in expanding and deepening global mission involvement. The goal is to standardize the message presented by all those who engage churches and to keep the information that they need current.
- Existing strategic impact areas:
  o Botshabelo, South Africa:
    - Of the 12 target outputs identified in 2017, six significantly exceeded the goal numbers (foster care, church engagement, pastors’ training, life skills training, family preservation, fatherhood program, and family reunification).
  o Nicaragua:
    - Twelve local pastors in Nicaragua learned new preaching techniques, and 48 local church leaders studied together in six groups to learn about the Protestant Reformation and how to preach from biblical text.
• One hundred sixty children receive food and medical care at two feeding stations in Bluefields, enabling them to stay in school and hear the message of the gospel.

• New strategic impact area—Brazil:
  o A job description for a project leader has been widely circulated, and interviews took place this spring.
  o The strategic impact area leader will be introduced along with the Brazilian partner at General Synod where an invitation will be given to attendees to join in this new network.
  o Work is underway to develop a network of RCA and Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) church planters who will engage in a peer-to-peer partnership with church planters in Brazil.

• Increase RCA church engagement in strategic impact areas.
  o Church engagement in Nicaragua:
    • Forty-three RCA churches are connected with the ministry in Nicaragua.
    • Nine RCA groups visited the mission field—a total of 88 individuals.
    • Fourteen congregations participated in two regional gatherings in northwest Iowa and West Michigan.
  o Church engagement in South Africa:
    • Thirteen individuals representing four RCA churches visited Botshabelo in 2017.
    • Ten RCA churches are actively engaged in the Botshabelo network.
    • Four regional gatherings were held in New York and New Jersey in 2017.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

• Twenty-five congregations will have participated in Re:Forming Missions, and 75 percent of these congregations will have developed and begun implementing their mission action plan.

• Three church networks will have formed, equipping and encouraging groups of churches to collaborate with each other and RCA Global Mission personnel for deep impact in three global impact areas.

• Two immersive global engagement experiences will have been facilitated, introducing participants to a global impact area and equipping them to implement what they learned by initiating a global ministry in their own congregation.

• Partnerships will have been established with ten RCA congregations who were not previously engaged with RCA Global Mission.

Progress

• The Re:Forming Missions process was put on hold with the departure of staff. New processes are being formed to continue the engagement process for RCA churches in global mission.

• Strategic impact areas have been formed in Nicaragua, South Africa, and Brazil, which are impacting these communities deeply in the areas of orphaned and vulnerable children, community development, sustainable food sources, and church planting.

• Two RCA-sponsored immersive global engagement experiences have been facilitated in the last year.
  o An immersive global mission experience in April 2017 gave RCA women an immersive look into the global mission work of missionaries JJ and
Tim TenClay in Italy. This was a collaborative effort with Women’s Transformation and Leadership. The participants are networked together for continued learning and implementation of ministry initiatives among their congregations.

- A peer-to-peer learning immersion experience with the CRCNA/Resonate Global Mission and RCA pastors took place at the Al Amana Centre in Oman, as well as in Egypt and Bangladesh, to further Christian–Muslim relationship building. Participating pastors then brought what they learned back to their congregations and colleagues.

- Between 2013 and 2018, more than 20 RCA churches began supporting RCA mission personnel and projects through Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares. These churches did not previously support RCA missions through PIM shares. In addition, seven non-RCA churches began supporting RCA missions through PIM shares.

**New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)**

- Global Mission will initiate another strategic impact area for a total of four strategic impact areas around the world that are making a measurable impact in people’s lives.
- Global Missional Engagement will continue to develop tools and resources for RCA churches to deepen their mission involvement.
- Goals for current strategic impact areas:
  - Nicaragua: Increase the network to 50 churches; build the second feeding center in Bluefields; increase the number of children fed by 15 percent.
  - South Africa: Build a network of 30 RCA churches; facilitate 300 local adoptions for children in Botshabelo.
  - Brazil: Create a network of ten churches; hire an initiative leader missionary.

**CHURCH MULTIPLICATION**

The RCA continues to start new churches that further the gospel—reaching the spiritually disconnected, bringing them into a community of authentic relationships, and introducing them to the God of grace who transforms lives and eternities.

Preceded by prayer and Holy Spirit empowerment, a multiplication movement is built on a solid foundation of assessment and evaluation of church planters and church planting locations and then strengthened through training. It encourages the ongoing ministry of church planters and new churches by providing coaching relationships and networks of planters for learning, support, and accountability. It expands as new congregations reproduce and established churches join in starting new churches.

We have been tracking seven strategic benchmarks that we believe will accomplish the multiplication vision and 15-year strategic plan. We are seeking to increase both the quantity and the quality of our church plants every year. One central qualitative benchmark is to organize our new congregations within five years of their launch date; at the time of organization, the church will be thriving, missional, reproducing, self-supporting, and self-governing. Another benchmark is that more than 40 percent of our new plants will be congregations of color or multicultural from the start. Finally, more than 50 percent of the growth of these congregations will come from new professions of faith, reaffirmations of faith, and/or adult baptisms.

In 2017–2018, we have added an eighth strategy: to develop fully-functioning church
multiplication teams in more of our classes. Today 55 percent of our church plants are coming from five classes; 14 classes are producing 82 percent of our plants. Since 1999, 30 classes have produced one or no plants. Our staff is coming alongside classes that are ready to become reproductive, helping them develop vision, systems, teams, resources, and strategies for church planting. With grants funded by the Church Growth Fund, we are currently working intently with two classes. We believe this will improve the quantity and quality of our plants through more local nurturing and engagement.

Planting churches to reach spiritually disconnected people requires constant adjusting and innovating. We are working with our partners within the RCA and CRCNA to explore new ways to reach our world. Presently we are exploring smaller plants led by bi-vocational pastors or supported by sustainable funding enterprises, particularly for rural small communities and under-resourced urban settings and among immigrant people groups where a full-time pastor, facility, and program are otherwise unattainable.

The Church Multiplication initiative is led by Mike Hayes, Tim Vink, and Randy Weener with operational assistance from Eduardo Rodriguez and Dawn Muller.

**Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)**

- Ten congregations will be activated for parenting that have not done so in the last five years.
- The cultures of two classes that had minimal church multiplication activity before this year are now shaped for multiplication, with a functioning Church Multiplication team, vision, budget, and staffing.
- Sixteen new RCA congregations will be planted.
- Eight congregations will be organized that are thriving, missional, and reproducing.
- Ten church plants will be started that are intentionally ethnic/multiethnic/multiracial or are congregations of color or are led by a female planter.
- Eight hundred new disciples of Jesus Christ will be engaged in new church plants.

**Progress**

- Ten new congregations have been activated for parenting and are in the process of developing a New Congregation Plan (NCP).
- Two classes are well on their way to developing fully-functioning Church Multiplication teams and are already identifying their first plant. In addition, exploratory conversations have started in four other classes.
- Four NCPs have been approved. Others are in the process of being approved.
- Three church plants have either organized or been started as additional sites of organized churches.
- Two of the four approved NCPs are ethnic church plants or are led by a female planter.
- It is too early to get accurate records on new disciples, but a safe estimate is 150 people among those four new plants.
- Four new Spanish-speaking planter coaches have been trained.
- We continue to meet annually with a strong Mission Catalyst Coalition (MC2) leadership community of 22 high-capacity parent churches from the RCA and CRCNA.
Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- One hundred new RCA congregations will be planted in all eight regional synods, reflecting increased church multiplication momentum and effectiveness.
- Fifty congregations will have organized and be thriving, missional, and reproducing.
- Forty intentionally ethnic/multiethnic/multiracial church plants, congregations of color, or congregations led by a female planter will be started.
- Five thousand new disciples of Jesus Christ will be engaged in new church plants.

Progress

- Seventy-nine New Congregation Plans have been approved.
- Thirty-three congregations have organized.
- Forty-five percent of the new congregations are ethnic/multiethnic/multiracial church plants, congregations of color, or congregations led by a female planter.
- 4,791 new disciples of Jesus Christ have been engaged in new church plants, plus a conservative estimate of 1,400 from the 14 new multi-sites that have started.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

- One hundred new RCA congregations will be planted.
- Twenty-five classes will have functioning Church Multiplication teams and will have planted at least one church in the previous 24 months.
- Fifty congregations that have not parented a church plant in the previous five years will become activated for parenting.
- Fifty ethnic/multiethnic/multiracial church plants, congregations of color, or congregations led by a female planter will have been started.
- Fifty congregations will have organized and are thriving, missional, and reproducing.
- Five thousand new disciples of Jesus Christ will have been engaged in new church plants.
- Twenty-five new congregations will be planted in Brazil by North American RCA church plants.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

The Volunteer Engagement initiative is focused on empowering, equipping, and engaging RCA volunteers of all ages in service for Christ through mission volunteer opportunities that have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities in which they serve. We believe that when volunteers serve in the name of Christ, whether in their local community or around the world, their service can have long-term impact on all participants.

This team, led by Stephanie Soderstrom, is focused on supporting congregations and equipping volunteers for service with RCA missionaries and mission partners. We work with volunteers throughout the planning process, providing support on the field and helping to ensure effective debriefing and follow-through.
Four Areas of Focus

1. Mission trips:
   Working with local, long-term ministries, mission teams can help meet needs, build relationships, and share the hope of Christ. Mission trips are available for teams of all ages.

2. Disaster response:
   When disaster strikes, RCA volunteers can help provide much-needed support in the months and years that follow. Individual and group opportunities are available.

3. Individual volunteer opportunities:
   Opportunities are available for students and adults to serve for a few weeks or up to two years alongside RCA missionaries and partners.

4. Church equipping:
   Working with RCA churches, we will offer resources, training, and equipping processes to help them take their next step in volunteer engagement. These equipping resources will be available to churches that serve through the RCA and to those that do not.

Many RCA churches have been engaged in sending volunteers in mission for years. Our vision is to become value-added for these churches as well as for churches that are new to engaging volunteers in mission. Additionally, we will seek to engage individuals, especially the next generation, in dynamic volunteer opportunities and internships that allow volunteers to utilize their unique gifts to contribute to the long-term goals of our mission partners.

The RCA will engage all generations of volunteers in service for Christ through bi-national and global mission volunteer opportunities that will have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities where they serve.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Engage 1,500 volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- Serve 150 churches through equipping processes or mission opportunities.
- Develop and pilot a mission gap year program to serve 20 young adults in year one.

Progress

- Engaged 1,455 volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- Served 96 churches through equipping processes or mission opportunities.
- Developed the Cultivate program, a mission program to send young adults ages 18–25 to serve alongside RCA missionaries and mission partners. Recruited and trained 12 volunteers to participate in Cultivate during the 2018–19 year.
- A peer review process for Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission is scheduled, and we anticipate that accreditation will be granted.
- Additionally, in the 2017 calendar year, the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund awarded 56 scholarships—a total of $80,863 that has benefitted 321 young people.
Five-Year Goals (July 2013 to June 2018)

- Engage 5,000 volunteers with measurable impact on youth and adult participants, sending congregations, and partner communities.
- Support 200 congregations through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities.
- Become fully accredited with the Standards of Excellence in Short-term Missions and develop tools to help volunteers, congregations, and mission partners align with standards.

Progress

- Engaged 5,285 volunteers with measurable impact on youth and adult participants, sending congregations, and partner communities.
- Supported 226 churches through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities. Volunteer resourcing includes the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund Scholarship and the SENT devotions. The SENT devotions are crafted by Volunteer Engagement to engage groups in growing discipleship while on short-term mission trips and are now being released annually.
- As referenced above, Volunteer Engagement has a peer review scheduled with the Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission, with the expected outcome of full accreditation.
- As of February 2018, the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund has awarded 187 scholarships—a total of $230,685 that has benefitted 992 young people.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

- Engage 11,500 volunteers in service with RCA missionaries and mission partners.
- Support 150 new congregations through volunteer equipping processes or mission volunteer opportunities.
- Maintain full accreditation with the Standards of Excellence in Short-term Mission.

CULTURAL AGILITY AND ADVOCACY

Cultural Agility and Advocacy (formerly called Missional Mosaic) focuses on helping congregations to live more fully into the biblical vision of shalom and the human hope of the beloved community. The initiative is led by Earl James.

The ancient Hebrews spoke the word *shalom* both at greeting and parting. The word meant “peace” but conveyed more, including life with complete wholeness wherever one lived, worked, and worshiped.

The beloved community grows naturally out of Jesus’ own hunger for the felt unity of his followers, mirroring the unity he shared with the Father (John 17:20-23). That unity expresses a readiness to engage everyday life in close friendship and to actively take a stand when society and societal systems block access to the abundant life for people and places God created.

Cultural Agility and Advocacy offers congregations two pathways as they strive for shalom and the beloved community, helping congregations:
• Increase their cultural agility.
• Advocate by addressing public policy.

“Cultural agility” begins with whatever culturally-rooted style of communication a person or congregation has and focuses on adapting that style when communicating, negotiating, and building trust with other people, congregations, or groups whose cultures differ from one’s own.

As congregations increase in cultural agility, tangible, sustainable transformations can occur in leadership, outreach, discipleship, and worship.

In advocacy, congregations come to see and engage public policy matters and practices as simply a third expression of their shared compassion ministries. Many congregations express compassion by “giving a fish.” They see a need and meet a need. Food pantries are excellent examples of “giving a fish” compassion ministry.

Congregations also express compassion by “teaching to fish.” By sharing any particular knowledge, skill, or ability, they assist a person or family in overcoming a particular life challenge that threatens them. Tutoring and financial stewardship ministries are excellent examples of “teaching to fish” ministries.

Not very many congregations ask, “Why do so many people and families need those fish to begin with?” Advocating by addressing public policy results in congregations partnering with others to make tangible differences in everyday life challenges, locally or globally, for hundreds of thousands of people and to add greater liveliness and focus to the shared life of the congregation itself.

Staff coordination for the African American Black Council shifted to Cultural Agility and Advocacy in August after the untimely death of Antoine “Tony” Campbell, who coordinated that work for the past several years.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

• Two cultural agility learning communities.
• Two cultural agility connection events.
• One advocacy learning community.
• Six advocacy connection events.

Progress

• Three cultural agility learning communities were engaged.
  o The learning community in the Synod of the Heartlands, which uses a repurposed Sankofa journey ministry model, continues with an anticipated positive conclusion in April 2018. The congregations and participants have worked well together, learning how cultural agility affects both race and ethnicity relations, as well as intergenerational living, leadership, and ministry.
  o The learning community in the Synod of the Great Lakes launched in October 2017. Over time, the congregation and participants have been engaged well on cultural agility within their congregation, families, and geographic communities. Interestingly, they are also acquiring new knowledge and skills around active listening, conflict management, and change theory as they grow as culturally agile people and leaders.
The learning community in the Synod of the Far West was closed due to low participation.
Additionally, the African American Black Council is developing a pilot learning community to be launched in the spring that will assist a congregation to become more open to intergenerational leadership and membership at cultural and influence-bearing levels.

• Three cultural agility connection events were successfully completed.
  o The October joint meeting of the GSC and commissions began with a cultural agility connection event for new members. Participants explored a biblical foundation for cultural agility, learned about culture and its various levels, change blindness, implicit bias, the dynamics of cultural agility, and several skills for cultural agility levels.
  o The African American Black Council’s fall gathering featured an impactful poverty simulation in which participants learned about engaging in-depth living and ministry across socioeconomic realities and cultural lines.
  o A group of three Great Lakes Synod male pastors who share a building have been working on their personal relationships and thinking through how their churches could relate better with one another. One pastor is Latino and leads a Latino church plant, one is Nepalese and leads a Nepalese church plant, and one is white and leads a white congregation. Together, they traveled on a re-purposed Sankofa journey to visit a pastor in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics who is a white woman. She has developed and grown a high level of church engagement with community that, coincidentally, led to a 350 percent growth in her worshiping community. The Great Lakes pastors learned much from that experience and are beginning to implement some lessons learned. They are also looking into some customized approaches to turn their landlord-tenant relationship into a true and deep ministry partnership with a possible learning community format as a guide.

• One hybrid learning/engagement community experience took place.
  o Following the March 2017 mass incarceration connection event, several participant congregations began new work. One church in the Regional Synod of New York formed a nonprofit to work with children who have incarcerated parents. A congregation in the Regional Synod of Mid-America formed innovative relationships with area judges and police and with their community behind a new approach of police-community relations. Another congregation in the Regional Synod of New York expanded its ministry to assist prisoners who are reentering their communities.

• By June 2018, eight advocacy connection events will have occurred.
  o Two Israel-Palestine connection events in the Regional Synods of the Great Lakes and the Heartlands were completed in partnership with Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), a nonprofit of which the RCA is a founding member. More than 30 percent of the participants signed up to engage with CMEP on an ongoing basis, and more signed up to engage with the redesigned RCA Israel-Palestine Ministries.
  o Two basic biblical advocacy connection events were held in the regional synods of the Far West and New York in partnership with PICO National Network (People Improving Communities through Organizing), a U.S.-based, church-rooted advocacy network. Two primary outcomes for participants were deeper understanding of the biblical roots of advocacy as an expression of love and an increase in active listening skills and disciplines for how people who serve others can “share presence” with others who need their presence and love.
  o Three care of creation connection events have taken place. One was held...
in the Regional Synod of Albany; by the end of March, two others will be held in the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes. These events are being conducted in partnership with the nonprofit Creation Justice Ministries of which the RCA is a founding member. Goals are to increase congregational discussions and awareness about care of creation, encourage periodic incorporation of caring for God’s creation in worship services, share ways for making church buildings and our homes more energy efficient, and identify pathways for making differences locally and nationally through public partnerships and advocacy. We are exploring how to open a similar customized care of creation initiative in Canada.

In March, we will hold an advocacy connection event in partnership with Mission Year at Northwestern College. We are calling the event “Diversity–Justice–Solidarity: Centering God, Embodying Our Faith.” Students will explore their identities in Christ and map linkages through love, from who they are to how to stand with people where they live, work, and worship.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- Nine cultural agility and advocacy learning communities or advocacy impact teams will have launched involving 40 congregational teams.
  - At least 50 percent of the cultural agility learning community congregational teams will make a shift in leadership, outreach, or worship with the long-term goal of better reflecting their geographic communities.
  - At least 50 percent of the advocacy learning community teams will form ministry partnerships with pertinent, successful advocacy groups or launch their own congregational advocacy ministries.

- Thirty-five cultural agility and advocacy connection events will have been held, engaging representatives from 200 congregations.
  - At least 25 percent of the cultural agility participants will become directly connected to successful cultural agility groups or their congregations will participate in cultural agility learning communities.
  - At least 50 percent of the advocacy participants will become directly connected to successful advocacy groups or their congregations will participate in advocacy learning communities or impact teams.

Progress

- Seven cultural agility and advocacy learning communities or advocacy impact teams have been launched, involving people from over 40 congregations.
  - We have not been able to chart long-term sustainable cultural agility change in terms of shifts in leadership, mission, or discipleship, but we have seen short- to intermediate-term shifts. From organizational development perspectives, long-term changes need to be guided for at least five years as opposed to the one to two years that learning communities normally last. To our knowledge, no churches have changed demographically enough to approximate their geographic communities.
  - The mass incarceration impact community has resulted in deep change in two congregations. One has formed a nonprofit to assist with its ministry to children of incarcerated parents and the other has formed innovative partnerships with local police and judges.

- Thirty-six cultural agility and connection events will have been completed by June 2018, involving more than 300 congregations and more than 600 people.
  - At least 26 of the connection events resulted in more than 40 percent of the participants engaging further in the topical area through the work
of the RCA’s partner organization, a denominational ministry, or a new congregational ministry effort.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

(These goals assume the same or similar initiative configuration for the next five years.)

- Cultural Agility
  - Seven new learning communities and three new leadership collaboratives will launch. Eighty percent will show demonstrated increases in cultural agility knowledge and skill development, and 20 percent will have new fusions of cultural agility in leadership, mission, discipleship, and/or worship.
  - Twelve connection events will be held; 30 percent of participants will increase cultural agility knowledge, and 10 percent will engage in cultural agility learning communities or leadership collaboratives.

- Advocacy
  - Seven new advocacy engagement communities (a hybrid of learning communities but more focused on action) will begin.
  - Twenty-five connection events will be held; 50 percent of participants will partner with organizations that engage in advocacy work, and 10 percent will assist their congregations to launch a new advocacy ministry.

- New synergies are developing between the Cultural Agility and Advocacy and Local Missional Engagement initiatives. We anticipate some fresh approaches to ministry will result from how those two initiatives work together. Other potentials might be realized as Cultural Agility and Advocacy develops new work with other Transformed & Transforming initiatives.

DISABILITY CONCERNS

Scripture’s vision of the kingdom is a unifying embrace of the love and grace of Jesus Christ that reaches all people—every race, tribe, people, and language, every disability and special need. Raising awareness and making our churches accessible to people with disabilities establishes a needed foundation, but our own attitudes require even greater transformation so that ministries to and for people with disabilities grow into ministries with and by people with disabilities. The vision of RCA Disability Concerns is to welcome and engage the gifts of all people in Christ’s ministry—becoming accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves. A covenant with CRC Disability Concerns between the governing boards of the RCA and Christian Reformed Church (CRC)—in place since 2009—has demonstrated a track record of multiplied effectiveness and continues to deepen ministry impact in both denominations.

The RCA’s Disability Concerns initiative is led by Terry DeYoung.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Launch two learning communities focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church (a mental health focus in west Michigan and an adult foster care/group homes focus in New York and New Jersey).
  - By 2019, at least 50 percent of the congregations involved will conduct an accessibility audit, adopt a church disability policy, launch a new disability ministry, develop a new strategic partnership, or make shifts in church staffing or budget.
- Hold five to six connection events designed to raise awareness about advocacy
with people with disabilities, provide equipping resources, and connect participants to learning communities.

○ At least 50 percent of the congregations involved in the connection events will commit to a learning community or appoint a church disability advocate.

● Through the leadership of church disability advocates, ten churches will conduct an accessibility audit or adopt a church disability policy, with at least five removing barriers to full participation.

Progress

● A mental health learning community was launched in January 2018 with four West Michigan churches (two RCA, one CRC, and one RCA-CRC) seeking to improve their welcome and support of people living with mental health challenges. A learning community focused on deepening relationships with adult foster care/group homes remains on the horizon.

● RCA-CRC Disability Concerns connection events have been held in Michigan (two), New Jersey, Iowa, British Columbia, and Ontario.

● All church disability advocates identified in the RCA database were encouraged to facilitate an accessibility audit (identifying and addressing barriers in attitude, communication, and facility design) and/or work with leaders to adopt a disability policy for their church. Typically these are lengthy undertakings, particularly an accessibility audit. Further, in November 2016, RCA Disability Concerns initiated a brief accessibility survey of all RCA churches to assist in evaluating physical barriers, communication barriers, and inclusive programming; more than 200 churches participated. The goal was for results of this yearly survey to be added to each participating church’s information in the RCA’s online church search—in part so that potential visitors with disabilities can anticipate if the church will be able to accommodate their needs—but staffing challenges have delayed implementation of this project.

● In September 2017, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns hosted a three-day leadership conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that equipped 21 RCA disability advocates plus an equivalent number of CRC disability advocates. Much of the time was devoted to the theme of “Creating Communities of Belonging,” but advocates also engaged in networking, meeting with other advocates in their region, learning about opportunities and resources in their church and regional settings, and setting personal ministry goals for the coming year.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

● Forty churches will have conducted an accessibility audit or adopted a church disability policy so that substantive changes are made in their welcome of people with disabilities.

● One hundred churches will have identified a church disability advocate who is empowered to champion the full welcome and engagement of people with disabilities so that disability awareness is deepened and people with disabilities are engaged.

● Fifteen churches will have engaged in local mission efforts, volunteer engagement, or public advocacy campaigns that address issues that are harmful in some way to people with disabilities so that people with disabilities can flourish as active community members.

● One hundred twenty-five churches will have participated in connection events designed to raise awareness about advocacy with people with disabilities, provide equipping, and connect participants to learning communities.
Three RCA-CRC learning communities focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church will have been established.

One leadership community will be established for churches that are engaging people with disabilities exceptionally well.

Progress

- At least 23 churches have conducted an accessibility audit or adopted a church disability policy.
- At least 86 churches have identified a church disability advocate.
- At least 19 churches have engaged in local mission efforts, volunteer engagements, or public advocacy campaigns so that people with disabilities can flourish as active community members.
- One hundred four churches have participated in disability connection events.
- Two RCA-CRC learning communities focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church have been established.
- Five disability leadership training events have equipped, supported, and resourced church disability advocates and regional disability advocates for their local ministry contexts.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023*)

*Projections are inclusive of outcomes already reported for 2013 to 2018.

- Seventy-five churches will have conducted an accessibility audit or adopted a church disability policy so that substantive changes are made in their welcome of people with disabilities.
- Two hundred churches will have identified a church disability advocate who is empowered to champion the full welcome and engagement of people with disabilities so that disability awareness is deepened and people with disabilities are engaged.
- Thirty classes will have appointed a regional (classis) disability advocate.
- Forty churches will have engaged in local mission efforts, volunteer engagements, or public advocacy campaigns that address issues that are harmful in some way to people with disabilities so that people with disabilities can flourish as active community members.
- Two hundred churches will have participated in connection events designed to raise awareness about advocacy with people with disabilities, provide equipping, and connect participants to learning communities.
- Five RCA-CRC learning communities focused on Disability Concerns initiatives in the local church will have been established.
- Ten disability leadership training events will have equipped, supported, and resourced church disability advocates and regional disability advocates for their local ministry contexts.

ADDITIONAL GLOBAL MISSION REPORTING

Working together to share God's love with the world

RCA Global Mission exists to strengthen and grow the global church by supporting ministries of compassion, developing leaders, and sharing the good news. Our goal is to provide engagement opportunities for RCA churches to partner with global churches in ways that are collaborative and mutually meaningful that help us all to live and love like Jesus.
Partnership in Mission Shares

The mission personnel and staff of RCA Global Mission would like to express appreciation to the churches and individuals of the Reformed Church in America who so generously support our mission programs. The RCA mission program is supported almost entirely from contributions and Partnership in Mission shares. Without you, there would be no RCA Global Mission.

The Reformed Church in America has 78 active partnerships in 43 countries around the world. There are 48 mission personnel and 41 partner personnel (who are employed by the partner but supported through RCA Partnership in Mission shares). These mission personnel are supported by 449 churches through Partnership in Mission shares. There are more than 93 active projects, including disaster response and projects of compassion. These projects were supported by gifts from 630 churches and more than 2,500 individual donors.

General Synod 2017 set the value of a full Partnership in Mission share for 2018 at $6,700; we are recommending that the value remain the same for 2019. We are also asking that each RCA congregation that does not currently support an RCA missionary with Partnership in Mission support consider taking on a full or partial share of support.

Transitions in Mission Personnel

Richard and Carolyn Otterness were appointed as RCA missionaries in 2005 to reach out to the Roma people in both rural and urban areas of central Europe in partnership with the Reformed Church in Hungary. They worked together with church leaders and Roma congregations to build bridges between the church and secular society. They also worked to improve health care and education among the Roma. Before accepting this call to mission, Dick served as a pastor and administrator for 27 years and Carolyn worked as a nurse and a nurse practitioner. Richard and Carolyn are now retiring from mission service after 13 years in the field.

Richard and Donna Swart were appointed as RCA missionaries to Kenya in August of 1985. After serving in Kenya, Dick and Donna returned to Ethiopia where they had both spent much of their childhood and where the Daasanech people still remembered Dick’s parents, Bob and Morrie Swart. Dick and Donna worked alongside the Kale Hiwot National Church to reach out to and disciple the Daasanech people. They ministered in Ethiopia through the windmill project that enabled the people to irrigate their fields and create a sustainable food source. Donna, a registered nurse, provided for health needs through immunizations and prenatal care. Through the work of Dick and Donna, the Lord has established a viable, self-sustaining church among the Daasanech where 300 worship each week. They are now retiring from mission service after more than 30 years in Africa.

Caleb and Joanna Swart have served the Reformed Church in America as mission personnel stationed in Ethiopia and Tanzania. They started mission service in 2006. In Ethiopia, Caleb and Joanna served alongside Caleb’s parents, Dick and Donna. Caleb was a welder for the Windmill Project, which attained national recognition by the government and news media for providing agricultural development, food security, and better health for the Daasanech people. Joanna served as a nurse in the area of health treatment and
teaching. In 2014, Caleb and Joanna, along with their children, moved to Tanzania to serve with Training in Mission Outreach (TIMO), which trains future missionaries in cross cultural ministry. Caleb and Joanna are pursuing a new business-as-mission opportunity in Ethiopia that involves working for a beef company that will provide income generation for the Daasanech and other pastoralist people groups in Ethiopia.

GM 18-2
BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting on the campus of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from June 7 through June 12, 2018, gives glory to God for the life and witness of Dick and Carolyn Otterness, Dick and Donna Swart, and Caleb and Joanna Swart and offers a prayer of thanksgiving for their service to RCA Global Mission. (ADOPTED)

New Mission Assignments

The following new mission personnel are all currently in the fundraising stage and will be deployed when fully funded.

Robert and Amy Abel will work with new RCA partner Remember Nhu, an organization that works to end child sex slavery in 13 countries. Bob serves as director of staff care, providing pastoral care, discipleship support, and leadership development to its international and indigenous mission staff. His initial focus is working with Remember Nhu’s Southeast Asian locations to develop a global care strategy for all of the organization’s mission personnel as well as preparing new mission workers to enter the field.

Christopher and Renae Briggs will be partnering with the Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf (CCCD). As much as 99 percent of the world’s Deaf population has never been exposed to the gospel, making it one of the largest unreached people groups. In Jamaica alone, tens of thousands of people are Deaf. Many of them have no access to language or education, so there is little hope for employment, inclusion in community life, or understanding God’s love for them. CCCD provides the Deaf community in Jamaica with a language, education, mentoring, and an opportunity to encounter the gospel. Chris serves as campus manager at the Jamaica Deaf Village.

Joshua and Erica Bode will serve at the Protestant Church in Oman. Josh will serve as the pastor of this diverse international congregation in cooperation with an Anglican and a Methodist pastor. He will lead the English-speaking congregation as well as provide support to the PCO’s relationship with the Omani ministry of religious affairs. The PCO church consists of members who belong to the expatriate Christian communities of varied and diverse nationalities, bringing with them a deep commitment to Christ and a passion to serve and follow Christ’s precepts.

Andrew Smothers will serve as the associate pastor for the English Language Congregation (ELC) of the National Evangelical Church of Bahrain, a church planted by the RCA in 1893. He will serve alongside lead pastor Jim Harrison and will be leading the discipleship program for the church, including Christian education programs and Bible studies. The ELC is a vibrant, multicultural expatriate community in a difficult part of the world where political tensions are high.
Deaths

Paul Alderink served as the director of Annville Institute and Jackson County Ministries (now known as Grace Covenant Ministries) in Kentucky for 16 years. He went into mission service along with his wife, Doris, in 1963 after serving in the Navy during World War II and teaching and serving four RCA congregations. Paul died on December 9, 2017.

Jack Buteyn, former RCA missionary in Oman, died on July 20, 2017. After serving for 30 years as pastor of the Reformed Church in Plano, Texas, Jack and his wife, Linda, traveled to Oman to serve as RCA missionaries. Jack served as minister of the Protestant Church of Oman.

Ronald Korver, RCA missionary to Japan, died on May 8, 2018, in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He is survived by his wife, Ruby, who served alongside Ron in Japan from 1948 through 1992. Ron and Ruby both taught English and shared the love of Jesus with students at Meiji Gakuin School in Tokyo as well as at other schools in Japan.

Lew Scudder, longtime RCA missionary in the Middle East, died on November 1, 2017. Lew and his wife, Nancy, served in Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey, and Cyprus from 1996 until their retirement in 2008. Lew was the fifth generation within the Scudder family to serve as an RCA missionary. The son of Lewis and Dorothy Scudder, Lew was born while his parents were serving on the mission field in Kuwait. He attended Hope College and Western Theological Seminary. Lew also authored The Arabian Mission’s Story, which is part of the RCA Historical Series.

Earl Smith, former RCA missionary serving among the Omaha people in Macy, Nebraska, died on March 11, 2017. Earl and his wife, Sarah, served Umonhon Reformed Church from 1995 to 2007. Earl’s Native American heritage—he was from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin—helped prepare him for ministry with Native Americans. Earl and Sarah also served at Comanche Reformed Church in Lawton, Oklahoma; Bussing Reformed Church in McKee, Kentucky; Immanuel Reformed Church in London, Ontario; and Maranatha Reformed Church in Wainfleet, Ontario.

David Wyma, former RCA missionary in Taiwan, died on February 14, 2018. Dave, together with his late wife Barbara, served with the Protestant Church in Taiwan from 1978 through 1990, first with Student Campus Ministries based in Taichung and later with Mackay Memorial Hospital in Taipei.
Report of Words of Hope

Words of Hope is an international media ministry founded by supporting classes of the Reformed Church in America. Words of Hope’s mission is to build the church in hard places by equipping indigenous Christian churches and ministries to proclaim the gospel, especially through the use of media.

The areas where Words of Hope does ministry are difficult to reach with the gospel because of poverty, geography, persecution, or social antagonism toward Christianity. Words of Hope partners with existing Christian organizations in these hard-to-reach countries and equips them to more effectively minister in their own language and context, among their own people.

Currently, Words of Hope’s regions of ministry include Albania, Bhutan, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Niger, North America, South Sudan, Tibet, Turkey, and Uganda. Each ministry field requires its own unique media outreach approach. Depending on the variety of resources and preferences in a given region, an assortment of radio programs, CDs, DVDs, text messages, Internet, Skype, Facebook, print materials, and satellite television are used to proclaim the gospel.

Some notable highlights from Words of Hope’s ministry include the expansion of digital media outreach in Iran, new English projects in North America, and the launch of an exciting new ministry partnership in the Middle East.

Iran is a very difficult place to share the gospel. Currently, less than one percent of the population in this Middle Eastern country is Christian. What’s more, Muslim-background converts to Christianity risk imprisonment or even death if their beliefs are made public. All evangelical churches have been forced to close, and Bibles may not be published.

For twenty years, Words of Hope has been able to spread the good news about Jesus within the country of Iran via radio waves, which are very difficult for the government to intercept. Now, increasingly, the Internet is providing even more ways to contact individuals inside Iran without alerting governmental suspicion. While Words of Hope satellite radio broadcasts into the country will continue, Internet radio broadcasting will be launched this year as well. The online service will allow Words of Hope to broadcast programming 24 hours per day. Even more importantly, it will provide important listenership metrics that will help us shape our content creation for the future.

In addition to online radio, Words of Hope is actively expanding its presence on other social media networks to connect with Iranian listeners. The team currently receives as many as 75 messages per day from those who are seeking to learn more about Jesus Christ.

As we continue to diversify our digital media outreach overseas, similar projects are underway in our North American office. We are excited to announce that audio recordings of the Words of Hope daily devotional will become available this year. These recordings will be released in podcast form to provide a new way of interacting with the devotional. We believe these podcasts will broaden the reach of the devotional by capitalizing on the popularity of the podcast media form.

Two new Words of Hope books are in the publishing process. The first book will be released in July of 2018. It is a devotional book featuring 52 weeks in God’s Word, written by former Words of Hope president Bill Brownson. We believe this book will be an excellent resource for families and small groups looking for a devotional resource. We will also be
publishing an autobiography by Steve Laman, one of our most-loved devotional writers.

As we experiment with new forms of media through which to share gospel good news, we are also blessed to enter into new strategic partnerships that will take the message of hope further. Documents have been signed for the launch of an exciting new ministry partnership in the Middle East between Words of Hope, Back to God Ministries International, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt.

The new joint project in Egypt is called al-Hoda, an Arabic term meaning “the one who guides others back to the true way, or to God.” The partnership fits well with Words of Hope’s model of coming alongside strong, indigenous ministries in order to help expand and strengthen their media outreach. Using the Internet, social media, and smartphone applications, al-Hoda programs will call the lost to faith in Jesus Christ. The ministry will also distribute discipleship resources to nurture followers of Jesus.

Words of Hope is deeply grateful for the support from RCA churches that continues to allow this outreach ministry to grow. In 2017, contributions from RCA congregations totaled $542,370. We celebrate this generosity, knowing that these dollars are allowing people to be introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Thank you for proclaiming hope to the refugee, the orphan, the oppressed, the impoverished, and the imprisoned. Thank you for sending the gospel out to the ends of the earth.
Report of the Church Growth Fund

The Reformed Church in America Church Growth Fund, Inc. (CGF) is a nonprofit corporation that functions under the supervision of the RCA General Synod. The CGF supports the work of the denomination by making affordable-rate loans to RCA churches and related agencies for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings and other properties used in their ministries. The CGF loan programs offer unsecured loans up to $200,000 and secured borrowing up to $5 million.

As a primary source of funding for loans, the CGF sells interest-bearing investments called savings certificates. The CGF offers two types of savings certificates:

1. Term savings certificates, which are available in maturities from one to ten years.
2. Demand savings certificates, which allow the investment of additional funds and the redemption of amounts in the certificate (subject to the limits described in the CGF Offering Circular).

As a way to further support the denomination, the CGF contributes a portion of its earnings annually to the General Synod Council (GSC), which awards the funds as grants to support RCA Church Multiplication. In 2014, as a way to support Transformed & Transforming (the RCA’s 15-year ministry goal), the CGF began making additional contributions to the GSC for what became known as the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund, providing scholarships to middle schoolers through post-college young adults to cover part of the cost of mission trips, internships, disaster response work, vision and study tours, and missional training experiences.

The CGF has been the catalyst and financial supporter of a new grant program from which a flourishing church can receive funds for building improvements that allow the congregation to continue, enhance, and expand ministry. This program will be implemented in 2018.

More specific information on CGF loans and how to invest in savings certificates is available on the CGF website at www.rca.org/cgf.

Assets

In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2017 (FY17), assets grew slightly by $481,758 (0.60 percent) to $79,782,736. CGF assets at the end of FY17 consisted primarily of loans of $56.2 million and cash and investments of $24.6 million. Loans during FY17 increased by $3 million (6 percent) as the CGF funded $8.8 million in new loans to 20 churches and received principal payments of $5.8 million from existing borrowers.

The overall financial health of CGF church borrowers is strong as the U.S. economy continues its steady growth. This has resulted in few delinquent loans in the CGF portfolio and contributed to the CGF continuing its long history of never having experienced a loan principal loss. We continue to have a few church borrowers that are challenged to repay their loans, and the CGF works in partnership with these affected congregations by restructuring debt repayment terms to ensure viable continuance of their ministries.

Savings Certificates

At year end, FY17 savings certificate investment was at $35,079,869, representing a small decrease of $771,792 (2 percent) from the previous year. Savings certificate investors continue to recognize the favorable return received on their funds as well as how their
investment supports the mission of the CGF. Funds received from investment in savings certificates are used primarily by the CGF to make loans to RCA congregations throughout the United States, its territories, and Canada.

CGF savings certificates are state-regulated securities. Currently the CGF is authorized to sell savings certificates in 27 states, which are listed on its website at www.rca.org/cgf. Rates of interest paid on savings certificates, along with other information on the CGF and how to invest in savings certificates, can also be found on the website.

Earnings

In FY17, the CGF showed net earnings of $1,706,426 before making its annual contribution to the GSC for church ministry grants, a decrease of $248,413 (13 percent) from the previous year. Net earnings after grant contributions were $1,235,426, a decrease of $317,413 (20 percent) from the previous year.

The lower earnings in FY17 compared to FY16 was a result of decreasing interest rates in FY16, which increased the value of fixed income investments, creating significant unrealized gains that contributed to higher net earnings.

Ministry Grants

In 1999, the CGF began contributing a portion of its earnings to the GSC to be used for grants to new church plants in support of the RCA’s ten-year ministry goal, Our Call. With Our Call now complete, the CGF has continued its support of RCA church planting initiatives and will continue to do so through Transformed & Transforming. Since 1999, the CGF has contributed $5 million to support RCA Church Multiplication with grants made with those funds to more than 250 church plants. In FY17, the CGF contributed $96,000 for church plant grants.

In FY17, the CGF also continued its annual $50,000 contribution in support of the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund. Since the inception of the program in 2015, the CGF has been the fund’s primary financial supporter, with total contributions of $150,000.

General Synod 2017 approved a program named Cultivate, in which young adults in the denomination can experience a longer-term missional experience by partnering with RCA missionaries throughout the world. The CGF provided $75,000 of seed money to launch this new program.

In 2015, the denomination launched Called: The RCA’s Campaign for Transformed & Transforming, a $6.5-million capital campaign supporting Transformed & Transforming. In FY17, the CGF contributed $250,000 to the campaign to help it reach completion and achievement of its financial goal.

In total, the CGF contributed $471,000 to support RCA ministry in FY17.

Financial Strength

One measure of the financial strength of an entity is its level of net assets, also known as capital or equity. As of September 30, 2017, the CGF had capital of $44,580,946, which represents the accumulation of earnings and contributions received over its years of operations.
The funds received from savings certificates are used by the CGF primarily to make loans to RCA churches. The ability of the CGF to repay savings certificate investors is related to its level of capital, net earnings, as well as repayment of the loans funded from certificate investment dollars. CGF loans are typically secured by first mortgages on church facilities. The CGF follows strict guidelines in approving loans to make sure congregations can sustain such debt payments. While past performance is no guarantee of future events, the CGF has never experienced a loss of principal on any loan. No CGF savings certificate investor has ever experienced a loss of investment or missed receiving an interest payment.

Financial Highlights

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY 2016</th>
<th>FY 2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total assets</td>
<td>$79,782,736</td>
<td>$79,300,978</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net assets (capital)</td>
<td>$44,580,946</td>
<td>$43,345,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>Savings certificates outstanding</td>
<td>$35,079,869</td>
<td>$35,851,661</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of churches with loans</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dollar amount of loans outstanding</td>
<td>$56,170,269</td>
<td>$53,091,170</td>
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<td>Number of loans funded in year</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dollar amount of loans funded in year</td>
<td>$8,847,539</td>
<td>$10,080,846</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net earnings before ministry grants</td>
<td>$1,706,426</td>
<td>$1,954,840</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributions to GSC for ministry grants</td>
<td>$471,000</td>
<td>$402,000</td>
</tr>
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Future CGF Activity

The CGF will continue to follow its primary mission of providing affordable-rate loans to RCA churches for the purchase, construction, and improvement of buildings used in ministry. The CGF has also set as a goal the ability to contribute increasing amounts to the GSC for ministry grants to support growing church planting initiatives, the popularity and growing number of requests for Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund scholarships, and the newest program to provide grants to churches in need of building renovation for ministry.

As a way to meet the financial needs of these ministry grant programs, the CGF board in FY17 approved an increase to its annual contribution amount of up to 50 percent of net earnings.

To meet the goal of larger contributions to the GSC, the CGF needs to increase earnings, which can be done primarily through growing its loan portfolio. A larger loan portfolio needs to be funded primarily from growth in the sale of savings certificates.

The CGF will continue to implement marketing programs as a way to create a greater awareness within the denomination of the organization, its products, and how borrowing churches and investors can benefit through them.
Report of the Board of Benefits Services

The Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) was established by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America and incorporated and approved by an Act of the Assembly of the State of New York on April 16, 1923.

The General Synod has delegated to the Board of Benefits Services the responsibility to manage and administer the retirement and insurance programs required by the Reformed Church in America Book of Church Order (BCO) Formulary No. 5 and the assistance programs, and also to ensure the availability of appropriate group life insurance benefits, group long-term disability benefits, and other programs or services related to the financial and physical well-being of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America. Fulfilling that responsibility is the purpose of the Board of Benefits Services.

The board met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 10–11, 2017, and again in Tempe, Arizona, on March 19–20, 2018. The volunteer board consists of at least nine but not more than seventeen members, including pastors and professionals from business, finance, investments, and law. Board membership also includes the officers of General Synod and the general secretary.

Review of Ends and Executive Limitations

The Board of Benefits Services, like the General Synod Council, utilizes the principles of policy governance to conduct its work and to guide its oversight and supervision of its executive director in the fulfillment of the purposes (“ends”) it was established to accomplish by the General Synod.

Key to its use of the principles of policy governance is the responsibility to state clearly the reasons the Board of Benefits Services exists. In policy governance the reasons are stated as “ends.”

Two board work groups reviewed and proposed revisions to the BOBS governance policies to reflect the constitutional amendments approved by the 2016 General Synod. The following updated ends policies were approved in the October meeting:

1: Manage and administer the retirement programs required by BCO Formulary No. 5.
   1.1: Participants and eligible participants have a means to wisely set aside funds at a rate commensurate with other church plans.
   1.2: Participants and eligible participants have a means to convert accumulations into retirement income choices, including guaranteed lifetime income options.

2: Manage and administer the insurance programs required by BCO Formulary No. 5.
   2.1: Reasonable health insurance benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants through our partnership with Reformed Benefits Association (RBA). Recognizing that the partnership with RBA is a board decision, the
executive director is tasked with the following end: “Advocate for the purposes of 2.1 and monitor and report the effectiveness of current partnership with RBA to the board.”

3: Manage and administer the Reformed Church in America funded assistance programs.

3.1: Active and retired participants and spouses might have access to an assistance fund that may be available based on demonstrated need and is limited by available funds.

4: Ensure the availability of appropriate life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits.

4.1: Reasonable life insurance benefits and long-term disability benefits at rates commensurate with other church plans are available to participants and eligible participants.

5: Provide other programs or services related to the financial and physical well-being of eligible ordained ministers and their dependents, and of other eligible employees of agencies, assemblies, and institutions of the Reformed Church in America.

5.1 Participants and eligible participants have access to and are encouraged to use information and educational resources that allow them to make timely financial decisions regarding their retirement and their health, life, and disability-related benefits.

5.2 Investigate and, if appropriate, ensure availability of programs or services related to multidimensional wellness and well-being.

Review of Services and Ministries

Retirement Services, Fidelity Investments, and Fund Management

Effective January 1, 2018, we implemented a fee reduction for our participants from 28 basis points to 22 basis points. This represents a cumulative decrease of nearly 50 percent in the past six years.

In collaboration with the Investment Advisory Committee (IAC), in its fiduciary role, BOBS monitors the performance of the investment options (funds) available under the two retirement programs. BOBS and the IAC are assisted in this task by outside investment consultants Lockton Advisors.

Fidelity Investments rolled out Simplified Contribution Platform (SCP), a new electronic system for churches to remit their payments directly through the Fidelity website instead of manually by check. Each month, a new group of churches will be instructed how to enroll and remit contributions through SCP. By the end of 2018, all churches will be expected to remit contributions electronically. Online remittance of funds is a crucial step in reducing administrative fees and to be more competitive for any future record keeper plan review or request for proposal (RFP). Full cooperation from treasurers is needed to make this transition successful.
To participate in the 403(b) plan, employers need to complete and submit an adoption agreement to the Board of Benefits Services office. This is a compliance document that can allow a consistory some flexibility in defining the terms of its participation in the RCA 403(b) retirement program. The agreement recognizes the RCA 403(b) plan as the retirement plan of the employer. If an employer submits funds on behalf of its ministers, the board recognizes this action as evidence that the employer has adopted the agreement. Staff will continue to request adoption agreements from employers as required by the plan. The agreement can be downloaded from the church treasurers’ page on the RCA website, www.rca.org/treasurers.

The 403(b) retirement program document was approved through the IRS volume submitter program. Under this program, the IRS issues an option letter to the plan sponsor if the plan document meets legal requirements. As a result, each employer (church) must adopt the approved plan by 2020. Staff is drafting communication to each employer so we can begin the process of collecting the new adoption agreements.

We continue to work with participants and their financial advisor when the participant wants to purchase an annuity. Most of these are purchased from the old plan where it is required that the Board of Benefits Services is the owner of the annuity. Our consultant from Lockton Advisors reviews the funds and is able to provide feedback regarding the integrity and financial stability of the insurance company. Fidelity offers an annuity shopping service; however, we have found most participants prefer to work with someone they know locally.

After two years of availability, 35 participants are enrolled in the Portfolio Advisory Service at Work (PAS-W) program through Fidelity. PAS-W is an optional service that provides professional management of a participant’s plan account for an advisory fee of 0.50 percent based on total assets invested. Fidelity’s investment consultants create an investment strategy that aligns with the personal goals of an individual and will monitor those investments and adjust the strategy based on the market or life changes of the participant. This investment service is optional. Enrollment campaigns are held annually to allow a participant to enroll at a discounted price to test the program.

In order to improve security and reduce fraud, Fidelity rolled out a two-factor authentication (TFA) for participants performing certain high-risk transactions (password and user ID requests, rollover requests, etc.) on netbenefits.com.

New participants continue to enroll online through the Fidelity NetBenefits website. In addition, current participants can change their employee contributions and list and update beneficiaries directly on the Fidelity website.

Several participants of the retirement program met in the fall of 2017 in two small groups to participate in a research project. The objectives were to learn how participants in the RCA plans view retirement, to understand what major decisions they face, and to understand what they see as BOBS’ and Fidelity’s role in helping them. Staff were reminded that for those called to serve, it’s a calling, not a career; the call is demanding and emotionally draining, and retirement is just a continuation of their calling. Because there are unique challenges faced by those called to serve, it is important that staff and Fidelity provide tools that help them both understand and anticipate their needs.

RCA 403(b) Retirement Contribution Verification Project

BOBS’s benefit actuarial analyst Feifei Liu, under the supervision of manager of
retirement services Claude Bussieres, continues to collect the necessary information from RCA employers for the 403(b) correction project. By housing the Retirement Security Form (RSF) alongside the Consistorial Report Form, the necessary information for 2017 can be collected so staff is able to complete the contribution verification process. BOBS staff appreciate the cooperation of treasurers and consistory members in providing this information. There are more than 275 churches that have either not completed the RSF, not responded to the requests for payment, or have only provided the basic information requested to perform the review. It is impossible for staff to verify that the contributions have been made and are accurate without the needed information.

As reported in prior years, the correction project was initiated in 2012 to audit the participation and payment of the required employer contributions related to the retirement accounts of eligible ministers under call or contract. Many employers were out of compliance with the plan document and the Book of Church Order and had not contributed the required 11 percent of compensation to eligible RCA ministers’ retirement accounts.

Steady progress is being made on the collection of missing contributions. Approximately $1.3 million has been added to the retirement savings accounts of RCA ministers. As stated earlier, a growing concern is the lack of response from the churches that are not providing the requested data so staff can verify the contributions to the accounts of the ministers. The plan document states that the responsibility for making contributions lies with the church employer.

A full review of church compliance (adoption agreement, contributions, and life and LTD insurance coverage) on a per-classis basis was completed in June 2017. All of the classes have received reports that outline which churches are not in compliance and which churches have missing contributions to their pastors’ retirement accounts or missing adoption agreements. The regional synods have been copied on this communication. Staff feel confident that we have made reasonable efforts to collect these contributions.

We wrote off $440,000 in uncollectable contributions to the 403(b) plan in 2017 based on a confirmation that churches would not be paying into the plan. An acknowledgment form was sent to each church and each affected RCA minister, along with a letter explaining the process staff have gone through to collect the contributions. The minister and his or her spouse, if applicable, were asked to complete and sign the waiver in order to properly acknowledge and document the situation. In addition to waiving any claim(s) the minister or spouse may have against the applicable consistory, classis, or BOBS, it also includes an acknowledgement by the minister that he or she may not be considered for future financial assistance grants.

There are a number of churches in each classis who have failed to respond to our request for information and failed to complete the retirement services form (RSF) within the Consistorial Report Form system. This information is critical so we can calculate and verify that the church has contributed the proper amount to the minister’s or ministers’ retirement account(s). Our next step is to work through each classis to try again to get the needed information, contacting the classis clerks for assistance.

Reallocation Project

The Board of Benefits Services’ non-qualified retirement plan holds funds for 1,739 participants with a market value more than $260 million as of December 31, 2017. This plan was closed to new participants and contributions as of December 21, 2004. The plan has advantages and disadvantages. BOBS feels that the potential disadvantages are
compelling enough to open the opportunity for participant funds to be transitioned out of the RCA retirement plan and into the 403(b) retirement plan.

Following approval by the 2015 General Synod, the legal plan document of the RCA retirement plan was amended to allow the reallocation of participant funds from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) retirement plan. The Board of Benefits Services implemented a process in the summer of 2015 to reallocate retirement savings from the RCA retirement plan to the RCA 403(b) plan. This reallocation is a two-step process that requires participants to provide relevant information to confirm their eligibility and determine the amount that can be reallocated. Staff work closely with Fidelity Investments in the process and the review is completed in strict compliance with the IRS 415(c) rules. Participation in this program is optional.

The Reallocation Project was offered for a third time in the summer of 2017 to participants in connection with the 2016 tax year. One hundred eighty-eight participants were able to reallocate $6.5 million.

In June 2018, the Reallocation Project will be offered to participants in connection with the 2017 tax year. Participants interested in more information can find it at: www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/retirement-plan-reallocation-faq.

Insurance Programs

The Board of Benefits Services continues to collaborate with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) regarding the provision of medical benefits through the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA).

RCA and CRCNA entities are eligible to participate in RBA benefit offerings by agreeing to the Terms of Participation. The terms require that entities enroll all eligible full-time staff in the health insurance (unless the staff member has coverage through a spouse or parent or has retiree health insurance) and that members be enrolled in the basic life insurance of $175,000. Part-time staff are eligible to participate as well. Optional benefit offerings include dental, vision, and supplemental life; however, participants cannot enroll in the supplemental benefits without purchasing medical and life insurance coverage. RBA does not provide long-term disability insurance for clergy.

In the fall of 2016, the RBA began to offer physical well-being opportunities for its members. The Real Appeal weight loss program, offered in 2016–2017, was reintroduced during open enrollment for 2018. The RBA has contracted with Allegro Coaching for well-being webinars and for the development of an individualized movement program for members. These physical well-being programs are being funded by a renewable $10,000 grant from United Healthcare.

RCA ministers who are not enrolled in medical insurance through the RBA are enrolled in the group life and long-term disability insurance offered and administered through the Board of Benefits Services. In providing these benefits for eligible ministers, churches have access to an affordable group plan that allows them to easily fulfill the requirements of Formulary No. 5 of the Book of Church Order.

Churches are billed quarterly for BOBS’ group plans. Reminders are sent to the church and the classis when an invoice is not paid by the due date. If payment is not received, a notice of cancellation is sent to the minister and the treasurer. The loss of or lack of coverage is a violation of the Book of Church Order and puts church employers out of compliance with
Formulary No. 5. More importantly, this loss of coverage puts the participants at financial risk should an uncovered insurance event happen. Cineca Anthony, BOBS’ life and LTD administrator, and Feifei Liu continue to work with the classes to ensure proper insurance coverage is available and provided to all eligible RCA ministers. A summary of ministers without life and long-term disability insurance is communicated to each classis stated clerk prior to termination of the policy.

Effective October 1, 2017, BOBS’ group life and long-term disability insurance policies moved from Reliance Standard to UNUM. This allowed BOBS to expand the eligibility requirements so active ministers regularly working a minimum of 17.5 hours per week are able to enroll in life and long-term disability coverage as opposed to a 20 hour minimum that was required in prior years with Reliance Standard.

An amendment to the \textit{BCO} was proposed by the Commission on Church Order (CCO) at the 2016 General Synod to address inconsistencies between requirements in the \textit{BCO} and the eligibility requirements for insurances offered by BOBS and RBA. The insurance policies offered by BOBS and RBA are only available to participants actively working at least 20 hours per week. The \textit{BCO}, on the other hand, says that a consistory is responsible to “fulfill the provisions of the call form (Appendix, Formulary No. 5) for retirement and insurance for all ministers serving the church under call or contract unless … the classis determines that the minister is serving the church part-time and that circumstances warrant that the consistory be exempt from this requirement.” This caused conflict between the plans and the requirements of the church. (\textit{BCO} Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 [2016 edition, p.15]).

The amendment was adopted by the 2016 General Synod, received the required approval of at least two-thirds of the classes, and declared effective by the 2017 General Synod.

As a result of this amendment, the Board of Benefits Services is responsible for defining “part-time.” This definition has been created and is published in the “Annual Insurance and Retirement Benefits Information” brochure that is sent to ministers and churches each fall. The Board of Benefits Services remains committed to providing group life and long-term disability insurance at a competitive rate for eligible RCA ministers. We continue to seek ways to expand the coverage.

\textit{Retiree Chaplains Ministry}

Twenty-eight retiree chaplains are employed by the Board of Benefits Services to call and visit more than 1,000 retired pastors and surviving spouses across the U.S. and Canada each year. The retiree chaplains see each retired pastor once per year and call them at least three times per year. This ministry attempts to keep retired pastors and their spouses connected to the RCA after a life of service and provides a resource for those who are experiencing significant medical, financial, or emotional needs. Retiree chaplains play a key role in the assistance program. They know the needs of the retirees, are able to identify those who might have a need, and, at the request of staff, will contact the applicant or a family member to clarify the extent of the need.

We are currently recruiting two retiree chaplains to serve in the Albany, New York, area and the region encompassing North and South Carolina and Georgia.

The annual retiree chaplain meeting took place April 26–27 in Holland, Michigan.
Assistance Program

Financial assistance grants are awarded each year to eligible ministers and their surviving spouses and dependent children. Assistance may be granted for housing and utilities, ongoing medical insurance premiums, higher education for children of deceased ministers, funeral grants to surviving spouses, and retirement contributions for disabled ministers. Matching grants are available for emergency needs of active RCA ministers and for the medical insurance premiums of full-time RCA ministers involved in a new church. The assistance program provided nearly $300,000 in grants to approximately 50 recipients in fiscal year 2016–2017.

Each year, grant recipients express their gratitude by sending a note of thanks to the staff. One recent thank-you note said:

My wife and I want to thank you a lot for your good decision giving us the assistance grant of RCA. The beginning of February, we received the payment … We thank our God sincerely and appreciate your great help for our living in old age. We will try our best to live animated with job, and to love our God, RCA, and neighbors. May the Lord bless you all and RCA.

Another spouse thanked the RCA by saying:

Thank you from my heart for the help you give me and have given in the past. I so much appreciate the retiree chaplain’s annual visit and deep concern for my welfare and appreciate the social gathering with other clergy widows.

Four primary sources of income for the program have been identified: administrative fees from the RCA retirement plan, assessments, contributions, and endowments. The donor’s intended purpose for each endowment has been researched and documented.

1. Administrative fees (RCA retirement plan): Expenses for the retiree chaplains program and the assistance program that are not covered through assessments, contributions, or endowments are covered by the administrative fees charged to the plan as noted in Article V, Section 5.4 of the plan document.

2. Assessments: In 2017, assessments designated for the assistance fund were increased from $1.50 to $2.00 per member.

3. Contributions: Any donation to BOBS that is not specified for another fund is deposited into this fund to be used for the assistance program.

4. Endowments:
   - Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Fund: Beginning in 2017, the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
   - Frank Williams Fund: This endowment specifies that the interest shall only be used to aid ministers who have special emergency needs. This has traditionally been used to provide assistance to active RCA ministers on a matching-funds basis with the consistory, other RCA employer, or classis of membership.
   - Stillwell Trust: The interest can only be used to fund the assistance program. Beginning in 2017, the earnings are being distributed to the assistance fund.
   - Restricted legacies and assistance funds: These are board-restricted funds to be used for assistance. In 2017, the Children’s Fund (formerly the Orphan’s Fund) was rolled into the assistance fund, expanding the coverage to include the provision of higher education grants for dependent children of deceased RCA ministers of Word and sacrament.
• **Van Brunt Trust**: The distributions from this trust are made each quarter to the assistance fund.

A board-restricted endowment fund has been established with the reserves from the medical plan that was managed by the Board of Benefits Services. Future earnings from the fund will be used for assistance and for emotional and financial program expenses.

Budgets are being planned so that the assistance fund and the retiree chaplains program will be fully funded by assessments, contributions, and earnings from the various endowment funds.

**Well-being**

To address the emotional well-being of pastors, we contracted with Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services to provide the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our pastors (ordained, commissioned, and retired) and their direct family members will have access to a nationwide network of clinicians where they can seek confidential, short-term counseling for mental health, marital, substance abuse, financial, and work-related issues. Eligible clergy and their households will have access to a 24-hour phone line to explore their concerns with M.S.W. or Ph.D. counselors. If needed, clergy will be entitled to up to three face-to-face consultations per problem. In addition, clergy will have access to assessments, articles, videos, templates for legal forms, and training via an online web tool. Services began March 1, 2018. Training, webinars, and promotional materials are being developed.

A participant survey was conducted in the summer of 2017. About half of those who responded indicated they would be interested in a multidimensional well-being program. The areas where participants are seeking the most support are financial, physical, and emotional well-being. For more information on the survey, visit images.rca.org/docs/bobs/RCASurvey.pdf.

Priorities for staff will be to increase the resources for financial well-being so participants will have access to educational opportunities and tools for budgeting, managing debt, saving responsibly, and turning savings into retirement income.

Members enrolled in the benefit programs through the RBA have access and are encouraged to participate in the physical well-being opportunities offered through the RBA.

**Communication and Education**

The Board of Benefits Services hosted one-on-one meetings with a Fidelity planning and guidance consultant for participants who attended General Synod 2017 and for those located in New Brunswick, New Jersey; Orange City, Iowa; and Grand Rapids, Michigan. Participants were able to register for a 45-minute face-to-face consultation to review their investment choices and to manage their retirement savings goals. A Fidelity planning and guidance consultant will be on site again at General Synod 2018 in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

BOBS’s retirement program plan administrator, Thos Shipley, and Claude Bussieres had a successful meeting with the staff of Reformed Church Home on February 22, presenting and talking about the RCA retirement program.

Participants were able to take part in a number of webcasts in 2017. The webcasts and campaigns included topics like America Saves Week, PAS-W discount, Social Security
planning, managing debt, Medicare, and beneficiary designations. A number of age-specific electronic mailings and quarterly check-ins were provided to participants. Topics varied depending on the age of the participant.

A job description is being created to hire a new part-time staff member who will specialize in education and communication. The education and communications coordinator will create Board of Benefits Services–branded retirement readiness resources for our participants, coordinate the quarterly newsletter, keep the benefits website up to date, and coordinate other projects internally and with our record keeper.

The newsletter continues to be created and distributed to participants either through print or digitally. The newsletter is housed on the benefits page of the RCA website (www.rca.org/benefits).

The benefits page of the RCA website is an evolving resource for ministers, treasurers, consistory, and stated clerks. Information available includes minimum standards for medical insurance, newsletters, housing allowance letters, a calculator for imputed taxes, life and long-term disability insurance highlights, beneficiary and address change forms, retirement plan documents, investment performance updates, and links to Fidelity and RBA. Watch for enhancements in 2018!

Compliance-related documents (e.g., adoption agreements, retirement plan investment changes, etc.) are reviewed either by the RCA’s general counsel or Board of Benefits Services’ external attorneys at Conner and Winters prior to distribution to employers, supervising entities, and participants.

Participants are encouraged to contact retirement@rca.org with any questions.

*Finance and Annual Audit*

Please see the report of the Office of Finance on pages 53–66.

*Board and Staff Transitions*

The Board of Benefits Services expresses its gratitude and appreciation to Norma Coleman-James, Karen Feeney, and Pam Foster, who are completing their board terms at the end of June 2018. The board is also grateful for the faithful service of Stephen Hanson, Debra Jameson, John Verhoog, Marlin Vis, and Arvin Ten Brink, who have completed their employment as retiree chaplains since General Synod 2017.
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)
Resources

- Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan, drcwm.org/mediation/restorative-justice-mediation
- Office of Social Justice, justice.crcna.org
- West Michigan Restorative Justice Coalition, restorativejusticewmi.org
- Restorative Justice, peacetheology.net/restorative-justice
- “Restorative Justice vs. Retributive Justice,” www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/778

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 (PC[USA], 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
- CRCNA Office of Social Justice immigration resources, justice.crcna.org/immigration
- Interfaith Immigration Coalition, www.interfaithimmigration.org
- Detention Watch Network, www.detentionwatchnetwork.org
- International Detention Coalition, www.idcoalition.org
- Migration Policy Institute, www.migrationpolicy.org
- American Immigration Council, www.immigrationpolicy.org
- Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., wwwcliniclegal.org
- Human Rights First, 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>Number</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>
Suicides by gun  8,514
Death by accident, ages 0-11  13
Death by accident, ages 12-17  16

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 suppressive 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
Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Continuing Education for Church Educators

The Commission on Christian Discipleship is tasked with advocating for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry. While we as a commission leaned into this work, we asked if there was any such standard that provided for continuing education for those who carry out the teaching ministry of the church across the denomination and then surveyed each of the eight regional synods and 46 classes. From our survey, we found that only one of our regional synods has such standards in place. The Regional Synod of the Great Lakes and the classes within its boundaries have a policy for the compensation for church staff, which was created in response to a recommendation approved at the 2002 meeting of General Synod (MGS 2002, R-45, p. 211). That recommendation requested that regional synods “develop compensation guidelines for all types of church employees, e.g., educators, musicians, secretaries, youth workers, administrators, parish nurses, and custodians.” It is the norm across classes and regional synods to have in place compensation guidelines that allow for continuing education for ministers of Word and sacrament serving in local congregations, so in order to more fully support the teaching ministry of the church, the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education makes the following recommendation:

DE 18-1
To request regional synods, as part of their general superintendence of classes, to develop compensation guidelines that include continuing education allowance of time and money for non-ordained church employees who serve in the teaching ministry of the church, e.g., youth workers and Christian educators. (ADOPTED)

As a part of the Reformed theological tradition, our church places great value on learning and having educated leaders. Not having an expectation that those who serve to educate our members of all ages will receive education for their particular ministry fails to reflect this value. Allowing for continuing education for those who lead in these ministries helps to model that life-long learning in the Christian faith is a part of ongoing discipleship in the church.

In addition, to aid the commission in this work of advocacy, we make the following recommendation:

DE 18-2
To direct the General Synod Council to add a question to the annual consistorial report form asking how those who serve within the spiritual formation or teaching arena of the congregation have received ongoing or continuing education that year. The responses gathered shall be shared with the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education. (ADOPTED)

Such information will aid the commission in its work of advocacy for the ongoing preparation of those in the teaching ministry of the church by giving awareness to the involvement of our church educators in ongoing education and preparation. This information will also help the commission to connect educators to opportunities of ongoing
preparation. It will also help the commission to better understand where the commission might provide further support in ongoing preparation for those who serve the teaching ministry of the church.

Directory of Christian Educators

The commission is also tasked with the work of overseeing the RCA’s progress in the ministry of discipleship. As the commission has taken on this work, we have realized the importance of the connections and the relationships that we have with others who serve in the teaching ministry of the church. Much of this type of work is completed relationally by having conversations and meeting with those who serve the teaching ministry of the church. In our conversations about how to complete this work, we have discovered that a valuable tool for us would be to have a directory of those serving the educational ministries of the church. Such data is already collected in part through the annual consistorial reports, as contact information for a youth ministry contact for each congregation is gathered. The commission would benefit from having such a directory so that members of the commission could work on developing relationships with church educators throughout the RCA. Therefore, we make the following recommendation:

DE 18-3
To direct the General Synod Council to add a question to the annual Consistorial Report Form that will collect information for those who serve in the spiritual formation, discipleship, and/or teaching ministries of the congregation, in the same manner as information regarding youth ministry leaders is collected (current children’s ministry coordinator/director, adult ministry coordinator/director, etc.); and further,

To make the data available to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for its work of advocating for and monitoring discipleship ministry throughout the Reformed Church in America.

A motion was made and supported to refer DE 18-3 back to the commission.

VOTED: To refer DE 18-3 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for further work.

RCA and CERCA

In June 2005, the General Synod, meeting at Union College in Schenectady, New York, recognized the faithful service to the church provided by the Children and Worship program (celebrating its 20th anniversary) and CERCA (Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America—celebrating its 25th anniversary). In conveying the Synod’s gratitude for CERCA’s 25 years of faithful service to Christ and his church, the general secretary was to “communicate the synod’s encouragement for their continuing service in the years that lie ahead” (MGS 2005, R-38, pp. 133–134).

This past February, more than 30 CERCA members gathered at the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators’ (APCE) annual event in Louisville, Kentucky. The RCA and CERCA have maintained an affiliate relationship with APCE since 1983. At this year’s annual event, four RCA members provided presentations. Terry De Young and Paul Smith offered workshops and Carol Jones and Ellen Vellenga gave the mini-plenary,
“Sharing God’s Hospitality with Children.” The late George Brown, Jr. was remembered as the 2012 APCE Educator of the Year during the In Memoriam report. Eight RCA first-timers (five from Mescalero Reformed Church) received assistance from the Supporting and Equipping Educators’ Development (SEED) fund. During CERCA’s annual meeting at the event, Jill Ver Steeg, the RCA’s director of transformational engagement, member of APCE’s Coordinating Council, and ex-officio member of CERCA’s leadership team, provided an update on RCA discipleship ministries. CERCA members also enjoyed an evening of fellowship at The Old Spaghetti Factory during the free evening. All commission members except one were able to attend these events and meet with local church educators.

As a result, the commission makes the following recommendations to support the ongoing work of CERCA:

**DE 18-4**
To direct the General Synod Council to create a $5,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of $500 per year in order to provide for professional and personal growth of RCA educators and youth workers (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, expenses in conjunction with CERCA and APCE meetings, etc.).

A motion was made and supported to refer DE 18-4 back to the commission.

**VOTED:** To refer DE 18-4 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for further work.

**DE 18-5**
To instruct the General Synod Council to provide webpages for CERCA on the RCA website for the purpose of promoting opportunities for improvement of discipleship skills, supporting personal enrichment, advocating for church education, and recognizing the achievements and innovative contributions of church educators. (ADOPTED)

**Historical Publication**

As a result of our studies last year, the CCDE recognizes the importance of telling the stories of God at work in the people of God as an essential tool and effective strategy for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA. Thus, the CCDE is endeavoring to tell one such story as lived in the life of Frances Beardslee. The commission’s work on this has led to collaboration with the Commission on Theology, the Commission for Women, and the Commission on History on a forthcoming historical publication with the Historical Series. It is the hope of the CCDE that this story will be the first in a collection of children’s books or an anthology of stories aimed at children yet teaching the whole church and celebrating the work of God through the lives of faithful disciples.

Respectfully submitted,

Lindsey DeKruif, moderator
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 [BCO], Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Sec. 5; 2017 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 adoption 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 that reach all levels of mission in the RCA. The commission’s responsibilities are defined by the BCO 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 (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b; 2017 edition, p. 110).

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.

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 is 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 their gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they witness to the grace and gospel of Jesus Christ alongside believers around the corner and around the world. Periodically throughout 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 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 to “working with all the partners that God provides.” The commission is dedicated to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment to partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can be similarly transforming around the globe 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. The first portion of the commission’s report 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 also of the RCA itself. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in this church’s history, as the church continues to struggle with its response to Jesus’s prayer “that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

**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 Saviour 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.”

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 traditions, including most of the world’s Orthodox churches and 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. However, some major parts of world Christianity, including churches from evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is also not a member of the WCC, though it does participate in various theological dialogues and cooperate in some other ways.

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, secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies.

The work of the WCC is not simply programmatic or related to formal initiatives. At times, its work is to provide a Christian witness in ways that perhaps no other group in the world can do. “Together toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” is one example. This comprehensive study seeks to both 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 it could be an excellent study resource for congregations.

Olav Fykse Tveit, an ordained pastor in the Church of Norway, is the general secretary of the WCC. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the WCC. For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, see www.oikoumene.org.
COMMISSIONS

World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) 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 WARC 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 that is, in its words, “called to communion, committed to justice, 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-WARC in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates for social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at wcrc.ch/accra.

The 26th General Council of the WCRC took place in June 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, with the theme “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” The council dealt with issues of justice, church unity, and world renewal. More than a thousand delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests gathered in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document initially forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation that has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. The General Council also celebrated the signing of the “Wittenberg Witness,” a document crafted between the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation that expresses a commitment to Christian unity as Reformed and Lutheran Christians live and work together to further a common Christian witness to a broken and troubled world.

The RCA’s Lisa Vander Wal was chair of the General Council Planning Committee. During the General Council, she was elected to serve as vice president of the WCRC. The commission wishes to publicly commend her for the important leadership she is providing to the worldwide church through her multifaceted work with the WCRC. The commission also thanks Monica Schaap Pierce, Stacey Duensing, and Carlos Corro for their participation in the General Council in Leipzig as RCA delegates.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, see http://wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence that is for the first time drawing world leaders from evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African Instituted churches into a new place of relational—rather than structural—fellowship. Formed quietly in the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, the GCF is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity 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. 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. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson has supported its development and continues to serve on its steering committee. Granberg-Michaelson also served as co-chair of the search committee for a new executive secretary.

In February 2018, the GCF announced that Casely Essamuah was selected as its next secretary. Originally ordained in the Methodist Church in Ghana, Essamuah has worked for the last 13 years as the global missions and local outreach pastor of Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Maryland. Essamuah describes himself as “evangelical and ecumenical.” Originally from Africa and now ministering in North America, he views himself as a “bridge-builder” between the churches in the Global North and Global South. Essamuah will take up the position in July 2018, following the retirement of Larry Miller, who has led the GCF for the last six years. Essamuah was presented as secretary-elect to the third Global Gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Bogota, Colombia, on April 24–27, 2018. Attending the Global Gathering as representatives of the RCA were Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Stacey Duensing, and Lee DeYoung.

For more information about the third Global Gathering, visit www.globalchristianforum.org/bogota.html.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (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.

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 newest multi-year initiative of the NCC focuses on ending racism. The initiative was launched with a rally in Washington, DC, on April 3–5; nine members of the RCA attended. The NCC continues to respond to other urgent issues that Christians face, most recently mass incarceration and interreligious relations with a focus on peace. The RCA has placed members on the NCC’s Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations; Justice and Advocacy; and Christian Education, Faith Formation, and Leadership. The commission thanks Norma Coleman-James, Jeffrey Hubers, and Monica Schaap Pierce for their ongoing service on these Convening Tables.

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 six national organizations: the American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, 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
COMMISSIONS

its member churches “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.”

In 2017, Christian Churches Together held a special gathering in Garden Grove, California,
to discern the mission and future of CCT. With the theme “Beloved Community,”
speakers and participants engaged in dialogue over how to have difficult conversations in
community, racial reconciliation, and what it means to be a church for the poor. The RCA
delegation consisted of Earl James, Don Poest, and Monica Schaap Pierce. Schaap Pierce
also serves on the Steering Committee of CCT.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates laud the annual gatherings
as opportunities 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 Malave 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, Daniel Meeter serves as a member of
the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Paul Janssen serves
on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s ecumenical committee, 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 respective 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.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

The eighth round of Roman Catholic–Reformed dialogue began in 2013 and concluded in
2017. Included in the dialogue were 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 was represented by Allan Janssen, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, and Monica Schaap Pierce.

The dialogue focused on ecclesiology—particularly the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, unity, and diversity in the life of the church. The dialogue also examined ecclesial ministry and oversight and uncovered a unifying affirmation that ecclesial ministry and oversight are undertaken personally and collegially in service to the church, not just for the church’s own sake, but for the sake of the world God so loves.

The report of the dialogue, which is titled “The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World,” concludes with three important acknowledgements. First, the dialogue partners acknowledge that

[A]ll of our traditions see ministry as service to God through Christ, in the church and in the world, rooted in our common baptismal vocation. We further understand that ministry is exercised in both personal and collegial ways, and is undertaken in the context of the priesthood of all believers, who together share in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Although we ordain to different offices and have different requirements for ordination, none of that negates our acknowledgment of this fundamental reality.

Second, we acknowledge that God calls and appoints people to exercise the ministry of oversight (episkopé) in the church, and that this is primarily a service of love for the sake of the unity of the church, undertaken in obedience to Jesus Christ, for the sake of the gospel. We acknowledge that this oversight has significant pastoral as well as administrative functions. We acknowledge that this ministry of oversight exists in all of our communions. The forms differ, but the essential functions are very similar. We have learned that, among Reformed communions, the functions that are often (in the Roman Catholic Church) lodged in the person of a bishop are distributed among other individuals and collective groups, but the functions remain. We have learned that, in the Catholic Church, bishops function in a collegial and consultative manner, both with other bishops and with the priests and laity under the bishop’s oversight. We hold this to be one of the most helpful insights and significant fruits of this dialogue.

Third, we acknowledge that all of the baptized are baptized into the one body of Christ. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, those “who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.” This leads to an implicit acknowledgment of one another as communions of believers. We acknowledge that the body of Christ is present in all of our communions. While there are still challenges to full recognition and to full, visible communion, we can and must recognize in one another the work of God, the presence of Jesus Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit, our mutual service to a broken world, and our fidelity to the gospel that we all profess. It is our prayer that these acknowledgments become a foundation for eventual mutual recognition.

Following recommendations made in the report, the commission urges churches to reflect on the gifts that both the Reformed and Catholic churches have received from one another through the dialogue’s exploration of the mission of the church and the church’s ministry. Among these,
• That all of our churches acknowledge that many of the church-dividing issues from the Reformation era, such as those related to ministry and especially the office of the bishop, no longer pertain to the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church (see “The One Body of Christ,” chapter three, for further details).
• That all of our churches acknowledge and affirm the collegial and conciliar nature of oversight in the Catholic Church.
• That all celebrate our shared understanding that the purpose of ministry is service to both the church and world.
• That all acknowledge that, although it is expressed differently, we share the conviction that the act of ordaining marks a distinctive change in the one ordained vis-à-vis the community and that this is deeper than a change of function.
• That ministers from other churches be invited to be present as witnesses at ordinations and installations, just as the previous round of dialogue has encouraged for the sacrament of baptism.
• That Reformed ecclesiastical bodies and Roman Catholic bishops in local communities find ways to meet together, to learn from one another, to identify convergences in their practice of serving their communions, and to collaborate in service to the world.

The commission commends “The One Body of Christ” to churches for study. The text can be found on the RCA ecumenical webpage, www.rca.org/partners. The ninth round of dialogue will commence in the fall of 2018 with a focus on the relationship between justification and justice. The prospectus for the ninth round can also be found at www.rca.org/partners.

Christian Unity at Home and Abroad

The commission continues to focus time at each meeting exploring the explosive growth of Christianity in the Global South—the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia, where the Christian church is growing at a remarkable pace. As a commission, we believe that the witness of Christianity in the Global South has much to teach us in North America and in the RCA, and we are committed to discussing this reality and its possible impact on and lessons for the RCA. Just as the RCA was at the forefront of the ecumenical movements of the twentieth century, the RCA also needs to be deeply involved in these new realities for the twenty-first century.

The commission remains committed to the biblical mandate of unity in Christ 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, nor 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 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 long-standing, 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 is concerned about fissures of disunity within and among local churches and in the RCA as a whole. Diversity of thought is realistic and healthy. Diversity is realistic because the church is comprised of a multiplicity of people with sundry 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’s 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).

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 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 the oneness we have in Christ. Christian unity, while universal in God’s promise, must begin at home.

Celebrating, Lamenting, and Professing Christian Unity

In light of the RCA’s rich history of ecumenical involvement at home and abroad, there is much to celebrate in terms of accomplishments toward making whole what has been fractured. There is also much to lament when we consider the ways in which the unity of Christ’s church has been broken and disunity continues to foment. Therefore, we celebrate, lament, and profess our commitment to Christian unity.
We celebrate ...

... the recent strides toward unity with Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist Christians through the association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) in July 2017.

- With the WCRC’s association with the JDDJ and accompanying Statement of Association, Reformed Christians worldwide join efforts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant understandings of a doctrine that has divided the church for the past 500 years.
- With the association with the JDDJ, Reformed Christians not only affirm but enrich the existing consensus by adding our distinctive emphases to the doctrine of justification, particularly the Reformed emphases on the connection between justification and union with Christ and the link between justification and justice. (For the text of the Statement of Association and further information about the background and decision-making process, see http://wcrc.ch/jddj.)


- As the document states, “Together, we celebrate that we are one in Christ, sharing a common Reformation heritage and a common faith. We are united in confessing the gospel of Jesus Christ. We rejoice that there is no longer any need for our separation; our differences are not church dividing. We give thanks for the examples of those Lutheran and Reformed churches that have already declared church communion and now bear common witness together by sharing in worship, witness, and work for the world.” We celebrate this witness as a foundation for greater collaboration and partnership in ministry and mission between Lutheran and Reformed Christians. (The text of the Wittenberg Witness can be found at: http://wcrc.ch/news/lwf-and-wcrc-sign-the-wittenberg-witness-as-wcrc-joins-jddj.)

... the fruits of the U.S. Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue, which include a mutual acknowledgement that “all of our traditions see ministry as service to God through Christ, in the church and in the world, rooted in our common baptismal vocation. We further understand that ministry is exercised in both personal and collegial ways, and is undertaken in the context of the priesthood of all believers, who together share in the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.” This current state of mutual acknowledgement might serve as the basis to determine how acknowledgement of each other’s ministries might lead to the mutual recognition of each other as “church” and, further, might serve as a step on the path to full, visible communion.

We lament ...

... that we live in a fragmented world. The church’s disputes and divisions have contributed to some of these problems. We are unable to sit down at the same Lord’s Table and set an example to the world of what it looks like to be united in Christ. A fragmented Christian witness exacerbates the fragmentation of the world. As the Commission on Christian Unity, we are committed to seeking unity in all forms.

- As part of our responsibility for caring for Christian unity, it is incumbent upon us to name the times and circumstances in which we have not lived together in unity as members of Christ’s church.
• 1 Chronicles 12:32 says, “Of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do, two hundred chiefs, and all their kindred under their command.” We lament the occasions when we have known what we ought to do as followers of Christ who are called to seek unity, yet have not done it. This, we believe, grieves the heart of God.

• The “Wittenberg Witness” states, “Together, we acknowledge, confess and lament that divisions still obscure our unity and hamper our witness. We regret that through our history we have too often formed divisive habits and structures, failing to discern the body of Christ. Injustice and conflict scar and scandalize our one body.”

We profess ...  


We rejoice in the gift of unity: already realized in Jesus Christ.

We accept the task of unity: being made visible in the church.

We believe the promise of unity: to be fulfilled in the new creation.

THEREFORE,

We covenant to demonstrate our unity in Christ by maintaining the bonds of peace, speaking the truth in love, and bearing one another’s burdens.

We pledge to seek the unity of the church through communing with other Christians in worship and work, cooperating with other Christians in councils of churches, and uniting with other Christians in faith and order.

We promise to serve the unity of the world by proclaiming the gospel of peace and reconciliation, sharing the earth’s goods with the poor and hungry, and seeking justice among the nations.

Until the unity which God now sees may be clearly visible to all, so that the world may know that Christ was sent to demonstrate the perfect and everlasting love of God.

Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to formally acknowledge the involvement of Dena Robins, who is leaving the commission. Michael Hardeman will assume the role of moderator of the commission for the 2018–2019 work year.

Finally, the commission expresses its profound appreciation for the inspired and capable work of our ecumenical associate, Monica Schaap Pierce.
Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship met three times over the past year. The group convened in person in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 12–14, 2017, in conjunction with the joint meetings of all the General Synod commissions and General Synod Council (GSC), and electronically on August 15, 2017, and February 7, 2018.

Worship Life of the RCA

Over the past few years the commission has been asking, what is worshipful for churches in the RCA? How does your congregation or your community worship together? How can we as a commission best resource the church? Two years ago, the General Synod committed $5,000 to help fund a survey on worship practices within the RCA to aid the commission in discovering answers to these questions and foster worship-based conversations across the RCA.

Joint CRC/RCA Worship Survey

The work of putting together and disseminating this survey is a joint effort between the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the RCA, in partnership with the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship (and the affiliated Center for Social Research). The answers from the survey will guide the future work of the commission and provide valuable direction for potential workshops and learning communities.

This survey has two complementary purposes. The first is to collect specific data about how congregations worship—what sorts of songs are sung, how long the sermons are, and so forth. This commission intends to use this information to guide the creation of resources that will be most helpful to pastors, worship leaders, and congregations in worship planning.

The second purpose is to stimulate reflection and conversation among those who take the survey. This commission encourages churches to take this survey in community—with a worship committee, a praise team, the board of elders, or some other collection of people typically responsible for overseeing worship at your church. The process of working through the survey, in other words, is part of its purpose.

The members of the Commission on Christian Worship from 2016 to the present day have worked on formulating the questions for the survey by utilizing information from previous worship surveys done in 1987 and 1994. All the questions and the survey’s organization were drafted and sent to representative groups in both the RCA and CRCNA. Feedback from those “test runs” was gathered and incorporated in late 2017. The survey will go through one more round of “testing” before it is sent to the Center for Social Research to help us discern the best way to actually deploy the survey.

Hopefully, this survey will bless those who participate and better equip all who are called to lead the worship of God’s people to do so with integrity and grace. In the meantime, the commission commends to you the use of the many worship resources available through the RCA website at www.rca.org/worship.

In Appreciation

The commission gives thanks for members Drew Poppleton, whose term on the commission concludes this year, and Katherine Lee Baker. The commission is grateful to Ron Rienstra
for his work as a consultant and his partnership with John Witvliet, Joyce Borger, and Noel Snyder on the worship survey.

Respectfully submitted,
Sarah Palsma, moderator
Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) met in person October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and again January 24–26, 2018, in New York, New York. Communication also occurred through numerous emails and phone calls. The CCO consulted with other commissions of the General Synod on the work assigned to it by the General Synod.

Referrals from 2017 General Synod

Six referrals from last year’s General Synod were received: R 17-20, R 17-23, R 17-26, R 17-30, R 17-31, and R 17-47. All are addressed in this report.

Task Force regarding Commitment to the Formula of Agreement

A member of the CCO (Philip De Koster) and an alternate (Joshua Scheid) were designated to represent the commission on the task force created in response to R 17-24 “to review the RCA’s commitment to the Formula of Agreement, including its role in ecumenism and exchange of ministers” (MGS 2017, R 17-24, p. 149).

Delegates Authorized to Vote on Final Declarative Resolution regarding Constitutional Amendments

The 2017 General Synod voted:

To declare that only classes that have seated delegates at a General Synod which recommends a proposed change to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America to the classes for approval may vote on that proposed change, and furthermore, to instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose language for the Book of Church Order to clarify this matter, for recommendation to the General Synod of 2018 (MGS 2017, R 17-30, p. 162).

The commission composed text for the appropriate section that fulfills the directive from the 2017 General Synod’s instruction on this topic. The proposed text amends the section of the BCO captioned “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures” (2017 edition, p. 73).

The commission submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-1
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order, “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures,” for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

Sec 2.
  a. Amendments to the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Formularies, and the Liturgy and the Directory for Worship shall be made only upon adoption by the General Synod at a stated meeting, with recommendation to the classes for approval.
b. At least two-thirds of the classes shall approve a proposed amendment in order to secure its adoption. Only classes whose delegates were eligible to be seated at the General Synod at which the amendment was adopted are eligible to vote on the recommendation for approval.

c. If an amendment is approved by the classes, the General Synod, at its discretion, may pass a final declarative resolution on the amendment. When the declarative action has taken place, the amendment shall become effective. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-1.

Regional Synod Formation, Combination, and Disbanding of Classes, and Transfer of Churches from One Classis to Another

The 2017 General Synod voted:

To send Overture 44 to the Commission on Church Order for consultation with the Regional Synod of the Far West (MGS 2017, R 17-31, p. 163).

Overture 44 read as follows:

The Regional Synod of the Far West overtures the 2017 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to amend the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 to read as follows: “The regional synod shall form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds. Prior to these actions, the regional synod will provide a 60-day notification of its intended action with all churches and classes being effected” (MGS 2017, p. 162).

Following its October 2017 meeting, the commission sent correspondence to the president and synod executive of the Regional Synod of the Far West (Glenn Spyksma and Bruce Bugbee, respectively) requesting additional background information regarding the overture it submitted to the 2017 General Synod. A response was received from the stated clerk of the Synod of the Far West.

The commission at its January meeting drafted an amendment that the commission believes addresses the concern raised by the Synod of the Far West yet also protects the parties that could be affected by the changes inherent in the Book of Church Order rubric. The commission gave attention to the potential breadth of the phrase “all parties involved.” The amended rubric identifies that required consultations to be completed by the regional synod happen between the classis and consistories affected, not everyone who may want to be considered a “party” affected by the proposed change.

To provide protection for classes and consistories, the commission’s recommendation calls for consultations about proposed changes to occur at a regular session of the consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 20]) or a stated or special session of the classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 31]). The commission recognized that a special session of a classis only requires three
ministers and three elders. The special session quorum is a significant minority of the composition of the classis, which could result in the lack of information to all members and delegates and a lack of input from all members and delegates about this potential consequential change, hence the greater quorum requirement if the matter is discussed at a special session. The commission could not justify such a significant, consequential action as transferring a church between classes, changing the composition of a classis or classes, or disbanding a classis needing to happen in an “ad hoc” fashion. The commission recognizes that a process that happens in a slower, deliberate fashion with adequate time to discuss and reflect on the implications of a proposed change along with a process that fits into the schedule of the assembly that would be most affected by the change better protects those assemblies (consistory and/or classis). Furthermore, the commission recognizes that an “ad hoc” process achieved quickly could more readily lend itself to a type of gerrymandering or other manipulations of the assemblies within a regional synod.

Lastly, the commission is proposing separating the current Section 3 into two sections (Section 3 and Section 4) since each sentence in the current section configuration addresses a different action for the regional synod and causes confusion when both actions are stated within one section.

The commission presents the following recommendation:

CO 18-2
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 61) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, form, combine, or disband classes. The regional synod, after reasonable and timely consultation with all parties involved, may also transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds.

Sec. 3. The regional synod shall, after consultation with the classes and consistories involved, form, combine, or disband classes. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a regular session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of the classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).

Sec. 4. The regional synod, after consultation with the classes and the consistory involved, may transfer a church from one classis to another classis within its bounds. All consultations required in this section shall occur at a regular session of each consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4, Section 2) or a stated or special session of each classis where a quorum is present that meets the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of the classis (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 4, Section 1).

[Remaining section renumbered.]
(ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-2.
Consistory Responsibility of Costs Borne by Minister when Source of Minister’s Insurance is Spouse’s Employer-Sponsored Benefit Plan

The 2017 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Board of Benefits Services, to prepare such changes to BCO Formulary No. 5, paragraph 5 (2016 edition, pp. 132-133), that make clear a consistory’s responsibility for any additional costs borne by a minister and the minister’s family when that minister’s insurance comes through the spouse’s employer-sponsored plan, for report to the General Synod of 2018 (MGS 2017, R 17-26, p. 150).

The commission was instructed to consider the responsibilities of the consistory to the minister when the minister has elected health/medical insurance coverage through his or her spouse’s employer-sponsored group plan. Since many group plans have a portion of the premium that is to be paid by the employee, the question was raised if the consistory should compensate the minister for those out-of-pocket expenses, since the consistory is not paying insurance premiums because it is not directly providing such insurance.

Formulary No. 5 requires the consistory to provide health/medical insurance. However, in the situation cited in the previous paragraph, a consistory is not providing such insurance and so has no financial obligation. The CCO believes the spirit of the promises and obligations made to the minister by the consistory in the call document (Formulary No. 5) is rightly fulfilled when the minister is not expected to bear the financial burden of health/medical insurance premiums by whatever means health/medical insurance may be obtained.

The CCO therefore proposes language requiring a consistory to compensate the minister for the required employee contribution for a spouse’s employer-sponsored plan. This compensation is limited: up to the premium costs of the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) plan that meets the minimum standards as determined annually by the Board of Benefits Services. Under current tax law, this compensation would be taxable income to the minister, assuming alternate arrangements are not made.

To demonstrate how this language would work, here are some examples:

- The minister’s spouse’s employer-sponsored plan for a family requires an employee contribution of $600 a month in 2018. The premium cost of the RBA plan meeting the minimum standards in 2018 is $1,727 a month. The consistory would be responsible to compensate the minister $600 a month.
- The minister’s spouse’s employer-sponsored plan for a family requires an employee contribution of $1,900 a month. The consistory would then only be required to pay $1,727, the cost of the RBA plan. If the minister chose the employer plan, the balance of $173 would fall to the minister’s spouse unless the consistory opts to provide additional compensation.
- The minister’s spouse’s plan has no required employee contribution. The consistory would not be required to make any additional compensation to the minister.

In either the first or the third example, the consistory may choose to take the funds that it would have spent on medical insurance and use them as additional compensation to the minister or a contribution to an account such as a health savings account if one is available. However, there would be no requirement to do so if the amount that is compensated to the
minister meets the required threshold. The calculations would need to be adjusted each year. If the required contribution for the employer’s plan becomes more expensive than the RBA plan, the consistory and the minister would need to discuss what option will best serve them moving forward.

In addition to this important change to the medical/health insurance, the CCO modified the call form in two places in an editorial manner. First, the current asterisk and footnote is eliminated. The definition that has been in the footnote is now incorporated within the text itself. Second, a new rubric is added stating that the signatures of the consistory and the classis leaders need to be part of the call form documents. The Formulary states that signatures are recorded, but the Formulary doesn’t have a provision for signatures. The BCO states that the call form shall be approved by the classis or classis president and clerk, but again, the Formulary doesn’t currently have a provision for the fulfilment of this requirement (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 14] and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 7 [2017 edition, p. 54]). CCO had been asked by a clerk whether a place for the signature of the minister should also be included in the call form. CCO is sympathetic to the request and recognizes that a classis may want to have a tangible acceptance of the call. However, CCO is not including a place for a minister’s acceptance signature in the Formulary because the call form is an action of a consistory and a classis to offer employment. The acceptance of the call by the minister is a corresponding response to the offer, but sending forth the call is an action of the consistory and the classis.

The CCO submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-3
To adopt the following changes to Formulary No. 5 in the Book of Church Order (2017 edition, pp. 132–133) for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

…As long as you continue to be the minister of this church, we also promise to pay the stipulated contributions to the Reformed Church retirement plan and provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance for you and your immediate family* —which means those dependents eligible for family medical insurance according to the insurance plan documents of the Reformed Benefits Association. Such insurance coverages shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services.

If you and your immediate family elect medical coverage through your spouse’s employer-sponsored group plan, we promise will not be required to provide medical insurance to compensate you for any medical premium costs incurred by your immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated.

In addition we promise to provide a minimum of one week and a stipend equal to, not less than, the equivalent of 1/52 of the minimum cash salary established by the classis for a study program mutually agreed upon by you and us for your professional development, for each year in service with our congregation. By
mutual agreement this time and money may be accumulated to a maximum equivalent of four years of service.

We hereby bind ourselves and our successors for the performance of all the foregoing by the underwritten signatures of the consistory members to this instrument. May the Lord incline your heart to a cheerful acceptance of this call and send you to us in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of peace.

Done in consistory and subscribed with our names this ___ day of ____, 20__.

Attested by ________________________________

Supervisor of the call

[Signature lines for all consistory members and the required classis officers must be inserted—see BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 regarding signatures of consistory members and BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 7 regarding the requirement for classis approval of a call prior to the call being submitted to the minister.] (ADOPTED)

(Note that in making its revisions, the CCO removed the present footnote regarding “immediate family.”)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of CO 18-3.

Affiliation of Local Church with More than One Denomination

The CCO recommended to the 2017 General Synod certain amendments to the Book of Church Order that, if adopted, approved, and declared effective, would have had the effect of providing an orderly way for local churches to affiliate with other denominations (i.e., maintain membership status in at least two denominations). At that time, the CCO noted that examples of affiliated churches already in exist in the RCA and that the CCO was aware of other churches expressing interest in such a relationship. The commission did not offer an opinion on the merits of affiliation.

The amendments proposed by the CCO would have had no effect on the affiliating church’s relationship with the RCA, such as the requirements of Formulary 15, oversight of property, etc.

The 2017 General Synod voted to not adopt the proposed amendments (MGS 2017, R 17-46, p. 271). Notwithstanding this action by the 2017 General Synod, local churches in the RCA continue to affiliate (or contemplate affiliation) with other denominations. The greatest need for this new Article 9 is likely the formal organization of new churches that have been formed by the cooperative efforts of the RCA and the CRC. These congregations have only known an affiliated relationship, yet when these church starts move to formal organization, there currently isn’t a provision in our order for such a continued affiliated relationship. Apparently, such a new church would need to choose between denominations rather than continued unity. For this reason, the CCO addresses the topic again in this report.
Some delegates at the 2017 General Synod wondered about the meaning of “full communion” that was used in the version presented to them. There isn’t a clear written definition of this term, though it is used elsewhere in the BCO (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 14]). The CCO has now employed the phrase “an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers” to provide greater clarity. The General Synod has such written agreements.

Accordingly, the commission submits the following recommendation:

CO 18-4
To adopt the following changes to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are struck):

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 9. Affiliated Churches

Sec. 1. A consistory or governing body, with approval of its congregation and classis, may affiliate with another denomination with which the Reformed Church in America has an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers. A consistory or governing body that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 2. The governing body of a church from a denomination with which the Reformed Church in America has an agreement for the orderly exchange of ministers may affiliate with a classis of the Reformed Church in America upon approval of its congregation, the receiving classis, and the affiliating church’s current denomination/s.

a. Unless otherwise determined by the receiving classis, delegates from an affiliating church shall be corresponding delegates to the classis.

b. A minister of an affiliating church shall remain subject to the discipline of the minister’s denomination.

c. A church that affiliates with the Reformed Church in America remains subject to the governance of its current denomination, unless it is otherwise agreed.

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to refer CO 18-4 to the General Synod’s Commission on Church Order for refinement and clarity.

VOTED: To refer CO 18-4 to the General Synod’s Commission on Church Order for further refinement and clarity.
Classis Divestiture of Interest in Property of Local Church Granted Leave to Withdraw from the Denomination for the Purpose of Affiliating with Another Denomination

The 2017 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to propose constitutionally appropriate amendments to the Book of Church Order to accomplish the intent of Overtures 16 and 17 for report to the 2018 General Synod (MGS 2017, R 17-20, p. 139).

This commission was instructed to propose “constitutionally appropriate” amendments to the Book of Church Order (BCO) to accomplish the intent of Overtures 16 and 17.

The proposed text amendments to BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 (2016 edition, pp. 40-42) found in Overtures 16 and 17 were as follows:

f. If the classis shall then determine that it is in the best interest of Christ’s Kingdom that the church be allowed to withdraw from the denomination, and to retain all or part of its real and personal property free from any claim, fees, or penalties on the part of the denomination or any assembly, board or agency thereof; and it shall then so declare and proceed promptly to assist the consistory of the church in (1) dissolution of the relationship of the church to the denomination, and (2) transfer of its property to a church of another denomination (MGS 2017, p. 138).

The commission engaged in serious discussion regarding a constitutional way to accomplish this intent. However, it was unable to find one. Fundamentally, our Constitution teaches that we are a Church together, not a gathering of individual local churches. We understand the Church to be the body of Christ, not its individual components (see 1 Corinthians 12). Our Constitution embodies this scriptural understanding. Cleaving from the body without conditions finds no support in the Constitution, as departure is a consequential matter. It is appropriate that classes be able to impose conditions that attempt to repair the significant damage that may be caused by a church leaving.

Our Constitution is the structure that “constitutes” the church. It is not merely text on a page but is the framework and very life of the church. When looking at a “constitutional” way of acting, one must look not only to the BCO but to all of the following: “the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, this Preamble, and the Formularies” (BCO Preamble [2017 edition, p. 1]). Our order is presbyterial, meaning its foundation is based on the idea that authority is vested in assemblies. It is not a congregational form, which would provide autonomy to local congregations, with loose ties to other churches (see Allan J. Janssen, Constitutional Theology, p. 19 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000]). The Preamble provides that “[t]he local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern” (BCO Preamble [2017 edition, p. 4]).

Although our current society places much emphasis on individualism, the Reformed Church in America cannot and should not do so. “A Reformed understanding of church moves in quite the other direction. The church is not a product of human activity or belief.
God establishes and maintains the church” (Janssen, p. 2 [emphasis original]). Church is not built from the bottom up as an individualistic culture would teach. Rather, “[t]he Church is God’s work. And that needed to be expressed in the church order” (Janssen, p. 3). Throughout our history, the RCA has looked to Scripture and found a communal focus of decision-making (Janssen, p. 5). From the very beginning, the Reformed Church in America has been about the gathering of churches into assemblies (see Daniel J. Meeter, Meeting Each Other in Doctrine and Liturgy, pp. 34–35 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993]). The Explanatory Articles of 1792 proved that “[t]he reformed Dutch Church holds the middle station between two extremes. On the one hand, she denies all superiority of one Minister of Christ over another, and on the other, considers independent, unconnected congregations as unsafe and inconvenient” (Meeter, p. 124 [emphasis added]). Janssen furthers this understanding by writing, “At the same time [the classis] prevented the local church from assuming to itself all power. The classis reminded the local congregation that it lives in communion with other congregations” (Janssen, p. 103). Nothing in the Constitution grants local consistories the right of independence. Rather, they are “accountable to the greater church for [their] life and action” (Janssen, p. 106).

Other parts of the Constitution similarly underscore the need for a collective understanding. The Heidelberg Catechism recognizes the corporate nature of the church when discussing the Apostles’ Creed. Answer 54 reads:

I believe that the Son of God
through his Spirit and Word,
out of the entire human race,
from the beginning of the world to its end,
gathers, protects, and preserves for himself
a community chosen for eternal life
and united in true faith.
And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

Similarly, the Belhar Confession emphasizes unity. The second “We believe” says in part:

We believe that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16).

The key component, again, is a communal understanding of life as a Church. The Church is not a collection of individual churches, and is certainly not individual churches all on their own. Rather, it is a unified body—the body of Christ.

Chapter 1, Part II of the Book of Church Order contains numerous other examples of a communal church. For instance, a local church cannot birth itself (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 29]). Rather, the local church emerges from the life of the Church, as embodied in the classis (Janssen, p. 107). The classis has responsibilities for ministers and students (e.g., BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Sections 7–10 [2017 edition, p. 30]). Finally, Section 11 provides the broadest authority to the classis; it “shall exercise all ecclesiastical functions … which are not specifically delegated to other assemblies” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 11 [2017 edition, p. 30]). Janssen writes that this section of the BCO, which was added in 1968, maintains the local character of the church, but

protects against a congregational polity that would grant to the local expression of the church too great an authority. The governance of the church remains close
to that place where the Word is preached and the sacraments performed, but it does not finally devolve to either the congregation or even its consistory (p. 112).

When a local church is dissolved, the order provides that remaining assets vest in the classis. This, too, is consistent with the understanding that the Church is something broader than the local congregation. Far from being independent, “… the congregation is itself a member of the larger church” (Janssen, p. 141). As such, “[a] congregation cannot dispose of its life as it sees fit” because it is part of the church (Janssen, p. 142).

Coming to the issue of a local church transferring to a different denomination, the understanding is and must remain no different. A local church is not an individual possessor of assets, free to do with them as it wishes. Rather, it is part of the broader Church, which reasonably has expectations for that local church. Independence is an anathema to our order and to our understanding of Church. We are, as Christ compels, unified as a body to conduct his work in the world (see, for example, John 17). This unity compels all we are and all we have, including the physical possessions of a congregation. Any attempt to remove consequences from a local church for its departure finds no support in our Constitution. What might be classified as “fees and penalties” by some can be seen by others as a classis ensuring it is able to do ministry. The best interest of “Christ’s Kingdom” is not always what’s best for the local church.

The overtures presuppose that a local church leaving without consequences is in best interest of Christ’s kingdom. Rather, the leaving has serious consequences for the classis, so it is appropriate to allow for the imposition of conditions so as to not unbalance the scales. The Church is the Church together, not individual congregations; they are (nearly) inextricably bound together. Our Constitution provides no way to allow a local church to leave as if it were independent. To make such a change would be to change the Constitution and thereby to fundamentally change the Reformed Church in America.

The CCO is not presenting a recommendation since it is not possible to “propose constitutionally appropriate amendments.”

**Discipline of a Classis**

The 2017 General Synod acted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to investigate the feasibility of one or more constitutionally appropriate proposals for amending the *Book of Church Order* to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline initiated by another classis and/or classes, and to present recommendations to the 2018 General Synod (*MGS 2017*, R 17-23, p. 147).

*What Is Discipline?*

Before moving on to any determination of the feasibility of discipline, the Commission on Church Order first found it necessary to determine what is meant by discipline in the *Book of Church Order*.

Two perspectives were identified:

1. Some RCA members take the category “discipline” to consist of charges (leading to admonition, rebuke, suspension, deposition from office, excommunication), complaints, and appeals (i.e., all *BCO* Chapter 2 is “discipline”).
2. Some RCA members take the category “discipline” to consist of admonition, rebuke, suspension, deposition from office, and excommunication, and take the category “judicial procedures” to consist of charges, complaints, and appeals.

Only the second perspective is consistent with the BCO. The BCO physically separates discipline from complaints and appeals. Charges are the judicial procedure that can lead to discipline. Complaints cannot lead to discipline. The BCO says, “Discipline is the exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 77]). Unless an assembly decides to use admonition or rebuke pastorally, discipline requires presenting a charge against a person or consistory. A member of a local church may have a charge brought against him or her by the board of elders. A charge can be brought against an elder or deacon by the board of elders. A commissioned pastor or a minister of Word and sacrament may be disciplined by the classis in which the person has membership. A General Synod professor may be disciplined by the General Synod. If a charge is proven to the satisfaction of the judicatory, discipline is imposed. In the case of a member, the discipline could include admonition or rebuke, suspension from the privileges of membership, or excommunication. In the case of an elder, deacon, commissioned pastor, or minister of Word and sacrament, the discipline could also include suspension from office or commission, removal from commission, or deposition from office (See BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Articles 1-3 [2017 edition, pp. 77–80]). The only assembly against which a charge can be brought is a consistory (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]; Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 1 [2017 edition, pp. 81–82]; and Formulary No. 13 [2017 edition, p. 139]). A consistory is “under the care of the classis and [is] subject to its government and discipline” (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7 [2017 edition, pp. 32–35]; and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29]). Notably, different conditions are imposed for the discipline of a consistory, underscoring the unusual nature of disciplining an assembly.

A classis has the authority, after trial, to suspend a consistory accused of unfaithfulness to duty, or of disobedience to the classis, or of violation of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America or the laws and regulations of the church. …The classis shall fulfill the responsibilities of the consistory …so suspended until a new consistory has been legally constituted (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 6 [2017 edition, p. 80]). This provision provides the only model for discipline of an assembly, and therefore is useful to consider the implications of discipline of a classis, the next higher assembly.

The instruction from the General Synod directs the CCO to explore the constitutionality of allowing for the discipline of a classis. The commission understands this instruction to mean exploring the possibility of amending the BCO by adding a new section called, “Discipline of a Classis” to the list in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, and addressing the ramifications of that addition throughout the rest of the BCO.

Historical and Theological Understandings of Discipline

In our Reformed polity, only at the local level is the Church most fully the Church, because the sacraments are administered and the Word is preached at the local church. Particularly, the uniqueness of baptism is foundational to the Church and Christian formation. But, this state of being Church must be expressed in fellowship and communion with other
churches. This is what the classis does. The classis, and the classis alone, fulfills the episcopal function and all that it entails (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7 [2017 edition, p. 32]). The classis is the assembly given authority for all matters on which the BCO is silent, underscoring the tension Reform polity provides between local autonomy and concentrated authority in a bishop (Janssen, pp. 19–20). For example, a classis administers a constitutional inquiry annually (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 32]). The consistory must respond with an update on the congregation’s spiritual fitness. A classis can supersede a consistory (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9 [2017 edition, p. 37]). The classis also has sole responsibility for ordaining and demitting ministers of Word and sacrament (see BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 13 [2017 edition, p. 80] and BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15 [2017 edition, p. 52]). The classis is responsible for enforcing “the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America” (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29]).

These examples demonstrate some of the ways a consistory is accountable to its classis for its ministry. Classes are not accountable to synods (regional or general) in the same way that consistories are accountable to classes. For instance, synods do not administer a constitutional inquiry. Synods cannot supersede a classis. Synods have no oversight of ministers of Word and sacrament. Perhaps most notably, the synod is not charged with enforcing “the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America” (compare BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 29] with BCO Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 61]). Synods exist for the good order of the church, but are not the heart of the church, which must remain more closely tied to where “the Word is preached and the sacraments performed” (Janssen, p. 112). The Preamble states, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser” (2017 edition, p. 3).

It is instructive to understand the historical background out of which our church order emerged. The RCA has inherited the church order tradition and ethos of the Hervormde Kerk, which undergird the current Constitution. After the Synod of Dort, each province of the low countries had its own provincial synod, which was the forbearer of the RCA’s regional synod. The churches in the provincial synods had their own cultures, their own liturgies, their own practices, and their own variations on the church order.

The Hervormde Kerk was made up of classes and provincial synods containing as wide a variety of church life, practice, and order as the variety of the towns, cities, and provinces themselves. It was a church whose ethos and identity strongly centered in the ethos and identity of the classes, and the church order reflected and supported that diversity. What they shared in common was a confession of faith, like what the RCA calls its Standards of Unity. When the Dutch church came to North America, the churches in the colonies were first members of the Classis of Amsterdam. Then in the eighteenth century, through nasty conflict, the Dutch church in North America formed the provincial (“particular”) synod of New York.

Church conflict in the Dutch Reformed tradition has, from the beginning, been about the degree to which the whole church needs to practice and believe the same things and to what degree the integrity of local and regional autonomy should be retained. So it is with us today. The CCO observes that this historic division is the issue driving the current discussion on the matter of classis-versus-classis discipline.

It is important to see that the historical DNA and heritage of the RCA has had from the beginning a basic, assumed bias toward local integrity over and against universal
conformity. Nearly all the episcopal authority needed to carry on as the church resides in the classis. The synods are gatherings of the classes. It is also important to see that the Dutch Reformed form of church conflict is, so to speak, written into the fabric of the church itself, both in its ethos and in its church order. The recurring form of church conflict in the history of the RCA’s church order is one that always finds its crisis point as a conflict over the integrity of the local and regional church versus the integrity of the whole church.

Never has this tradition, however, compromised the episcopal integrity of the classis. Those churches that did change the episcopal integrity of the classis split off to form their own denominations (e.g., the Christian Reformed Church in North America over the decision to allow local consistorial discretion regarding lodge membership).

R 17-23 instructed the CCO to consider whether there are constitutionally appropriate ways to discipline a classis and, furthermore, whether another classis could file a charge. However, neither the regional synod nor the General Synod has an episcopal role over the classis in the same way a classis has an episcopal role over a consistory/local congregation. For either synod to take on this responsibility infringes on the constitutional responsibilities, authority, and autonomy of the classis. It would be awkward at best and certainly alters the concept of Reformed polity. From a historical and theological perspective, this is why CCO states that the proposal R 17-23 seeks would end this church and begin another church.

Procedural Questions and Concerns

Although the commission could have stopped its inquiry given the weighty historical and theological issues with R 17-23, it thought best to also address the significant procedural problems. Thus, the portion of this paper addressing the feasibility of allowing a classis to initiate discipline against another classis addresses questions that are basic to any disciplinary procedure and that must be answered before a classis could be disciplined:

1. Who could bring a charge?
2. What would be the threshold for presenting a charge?
3. Which judicatory would conduct the trial?
4. What kinds of discipline could be imposed on a classis?
5. What conditions would allow for restoration?

Who Could Bring a Charge?

This question refers to the concept of “standing.” Is it constitutionally appropriate to grant standing in a judicatory to one classis against another classis? R 17-23 does not ask the CCO to consider the possibility of granting such standing to members of local churches, to members of other classes, or to anyone other than a classis.

“Standing” is a mechanism that protects a person or group from being accused by one who has nothing to lose or who has not been aggrieved or violated. Standing ensures a judicial matter includes only those who have been harmed. In this way, standing addresses relationship and furthers the purpose of discipline—restoration. It is important to note that discipline occurs in the context of a relationship—e.g., a member with the board of elders; an elder or deacon with the board of elders; a minister with that minister’s classis; a commissioned pastor with that commissioned pastor’s classis as well as board of elders; a consistory with its classis. In other words, relationship is paramount in discipline, and standing confirms relationship.

The BCO provides this guidance regarding standing: “A charge may be brought by an
individual who is subject to the jurisdiction of the responsible judicatory” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 80]). Also, Explanatory Note 11 furthers this understanding; it reads as follows:

A person not subject to the discipline of the judicatory may bring an accusation to the responsible judicatory. The accusation must meet the requirements set forth for a charge in Section 1 of this article. The judicatory forwards the accusation to the appropriate committee of the judicatory that will assess the accusation as outlined in Section 4 of this article. The committee will determine whether the accusation is of sufficient merit to become a charge. The committee shall, in turn, introduce the charge and move it forward. The factual foundation for the charge(s) must be the same whether the charge(s) is brought by an individual or by a committee of the judicatory (BCO, Explanatory Notes on Chapter 2, The Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures [2017 edition, pp. 96–97. Emphasis original.]).

Every resolution of a charge must include a decision about whether the accuser has standing—that is, has relationship. If the reason for initiating discipline is driven primarily by issue rather than relationship, the outcome of discipline will miss the intended purpose of discipline, which is restoration (see BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Sections 2 and 3 [2017 edition, p. 80]; see also Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 87] and Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 91] for rules about standing).

What Would Be the Threshold for Presenting a Charge?

If a classis were permitted to file a charge against another classis, how would the originating classis act on this urge? Such action is a very serious matter and raises many questions, such as:

- Does the recommendation to file a charge require a simple majority approval or a two-thirds super-majority approval of the classis’s members and delegates? Such an action would be extraordinary. It makes sense that it takes an extraordinary action to begin the process.
- Can the action be taken at a special session of the classis or must the motion be considered only at a stated session? The quorum for a special session is three elder delegates and three ministers. That number is significantly less than the 50 percent plus 1 requirement for a stated session.
- Is a “checks and balances” system needed as an intervening process that would require that a “Matthew 18” step of intentional, restorative discussion happen before a charge can be filed?
- Should a classis be required to submit a filing fee to cover the cost of the action when a classis is seeking to have a matter processed in the church judicatories? The judicial process can be very expensive, with travel for hearings and stenography work. Requiring a filing fee demonstrates the intent of a classis rather than the convenience of using the system that others need to fund. The judicial process within the RCA occurs at great cost to the greater church because of the rightful tediousness of the process, the time it takes for the judicatory to assemble, the important discernment of the judicatory, and by the significant stress to the body of Christ.

Which Judicatory Would Conduct the Trial?

In what judicatory would a classis be given standing if classis-to-classis discipline were part of our government? A regional synod doesn’t have episcopal authority and lacks
COMMISSIONS

the authority to enforce the requirements of the Government of the RCA. Nowhere in Chapter 2, Part I is a regional synod the original judicatory in which a charge is brought. The regional synod is rightfully limited to an appellate role, which reviews the procedure employed by a classis in its role as a judicatory. In the appellate role, the regional synod does not re-litigate the case. Its role is limited to review of the process that led to the decision to determine whether the judicatory followed the proper procedure and whether the decision was just (see BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 4 [2017 edition, p. 91]).

Even if the RCA were to become more episcopal in its structure, and a classis would present a charge, to which regional synod would the case be addressed? For example, if a classis in the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics sought to charge, for example, the Wisconsin Classis for a violation of the Constitution, would the charging classis file the charge with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics or the Regional Synod of Mid-America? If it would be filed with the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics, why should the Wisconsin Classis respond to a synod that lacks any supervisory authority over it? Would the Wisconsin Classis get extradited to New Jersey to stand trial? Likewise, why would the charging classis have the right to demand the Regional Synod of Mid-America begin trial proceedings and hear the charge? Again, the issue of “standing” and relationship arises. The crossing of regional synod boundaries seems inappropriate because of a clear lack of standing. But still, even more basic is the missing element of episcopal relationship in the composition of the regional synod.

Is there standing for a classis within the same regional synod to file a charge against another classis in the same synod? Admittedly, there is a relationship, but this does not eliminate the procedural issues. For example, the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics is composed of four classes. If one classis files a charge against another classis in that synod, both are recused for the judicial proceeding. This recusal would leave the other two classes to take the responsibility of the investigation and trial proceedings. The mission of the synod would be lost to this turmoil of litigation. It must be stated again: even more basic is the missing element of episcopal relationship in the structure of the regional synod.

What Kinds of Discipline Could Be Imposed on a Classis?

To answer this question, it is appropriate to look at the only assembly our current rules permit to be disciplined—a consistory. A consistory may be suspended and its members disqualified from re-election until disqualification is removed by classis. Further, Explanatory Note 8 says: “The classis has authority only to suspend a consistory and not to depose a consistory since a ‘consistory’ is not an office” (2017 edition, p. 96). This note indicates the limitations for disciplining a consistory, and the same idea would likely apply to discipline of a classis.

The CCO presumes one of the assumptions underlying this overture was a desire to change the action of the classis, which would require suspension of the classis. This is so because other forms of discipline (e.g., admonishment and rebuke) only reflect dissatisfaction with the action taken by that classis. What would it mean to suspend a classis? Is that feasible? If a classis were suspended, is the regional synod equipped to take over the vast responsibilities of the classis during suspension? What would be the status of suspended ministers? What would a suspended elder delegate be? These practical considerations alone suggested bringing a charge against a classis is unwise. Indeed, the term “suspended classis” is a contradiction of terms. A classis is an assembly composed of enrolled ministers—who are members by virtue of their ordination—and elder delegates. If it were suspended, there is no classis. This same logic applies to a local church. That body can’t be suspended. It either exists or it doesn’t exist.
There does not seem to be any other action a judicatory could take when disciplining a classis against whom a charge has been sustained. With a consistory, other church members can be elected to replace the disqualified elders and deacons. No such people exist on the classical level. One is a member of a consistory because of election wherein one is then ordained to office. One is a member of a classis because one has been ordained to office. Membership in classis isn’t an elected position where someone else can fill the void that would be created in the event of suspension.

**What Conditions Would Allow for Restoration?**

The stated purpose of church discipline is “to promote [the church’s] purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 77]). The intention of discipline is repentance, not punishment (see Janssen, p. 298). Attempting to promote restoration gives rise to many questions, such as: What conditions allow for restoration? How, and to whom, would a classis report its repentance? How would a classis meet to take any action toward repentance? Special session, quorum, and majority voting rules enter in this discussion. However, one major factor overrides these questions: A suspended classis doesn’t exist, so how could it “do” anything?

If a classis were suspended, how would a classis meeting be called in order to begin the restoration process? The suspended members would not have the privilege of vote to act to communicate its repentance. A suspended classis is a nonexistent classis. Wouldn’t the suspension of a classis result in the deposition of the officers of the classis (e.g., president, vice president)? How then is a president to call a classis session into meeting? Even if a regional synod sought to call a suspended classis to order, who would come? Suspended members do not have voice or vote. As discussed earlier, discipline is an action that addresses matters of relationship. The purpose of discipline is to right a relationship and care for a person. To use discipline simply to enforce a particular view or preference regarding an issue eviscerates not only the discipline process but also the pattern and conditions for restoration.

**Summary**

On practical, theological, and historic grounds, CCO is convinced that inventing a way to discipline a classis is unnecessary, unwise, undesirable, and most importantly, unconstitutional.

The changes implied in R 17-23 would change the 400-year-old DNA of the RCA by changing the relationship between classes and altering the basic structure of jurisdictional bounds of classes. It is not that it cannot be done, of course, but it should not be done without conducting a rigorous, legitimizing investigation into the magnitude of the change proposed. The impact of the R 17-23 proposal is not merely a pragmatic nor procedural change. It would be a change to *the Constitution of the church*. Implementing the changes sought by R 17-23 would not strengthen the RCA as a church. It would make the RCA another church—an unrecognizably different church than it has been for more than 400 years. A structure that would allow the filing of charges across classes’ boundaries is indeed fundamental in the historic life of the RCA. Changing the jurisdictional integrity of classes would be the end of this Reformed Church in America.

Former RCA general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson addressed the 2014 General Synod on the matter of seeking cross-classis discipline, which was an issue at that synod. He said,
The nearly 400 years of history in the Reformed Church in America has seen us deal with the most severe conflicts: between the *conferentie* and the *coetus*, where there was physical fighting over pulpits. Around the question of slavery, where some preached in favor of slavery and others preached against. Around the question of women’s ordination, more recently. And for all this time we have learned the priority of how our witness is strengthened when we stay together. One of the features that has enabled us to do this is our polity. It is a gift that allows us to deal with diversity while maintaining the unity of the Spirit and the priority of our witness. This overture does two things. It destroys that tradition and opens the opportunity for further division. Denomination after denomination is seeing the ill fruits of that division. We have a chance to make a different witness.

(https://vimeo.com/album/2958581/video/101295442, 1:00:52 mark; see the 2014 *Minutes of General Synod*, pp. 136–138, for the context in which these remarks were shared.)

*If No Change Is Made, What Actions Can a Classis Take?*

Our present church order permits any classis to act in the form of discipline through admonition and rebuke, including addressing another classis. “Admonition and rebuke are pastoral in nature and are exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings” (*BCO* Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, Section 2 [2017 edition, p. 77]). In other words, a classis can send a communication to another classis that the action or inaction of the classis is not affirmed by the sender of the communication. Such an action does not require a judicatory and avoids the myriad constitutional questions of standing, governance, and procedure.

This form of communication is not new. In historic minutes of classes, a term for communication between classes in which actions like “admonition and rebuke” may be exercised is observed. The minutes called such communication “fraternal letters,” and exchanges of letters happened commonly. Different classes within the RCA exchanged different opinions and expressed their convictions of right and wrong with and to one another. The term “fraternal letter” is no longer a proper phrase in our time. However, the word “fraternal” recognized that the two classes were connected at a deeper, familial level. “Fraternal” communicated respect and equality from the sender for the recipient. The letters reminded all that “we are the church together.”

In conclusion, the Commission on Church Order finds it is not constitutionally appropriate “to provide for the discipline of a classis, including discipline initiated by another classis and/or classes,” and therefore makes no recommendation to the General Synod for amendments to the *BCO* in response to R 17-23.

**Commissioned Pastors: Tensions around the Title; Possible New Designation**

The 2017 General Synod acted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to investigate the tensions around the title of commissioned pastor, and, if appropriate, to present a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” for presentation to General Synod 2018 (*MGS 2017*, R 17-47, p. 275).
The Commission on Church Order met in a joint session with the Commission on Theology (COT) and the Commission on History (COH) to discuss the tensions of the title “commissioned pastor” in October 2017. Specifically, there is ongoing confusion due to the title disparity of using “commissioned pastor” to describe someone who is an “ordained elder.” The *BCO* defines a commissioned pastor as “an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 58]).

**Tensions Identified**

First, there is a tension around the word “pastor.” Though a commissioned pastor is an ordained elder, the word “pastor” is often a synonym for “minister.” Additionally, “pastor” is used to identify a role, which may be held by a non-ordained person, such as a “youth pastor.” This tension is exacerbated because, by definition, commissioned pastors perform substantively similar functions as an ordained minister. For more on the history, role, and understanding of commissioned pastors in relation to office, the commission recommends the COT’s paper “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” (*MGS 2017*, pp. 314–317), CCO’s paper “The Commissioned Pastor in the Reformed Church in America” (*MGS 2017*, pp. 249–252), and COH’s paper, “Commissioned Pastors in the Reformed Church in America: A Historical and Contextual Survey” (*MGS 2015*, pp. 197–203).

Another significant tension is training. While a commissioned pastor is “trained,” the *BCO* specifies that the classis “approve and supervise a training plan for that person” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 58]). As a result, the training that commissioned pastors receive varies, sometimes significantly, from classis to classis and may not properly prepare them for the duties of their commission. Additional tension is created because others feel the education provided and/or the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process, either through RCA seminaries or the MFCA, is deficient and not to be trusted.

Finally, other tensions identified include a misconception that there is a shortage of ministers in the RCA and a lack of parity in compensation of ministers and commissioned pastors (see the COH’s paper “Ministerial Supply, 1900–2010: A Historical Perspective” in *MGS 2017*, pp. 286–297). For example, the provisions in Formulary 5 require consistory to provide certain medical and retirement benefits for ministers of Word and sacrament but not for commissioned pastors who may be performing in a substantively similar capacity.

**Possible Ways to Resolve the Tensions**

The commission spent considerable time discussing alternative designations in place of either “commissioned” or “pastor.”

- “Pastor” could be changed to “elder.” While this change would align with our understanding of office, it would not clarify the confusion around function, and in some cases could be seen as a detrimental demotion in contexts where a commissioned pastor is looked to as a pastor by members of the congregation.
- “Commissioned,” “licensed,” and “ordained” are three options with existing meaning and significance in ecclesial and legal settings. “Licensed” and “ordained” already have meaning in our order; thus, using them here would cause confusion. Removing “commissioned” or using an alternate word in its
place merely introduces a new set of problems in place of any it may solve.

- An inquiry to other denominations provided similar combinations of the aforementioned designations. The title “commissioned pastor” does share commonality with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA); however, in the CRCNA, commissioned pastor specifically is an office.

A different possible path to resolve some of the tension would be to better define and standardize the training provided to commissioned pastor candidates or to provide a more consistent route for commissioned pastors to become ministers of Word and sacrament.

Another possible resolution, admittedly a drastic one, would be to eliminate the commissioned pastor altogether. The title, while contributing to the tension, may not be its main source. This possibility recognizes that there are underlying concerns regarding commissioned pastors, but these tensions lie outside of the commission’s scope of resolving the title. Furthermore, it seems unwise for this commission to pursue such action given that the 2017 all-synod advisory committees largely affirmed the “work, service, and impact of commissioned pastors in the life of the church” (see “Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team” in *MGS 2017*, pp. 273–282).

**Conclusion**

“Commissioned pastor” is simply a title. The commission could not identify an alternate designation that would likely solve the underlying tensions or broadly improve the understanding of the good and important work that commissioned pastors do. Substantive changes may be the only way to reduce the underlying tensions. The commission is hopeful that the amendments to the *BCO* adopted as R 17-41 by the 2017 General Synod, if approved by the classes and declared effective by the 2018 General Synod, will clarify the role of commissioned pastors in the life of the Church. Accordingly, the commission does not find a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” to be helpful in reducing or eliminating the identified tensions, and therefore is not presenting a recommendation regarding the title.

**Election of Moderator and Secretary; Appointment of Corresponding Delegate to 2018 General Synod**

The commission elected Philip De Koster to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2018. The commission appointed Larry Schuyler to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2018 General Synod.

Respectfully submitted,
Larry Schuyler, moderator

The following motion was made and supported:

To instruct the CCO to fulfill their previous instruction from GS 2017 regarding Classis Divestiture of Interest in Property of Local Church Granted Leave to Withdraw from the Denomination for the Purpose of Affiliating with Another Denomination.

**VOTED:** To not adopt the motion.
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 (RCA), 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) and 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” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5 [2017 edition, pp. 111–112]). This is our fifty-second report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals 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 20 years ago when we installed the first woman professor of theology,
- The transformation begun 25 years ago when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president,
- The transformation begun 30 years ago when we ordained the first woman of color,
- The transformation begun 40 years ago when we expanded our polity’s definition of “persons,”
- The transformation begun and continued 50 years ago when we renewed our liturgies,
- The transformation begun a century ago when Ida Scudder opened Vellore Woman’s Medical College,
- The transformation begun 135 years ago when the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions established The Mission Gleaner to “keep the women of the Church at home informed of the progress of the work on the field,”
- The transformation begun 170 years ago when a group of immigrant churches in western Michigan formed a classis,
- The transformation begun 205 years ago when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since then, and
- The transformation begun 390 years ago when Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America—a multiethnic, multilingual congregation open to everyone.

Countless other transformations have occurred both before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God’s faithfulness and allow 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 Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 12–13, 2017 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council), and in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 12, 2018, as well as communicating regularly via email.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America is celebrating the half-century mark this year. The first half of this year should see the publication of four new volumes:

- **A Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 1848–1876**: A detailed record of the Persons and Issues, Civil and Religious, in the Dutch Colony of Holland, Michigan by Earl Wm. Kennedy;
- **In Peril on the Sea**: The Forgotten Story of the William & Mary Shipwreck by Kenneth A. Schaaf;
- **A Constant State of Emergency**: Paul DeKruif, Microbe Hunter and Health Activist by Jan Peter Verhave; and
- **Timothy Christian Schools** by Robert Swierenga.

Several books are also in process toward publication, including *An Enduring Hope: A Sesquicentennial History of Hope College*, edited by Jacob Nyenhuis; *Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York* by Francis Sypher; a revised edition of *Constitutional Theology* by Allan Janssen; *Another Look at the Canons of Dort* by Eugene Heideman; and a supplement to the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America* by Russell Gasero. Beyond these projects that have been approved by the commission, your commission is looking forward to a story about John Otte, medical missionary to China, by Linda Walvoord DeVelder; a look at some of the correspondence of Horace Underwood by James Jinhong Kim (our first potential book on the mission to Korea that started at New Brunswick Theological Seminary); and a story about the Global Grace Café at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, by Elizabeth Estes.

This fiftieth year has been a time of transition for the Historical Series. The world of publishing has changed dramatically since this project began, and it continues to change. At the end of December, the Historical Series staff found out that William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, our publisher since the beginning, was downsizing, changing the nature of its operations, and would no longer be carrying “consignment” publications such as the Historical Series. In January, books from the Series that were housed in Eerdmans’ warehouse were moved into the RCA Archives’ underground storage in Grand Rapids, along with books moved out of the basement of Western Seminary’s library due to their current construction project. In February, your commission received, with thanksgiving to God for his service, Donald Bruggink’s letter of intent to retire as general editor of the Historical Series.

H 18-1
That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:

WHEREAS the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America published its first volume, *Ecumenism in the Reformed Church*, in 1968, and has since published 97 other volumes to help both the church and the academy engage the story of our history and mission, and
WHEREAS the resources and expertise of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company were vital to the early success and growth of the Series, and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Donald J. Bruggink has faithfully stewarded the growth of this Series and its revolving fund since its inception, and

WHEREAS both Dr. Bruggink and Eerdmans Publishing are now retiring from a half-century of voluntary labors,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the 7th through 12th days of June, 2018, hereby offers thanksgiving to God for Donald J. Bruggink and the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, and lifts up heartfelt prayers for this ministry they have nurtured and their future endeavors; and further,

That the synod rise, in body or spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving. (ADOPTED)

Donald Bruggink was named general editor emeritus by your commission. There will be a time of celebration at this synod for everyone to thank him and representatives from Eerdmans and to celebrate the launch of this work into the next 50 years.

The Commission on History has been keenly aware of the importance of this time of transition and has taken steps to insure the continued growth and success of the Historical Series. Already in October, before news of the change in our relationship with Eerdmans, this commission had been discussing a strategic plan to move forward in what was sure to be a time of change. Working with the RCA Archives and Communication and Production Services, this commission has approved a plan that will continue the series under Reformed Church Press and will allow us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon and Patreon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and soon-to-be past moderator of this commission, has been serving as associate general editor and will take up the responsibilities of general editor of the Historical Series on July 1. Andrew Klumpp, currently a Ph.D. candidate at Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University and a member of the commission, has been appointed associate general editor. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church in New York and an adjunct faculty member at Western Theological Seminary, continues as editor of the Congregational History Series.

Remembering Our Transformations

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with the RCA archivist, Russell Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee (formed of commission members) and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the Archives. He serves as production editor for the Historical Series and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries. This past year, the assistance of the Archives has been invaluable during work with the Commission for Women and the General Synod Council to plan a time of celebration and thanksgiving for the gifts and ministries of women in the Reformed Church at this synod.
This coming November marks the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the great Synod of Dordt (in the spirit of ecumenism, the Christian Reformed Church spelling has been adopted). Your commission has been working with the Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and representatives from New Brunswick, Western, and Calvin seminaries on an observance of this anniversary, which should come as a series of lectures and programs at all three schools during the 2018–2019 academic year—the synod ended in May of 1619. This continues the cooperative work with the CRC that was begun with select volumes in the Historical Series; Timothy Christian Schools will be another CRC-related story in the series.

In addition to many other anniversaries, this year marks 40 years since the RCA first hired a professional archivist to look after the denomination’s collection. His offices are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened. 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. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, archivist Russell Gasero and the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management. With more than 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October of 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. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its new president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. In just two years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, and video and audio tapes.
- Staff has been added to aid in the digitization projects.
- With new staff and equipment, documents from the Amsterdam Correspondence—some of the earliest records of the RCA—have been scanned for a major retranslation project; records from the Regional Synod of Canada, recently moved to New Brunswick, have been digitized so that they may be kept in long-term storage, relieving space issues—more than 80 boxes of material were processed within two months; and a pilot project has begun to provide low-cost digitization of significant records to local congregations.
- Some of the costs of transferring records to underground storage have been underwritten.
- New displays in Sage Library have enhanced programs for both NBTS and the denomination and have helped publicize the Historical Series.

All of this has helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history
more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Development Office and the Archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the Historical Series Revolving Fund and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of NBTS. While there are virtues in thrift, however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

**Deliberate, Wise Transformations**

Part of this commission’s meeting time this year was spent discussing a proposal to have all commission reports at General Synod be done in a two- to three-minute video format unless there are recommendations being made to the synod. While the Commission on History recognizes the need for change and innovation, it has also raised several concerns.

- Producing brief video reports requires time, and there has been no offer to increase commission budgets to allow for extra meeting time.
- Between 200 and 400 person hours go into the work that produces the typical Commission on History report; can that be adequately represented in a short video?
- While the intent is to have every delegate read and comprehend all the reports before arriving at General Synod, we must all remember—especially as we approach a Dordt anniversary—that RCA members believe in total depravity. At least some delegates won’t do this.
- If some reports—those with recommendations—are presented orally, while others are presented on video, it could appear that some commissions are more important than others.
- Synods have, historically, been understood to be deliberative assemblies where office-bearers walking together have wrestled with issues, spent time in discussion and prayer together, and sought to discern God’s will. Video presentations often dampen discussion and deliberation, fundamentally changing the work of the synod.

Your commission recognizes that change is also a key element of history—these stories are stories of transformation. Certainly there is a way to incorporate the best possibilities of video presentation with the character and strengths of what the synod is formed and called to be. Just as there was discussion among commission moderators over the past several months, the Commission on History looks forward to meaningful conversation among the commissions and the GSC in the months ahead.

**Being Informed by Past Transformations**

As General Synods continue to struggle with issues of gender identity and sexuality in the life of the RCA, the debate and discernment continues to touch on different areas of our self-understanding. At the 2017 General Synod, delegates entered into discussions that touch on how the RCA looks at the Standards and their place in the Forms of Declaration and the role of ecumenism in the life of the RCA. As such discussions are likely to continue into this and future synods, your commission offers the following two papers to the synod and the church.
“HISTORIC AND FAITHFUL WITNESSES”: REFLECTING ON THE STANDARDS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN USED IN THE FORMS OF DECLARATION AND THE CHURCH

Since the 2017 General Synod passed R 17-29—“To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states [sic] that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman”—there have been concerns expressed about what this means for ministers and General Synod professors. Bearers of these two offices, as well as licensed candidates for ministry under care of classes, are unique in the RCA for being required to subscribe to a Form of Declaration that states: “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.”

The primary question seems to be whether, given this wording of the forms, the interpretation affirmed by the 2017 Synod can be used to discipline candidates, ministers, and General Synod professors. What exactly is meant by “historic and faithful” in the Forms of Declaration? A brief historic examination of this wording and its use by the Reformed Church in America seems to be in order.

The phrase “historic and faithful” has only been part of the declarations since 1972. The change came in response to overtures from the classes of Queens and Bergen, which expressed concerns over the forms and what they said about the place of sixteenth-century doctrinal statements in a late-twentieth-century context. Queens Classis stated its reasoning as follows:

Christianity is an [sic] historical religion, rooted in the long history of God’s mighty acts, culminating in His mightiest act in Christ Jesus, and we affirm with joy the part the Reformed Church has played in the long history of God’s dealing with His people.

However, as God’s covenant people we are a pilgrim people, called as was Abram to go from our father’s house to a land that God will show us, confident that when we arrive, God will be there ahead of us.

This requirement that we be a pilgrim people means that we be open always to the activity of the Holy Spirit as He may require us to re-think and re-state our theological position, and we must therefore hold with honor, but hold with open minds, the theological statements which served our fathers so well 400 years ago, ready if the Spirit requires, to re-state these pronouncements. We do not reject our history but rather affirm our openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our own day.

The Classis of Bergen took a somewhat different reasoning:

1. The Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the Form of Declaration for Ministers and the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology all contain statements which imply that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America are equated with the Word of God. Statements include “We believe the gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as truly set forth in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America,” (the Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates and the Form of Declaration for Ministers) and
“We believe that these Standards agree with the Word of God ...” (the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology). While some might place the Standards on the same level as the Scriptures, it is not right to force a person who believes that the Scriptures are the normative witness to the Word of God to assent to this statement.

2. What may have been a witness to the Word of God in one particular Historical setting may not be a witness to the Word of God in a new historical setting. For example: in order to combat the abuse made of the use of images in the churches, the Heidelberg Catechism poses the following question and gives the following answer: “But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity? (question 98) Answer—No ...” Because of a particular political situation, the Belgic Confession of Faith makes the following statement in regard to church-state relations: “and their (magistrates) office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.” (Article XXXVI) The entirety of the Canons of the Synod of Dort is based upon a philosophical presupposition of Determinism which led to such statements as “... Some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves ...” (Article XV) Are such statements still a witness to the Word of God in today’s life-situation?

3. While we should acknowledge that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America did speak to a certain group of people at a certain time in a particular historical setting, we do not have to hold that they speak to men today in the same way. If statements in the Declarations prove to be stumbling blocks to brethren who cannot assent to them because of conscience and the Word of God, these stumbling blocks must be removed!

The matter was referred to the Commission on Theology, whose report to the 1971 General Synod did a masterful job of exploring the historical understanding of the place of the Standards in the life of the church.

The Purpose of Standards: The Reformed Church is an evangelical confessional church in the historic sense. This means that we are one of those branches of Protestantism which has distinguished itself from the Roman Church (and from some other Protestant bodies) by subscribing to an evangelical statement (or statements) of faith as the basis for our unity. The intent of such standards of unity has varied greatly among the confessional churches and in our own tradition as well. Subscription to a standard may be understood as a witness of that body to its understanding of the faith without any controversial or polemical intent. In the time of the Reformation and the century following, however, such standards were nearly always intended as a means of distinguishing the body which accepted them from other Christian bodies which held other viewpoints. As such, these standards were also symbols of disunity within the Body of Christ, professing to distinguish the true church from the false church.

This polemical intent inevitably led to a second purpose and use of standards: discipline. Since they were understood to embody the right doctrine (orthodoxy), they could also be used to distinguish heresy and consequently become the basis
for excluding from the body those who did not conform. The history of the Reformed Churches reveals numerous such uses and some still favor such use today.

The main stream of Reformed tradition, however, has not understood the standards in this way. We have not claimed an exclusive corner on the truth. We have not viewed those outside our tradition as apostate, but considered other traditions as viable expressions of the Faith and other communions as fellow members of the Body of Christ. We have tended to look upon our standards as faithful witnesses to the Word of God to which we give our hearty consent, without making them binding upon our consciences as of divine authority.

_Relationship to Scripture_: The above leads naturally to a consideration of the relationship between the standards and the Scriptures. We hardly need to remind ourselves that the battle cry of the Reformation was _sola Scriptura!_ (Scripture only) In reaction to the encroachments of Roman tradition upon the Christian conscience, the reformers took their stand upon Scripture as the sole authority— the rule (measuring stick) of faith and life. We still give loud assent to this principle today as the _raison d’etre_ of the churches of the Reformation. Yet in the heat of battle in the centuries following the Reformation, Protestants found themselves invoking their standards in as final a way as any Romanist and with an authority which equalled or even surpassed that of the Scriptures.

Thus we see an ambivalence in our own tradition. On the one hand, we affirm the supreme and sole authority of Scripture. On the other hand, we have at times made the standards equally binding upon the Christian conscience. This ambivalence is enshrined in the Government of the R.C.A. … This still does not answer the basic question, however: What is the proper place of the standards in the life of the church? How do they unite us with one another and separate us from other Christians?

The commission went on to argue that the extreme positions—either that the Standards were irrelevant historical curiosities or that they were the final determination of orthodoxy for all time—must be rejected and advocated for a middle way based on the following principles:

1. _The Standards must always be subordinate and subservient to Scripture._ “Scripture alone can be the measure of our faith and life as Christians. … This means no statement of faith, however faithful to the Scriptures, can be placed on a par with the Word of God.”

2. _The Standards are historical documents._ “As such, they are the products of their times and the circumstances which produced them … we must take note that the century which produced them was different from our time in some significant ways. … We are called upon to bear the good news in contexts that would be utterly foreign to the 17th century Christian.”

3. _A Standard must have usefulness in the church._ “It must be an effective teaching aid within the church, and an effective witness to the world of the meaning of the Christian faith in our day.”

The commission concluded—and the synod affirmed by accepting their report and the recommendation to add the “historic and faithful” clause to the Forms of Declaration—that the Standards were faithful to Scripture as witnesses to the Word of God, but that they were “three among many witnesses to the faith … understood as defining what is the
Reformed tradition and what our fathers understood to be a faithful statement …” and that they are “limited in their applicability to our day by the difference between the historical circumstances in which they arose and those in which we live.”

The understanding that led to calling our Standards “historic and faithful witnesses” clearly includes the idea that we cannot expect them to comprehend or respond to modern scientific and/or sociological situations. We also cannot bind those who read and sign the forms to be binding themselves to some strict adherence to sixteenth-century—or even late twentieth-century—concepts of sociology, science, or even theology. Nor are they meant to be disciplinary tools. Ministers, professors, and candidates are promising to engage the Standards—acknowledging their limitations—as they wrestle with the Scriptures, listening for the Word of God.

H 18-2
To commend the paper “‘Historic and Faithful Witnesses’: Reflecting on the Standards and How They Have Been Used in the Forms of Declaration and the Church” to all ministers of Word and sacrament, General Synod professors, and licensed candidates for ministry, as well as all classis committees charged with the care and supervision of candidates and ministers. (ADOPTED)

ECUMENISM IN THE RCA

Four centuries ago, the Synod of Dort gathered in an attempt to extinguish the smoldering theological debate between Arminian Remonstrants and orthodox Calvinists, and in doing so, they welcomed ecumenical delegations from throughout Protestant Europe. At this pivotal moment in the development of both the theology and polity of the Dutch Reformed Church, representatives from the Church of England as well as churches in the Palatinate, Hesse, Switzerland, Geneva, Bremen, Emden, and France took part in the process of theological discernment. Even in its nativity, the Dutch Reformed Church did not go it alone.

In the 400 years that have passed since the Synod of Dort, the Dutch Church and specifically its daughter church, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), has continued to wrestle with how to embrace calls for Christian unity, doctrinal purity, and denominational uniqueness. This paper provides an overview of the RCA’s long history of ecumenical engagement and its efforts to balance an inclination toward ecumenical collaboration with a bent toward denominational independence.

Ecumenism during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The history of the RCA’s ecumenical engagement begins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the colonial churches often focused their energies on survival, especially after the British conquest of New Amsterdam in 1664, they also entertained calls to unify with other Reformed churches in the British colonies in North America. In fact, the Dutch churches nearly united with their Scottish Presbyterian and German Reformed counterparts in 1743 but were stymied by an inability to resolve the language differences between the three communions.

At the same time, firebrand Theodorus Frelinghuysen exhibited an ecumenical disposition when he crossed denominational lines to partner with Presbyterian preachers like the revivalist Tennent family. Despite dust-ups with his congregation and the Classis of Amsterdam, Frelinghuysen’s flair eventually caught on with his Presbyterian neighbors and would go on to influence the most well-known evangelist of the Great Awakening,
Calvinist Methodist George Whitefield. While not solely responsible for this intercolonial and interdenominational religious awakening, Frelinghuysen’s ecumenical ministry encouraged local collaboration and fostered a burst in evangelism.

After the American Revolution, the RCA successfully separated itself from the church in the Netherlands, yet even as it began to exercise its independence, the church entered into new ecumenical partnerships. During the period of the early republic, this was most evident in the church’s missionary efforts. For example, in 1796, less than a decade after severing ties with the Reformed church in the Netherlands, the RCA lent its support to the New York Missionary Society. This early missionary society focused on ministry to the Native Americans, and John Livingston—the father of the RCA—even served the organization as one of its earliest officers.

The New York Missionary Society marked the beginning of the RCA’s engagement with ecumenical missionary efforts. In 1810, the RCA partnered with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which operated as an ecumenical missionary organization during the first half of the nineteenth century. Influential and pioneering Dutch Reformed missionary John Scudder stands out as just one example of some of the prominent RCA missionaries who received their initial support from the ABCFM. Despite its engagement with the ABCFM, in 1832, the RCA founded its own Board of Foreign Missions, which initially worked in conjunction with the ABCFM before ending the partnership in 1857.

Regardless of the RCA’s disassociation with the ABCFM, seven years later the denomination was heralded for its “pioneering leadership in missionary ecumenism.” This was largely due to the efforts of a host of RCA missionaries who worked in tandem with other Protestant missionaries throughout the globe, particularly in China, India, and the Middle East.

The ecumenical mission in Amoy, China, offers an illuminating example of the ecumenical nature of the RCA’s robust missionary apparatus. Throughout the 1850s, a fruitful partnership existed between missionaries from the RCA and English Presbyterian missionaries in Amoy. An organic union grew between these two missionary groups, and together they founded a small network of Chinese churches. The biggest conflict that arose for the mission in its early years came about due to pressures from the General Synod to tamp down the ecumenical nature of the mission and force sole affiliation with the RCA. A heated scuffle lasted from 1857 to 1863. The missionaries resisted, but the General Synod was insistent. Eventually, after threatening to resign, the missionaries won the day, and the General Synod adopted a more cooperative posture toward ecumenical missions.

While the hullabaloo about the Amoy mission presents a striking example of the tensions that came along with ecumenical mission work, its ecumenical character was not unique. In 1872, the RCA’s Japanese mission followed Amoy’s example and united with the English Presbyterians. Similarly, nineteenth-century missionary work in India, led by the Scudder family, and in the Middle East, led by men like Samuel Zwemer, nurtured ecumenical partnerships. In the twentieth century, the RCA’s missionary work in Africa would exhibit the same ecumenical impulses.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the RCA’s most prominent and successful ecumenical endeavors centered on its commitment to missionary activity. Through both institutional affiliations with groups like the ABCFM and also local, ecumenical collaboration between individuals, ecumenism in the RCA became associated with spreading the gospel and an extensive missionary network.
Twentieth-Century Institutional Affiliations

Throughout the twentieth century, the RCA explored membership in a number of larger ecumenical bodies, and these conversations incited a bevy of debate and disagreement within the denomination. The earliest—and least controversial—of these broader church affiliations brought together various Reformed churches throughout the world. Founded as the Reformed Churches throughout the World holding a Presbyterian System in 1875, the group now known as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) functioned as a space for theological discussion and fellowship.20 The RCA joined this communion as a founding member and has continued to engage in this forum for global Reformed theological discussion.21

The RCA’s membership in other national and global associations proved to be far more contentious than its participation in the WCRC. For instance, in 1908, the RCA became a founding member of the Federal Council of Churches, which would become the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1950.22 Similarly, the RCA was also a charter member of the World Council of Churches, which was established in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II.23 Both groups brought together diverse communions not only for theological discussion but also for cooperative action through relief efforts, publications, and other joint endeavors.

Despite initial enthusiasm about these ecumenical bodies, opposition to the RCA’s membership in both of these bodies arose shortly after the denomination joined them. The first objections arose in 1930.24 Since then, fears about the formation of a unified church or significant doctrinal differences have flared intermittently and led to attempts to withdraw the RCA from both bodies. In fact, the General Synod of 1969 saw the denomination nearly withdraw from the NCC, and similar debates took place throughout the 1980s.25 Nevertheless, the RCA remains a member of both of these larger organizations.

While the RCA embraced the ecumenical efforts of the NCC and WCC, it stalwartly resisted joining the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which arose in the mid-twentieth century in order to explore the possibility of union between a diverse group of denominations, ranging from Presbyterians to Methodists and Congregationalists. The RCA never became an official member of this organization but did maintain observer status. It ultimately rejected participation due to suspicions about the organization’s aims and a firm commitment to the uniqueness of the Dutch Reformed tradition.26

At the close of the twentieth century, rather than pursue organic union between denominations, the RCA, along with many other denominations, worked to recognize full communion between distinct denominations.27 In particular, at the behest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the RCA explored the possibility of greater cooperation between Reformed and Lutheran churches in the United States. These efforts led to the Formula of Agreement, which was signed by members of the RCA, Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) with the ELCA in 1998.28 This agreement accomplished two primary goals. First, it rescinded four centuries of anathemas that had existed between Reformed and Lutheran communions, dating back to the Reformation era. Second, it acknowledged mutual recognition of sacraments and ministers between each of these four denominations. This has led to the opportunity for Lutheran and Reformed ministers to serve in one another’s churches, a development that was paralleled with the unification of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Netherlands into The Protestant Church of the Netherlands.29

Much like other ecumenical efforts throughout the twentieth century, the Formula of
Agreement provoked disagreement within the RCA. This opposition initially focused on the UCC’s open stance toward LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage—a position that both the PC(USA) and ELCA would also eventually take. Yet, the Formula of Agreement provided for “mutual admonition” between denominations, which has led to many of those who oppose the position of the other members of the Formula of Agreement to exercise this clause to admonish views that conflict with the RCA’s own position on these particular social issues.

Twentieth-Century Unification Efforts

The RCA exhibited considerable handwringing about its membership in larger ecumenical bodies throughout the twentieth century, but even more heated disagreement arose regarding unification with other Reformed denominations. The RCA was not immune from the ecumenical fervor that led to a spate of mergers during the twentieth century, but ultimately, despite numerous appeals to join other like-minded traditions, the RCA chose to remain independent.

In 1945, the RCA explored a union with the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPC), a small Presbyterian denomination located in Ohio and Pennsylvania. These efforts failed. Many members of the RCA, particularly in the Midwestern classes, feared the loss of denominational identity and the familial feeling they associated with the RCA. Others suggested that just because two traditions had much in common did not mean that they needed to merge with one another. Christian unity could exist spiritually while structurally remaining separate. In the end, the General Synod voted in favor of the union, but only 19 classes approved of it, far short of the 34 required by the commission overseeing the union.

Ecumenism was still in the air in the early 1960s. The General Synod of 1962 received eighteen overtures about union—eight for the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), eight for the UPC, one for the UCC, and one for the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The RCA chose to explore a proposed merger with the PCUS—the southern Presbyterian Church.

When the General Synod voted to move ahead with a committee to explore the union in 1965, opposition was already on the rise. Objectors feared a loss of denominational uniqueness and the dilution of Reformed doctrine. What is more, in 1966, PCUS joined the COCU, a perennial lightning rod for controversy in the RCA. Despite this move by the PCUS, the General Synod of 1968 approved the merger. Nevertheless, the classes rejected it, with all of the classes east of Detroit voting in favor and all those west of it voting against, for a final vote of 23 for union and 22 against, well shy of the two-thirds approval required.

Since the first efforts to unite the church with other Reformed traditions during the colonial era, the RCA has entertained 12 attempts to unite with another denomination. All have failed. Yet, in each case, serious talks have taken place. This willingness to explore the possibility of union exhibits the RCA’s underlying ecumenical commitment. Throughout these efforts, there have been both cultural and theological reasons for resisting mergers that reflect a fear of losing the distinctly Dutch Reformed theological tradition, most evident in our creeds and confessions. There was also a fear that these mergers might lead to a slippery slope of mergers first with larger Presbyterian bodies and eventually even larger bodies like the COCU.
A Special Relationship to the Christian Reformed Church

While many proposed mergers between the RCA and other Reformed traditions took place throughout the twentieth century, one denomination was conspicuously absent but must be a part of any discussion of the RCA’s relationship with other denominations: the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Prior to the two major secessions that led to the establishment of the CRC, the RCA was not a stranger to internal division. Some of the most rancorous debates dated back to colonial disputes between Coetus and Conferentie, which began in the 1730s. Unlike those early divisions, which eventually healed, the nineteenth-century divisions between the RCA and the CRC remain; however, in many ways the CRC has become the RCA’s closest partner.

The two primary moments of secession took place in 1857 and 1882. The first division reflected tensions in the Midwestern immigrant community about the Classis of Holland’s affiliation with the RCA in 1850. The division that occurred in 1882 also originated in the Midwest; however, it focused on disagreements between the immigrants and the American church about the role of freemasons within the church. For decades, these disagreements had flared at General Synod. The latter secession strained the relationship with the mother church of many of the immigrants, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland, which meant many new immigrants chose to join the CRC rather than the RCA.

Over the past half century, the RCA’s relationship to the CRC has warmed significantly. At the request of the CRC, more open dialogues began in the late 1960s. The CRC harbored anxieties about the RCA’s ecumenical memberships in the NCC and WCC and a perceived lack of enforcing doctrinal purity by the RCA. These talks in the 1960s eventually waned and ultimately ended without any result.

More recently, a renewed partnership has arisen between these our two denominations. This is most evident in joint publications, shared missions, and simultaneous annual meetings. In 1999, Maple Avenue Ministries in Holland, Michigan, became the first congregation to hold dual membership in both the CRC and RCA. More recently, the dual denominational membership of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, marked a significant symbol of ecumenical partnership and healing between these traditions due to its role as Albertus Van Raalte’s church and as the site of the particularly acrimonious secession of 1882. The RCA has continued to grow closer to the CRC into the twenty-first century, signaling a promising future of ecumenical engagement.

Local Ecumenism in the Past Half Century

The history of the RCA’s involvement with ecumenical movements tends to focus on denominational affiliations, initiatives, and efforts; however, ecumenism in the RCA also includes pastors like Frelinghuysen and Livingston and the host of missionaries who served throughout the globe. These individuals suggest that an essential element to the history of ecumenism in the RCA is the role of local churches engaging in ecumenical partnerships in order to serve their communities.

A brief historical case study illuminates how a local church, even in a small town in the Midwest, exhibits the RCA’s ecumenical commitments. Over the past half century, Sanborn First Reformed Church (FRC) in Sanborn, Iowa—a town of 1,300 residents with eight churches—has embraced ecumenism as a means of fulfilling their call to ministry. For more than three decades, the church has hosted the only vacation Bible school that
attracts children from all of the other churches in town. FRC participates in community-wide luncheons during Lent that draw members from both the town’s Protestant and Catholic churches and takes a leadership role in the coordination of community worship services. What is more, for over a decade, it jointly hired a youth pastor with a United Methodist Church in the next community in order to offer robust youth programming to its children. In this rural community, for the past 50 years, FRC has provided a model for ecumenical leadership.

Sanborn FRC is not unique in its classis, synod, or the RCA. A history of collaborative ecumenical engagement exists in churches ranging from Highland Park, New Jersey, to Paramount, California, to Grand Rapids, Michigan. From volunteers from New York churches serving during Billy Graham’s crusades in 1957 to ecumenical children’s programs in rural Iowa, RCA churches have a history of adapting the tradition’s ecumenism to their needs and context. A shared commitment to the Gospel and a desire to serve local communities remind us that the history of ecumenism in the RCA is not solely one of failed mergers and spats about association memberships. It is a story of a people striving to fulfill their call to mission.

H 18-3
To commend the paper “Ecumenism in the RCA” to all consistories and classes, and to invite them to enter into discussions over the paper, encouraging them to send responses to the questions below to rgasero@rca.org no later than February 1, 2019.

1. What does it mean that ecumenism has been such a key element to our identity in the past?
2. How does and should this understanding shape the future ministry of the RCA?
3. How is your congregation engaging in ecumenical relationships in your community? (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
James Hart Brumm, moderator

1 MGS 2017, 161.
4 MGS 1970, 83–85. The Bergen overture also let the Synod know that these two classes had taken steps to alter or amend the forms.
5 The Standards here refer to the Heidelberg Catechism and its Compendium, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The Belhar Confession was not added to the Standards until 2009.
6 MGS 1971, 212–213.
7 MGS 1971, 214.
9 Herman Harmelink III, Ecumenism and the Reformed Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 7.
19 Harmelink, Ecumenism, 25.
20 Bruggink and Baker, 198.
21 Bruggink and Baker, 200.
23 Bruggink and Baker, 204.
28 Bruggink and Baker, 205.
29 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
30 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
31 Japinga, *Loyalty and Loss*, 47.
38 Bruggink and Baker, 199.
43 Bruins and Swierenga, 131.
44 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
45 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
46 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
48 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Office of the General Synod received two judicial matters since the 2017 session of the General Synod. Each was referred to the Commission on Judicial Business (“CJB”) for review, recommendation, and report to the 2018 General Synod. The matters considered by the CJB, and the CJB’s reports and recommendations regarding them, are as follows:

Appeal by Phil and Diane Forner against the action of the Commission on Judicial Business of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes

Phillip and Diane Forner (“Forners”) filed with the Office of the General Synod an appeal (“Forners/GLJBC appeal”) from an action taken by the Commission on Judicial Business of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes (“RSGLJBC”). The Forners/GLJBC appeal was received by the clerk of the General Synod on September 25, 2017, and subsequently referred to the CJB. The CJB received the appeal on September 29, 2017, and the record of the case on October 4, 2017. The CJB met via conference call on October 25, 2017, to consider the case.

The factual background of the case is available to the reader in MGS 2015, pp. 214ff. At the General Synod (“GS”) meeting in 2015, the CJB recommended, and the GS adopted, the following:

To remand the case to the Zeeland Classis for hearing on the merits of the Complaint of Phillip and Diane Forner regarding their membership in Spring Valley Reformed Church (MGS 2015, p. 216).

Per the action of the General Synod, Zeeland Classis (“ZC”) held a hearing on the complaint on September 19, 2016, and determined that “the record of the case makes it clear that a complaint against the [Spring Valley Church] Board of Elders, which is the focus of the January 26, 2013, complaint, is without merit.”

Unsatisfied with the action of Zeeland Classis, the Forners filed an appeal with the RSGLJBC. RSGLJBC found the appeal to be procedurally in order. RSGLJBC agreed with the finding of ZC that the complaint of the Forners was without merit. Pursuant to its authority granted in Book of Church Order (BCO) Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2017 edition, p. 93) (“If the appeal is deemed to be frivolous, dilatory, or clearly without merit, the committee may dismiss the appeal without a hearing”), the report of RSGLJBC indicates the following:

The motion was made, seconded, and carried to dismiss these two pending appeals without a hearing. This action will be reported to the Assembly of the Synod of the Great Lakes on May 6, 2018, but this decision is considered the final action of the regional synod in response to these appeals.

This action is the subject of the Forner appeal.

The Forners allege that both ZC and RSGLJBC handled their original case (dating back to 2013) improperly. Specifically, the Forners argue that the appropriate bodies failed to consider what the Forners deem to be relevant items of record. Further, they contend that the findings of ZC and RSGLJBC dismissed their case unfairly on the grounds that it was “without merit,” where the BCO states that a case may be dismissed at the committee level if it is “clearly without merit.” They argue that these alleged irregularities amount to a pattern of bias and prejudice, originally on behalf of ZC but (by implication) on behalf of RSGLJBC as well.
The CJB met by conference call on October 25, 2017.

The purpose of the meeting was to deal with the appeal of Phil and Diane Forner against the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes.

Upon consideration of the 284-page record, the commission determined that the case was in proper order.

The commission measured the grounds for appeal (BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 [2017 edition, p. 91]) against the record of the case and found the following:

1. CJB could detect no irregularities in the proceedings of the board of elders, the classis, or the regional synod relative to this case;
2. CJB was not able to locate any occasion at which a lower judicatory refused reasonable indulgence to any party in the case;
3. CJB found no incidents of the receipt of improper evidence in the case. The Forners’ allegation that the regional synod failed to receive minutes from the Classis of Zeeland was not found to be dispositive;
4. CJB, having examined the minutes of lower judicatories, found that lower judicatories acted in good faith, and exhibited neither bias nor prejudice;
5. CJB therefore found no manifest injustice in the determination of the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes to dismiss the two pending appeals without hearing.

Further, the CJB notes the patience and pastoral concern that the Interim Leadership Council of ZC manifested in attempting to deal with a thorny situation. While it is certainly the case, as the Forners argue, that a board of elders “shall receive as confessing members of the church only those persons who have made a profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2017 edition, p. 21]), a board of elders is not thereby required to receive everyone who makes such a profession. Boards of elders are entrusted to discern the sincerity of those who come before them promising “to accept the spiritual guidance of the church; to walk in a spirit of Christian love with this congregation; and to seek those things which make for unity, purity, and peace” (Worship the Lord, p. 35). At the same time, the Belhar Confession guards against arbitrary decisions by boards of elders by rejecting any doctrine “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church” (Belhar Confession, Section II).

Finally, CJB notes that “the judicatory hearing the appeal shall give deference to the decision of the lower judicatory ... and shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole” (BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 11 [2017 edition, p. 93]). Given that significant restriction and the ample record of a case (dating back four years) that demonstrates considerable forbearance on the part of ZC and RSGLJBC, the CJB determines it right and proper to give such deference to the lower judicatories in question.

In sum, the CJB:

- finds no grounds for appeal, per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3 (2017 edition, p. 91);
- affirms the authority of a board of elders to receive confessing members per BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b (2017 edition, p. 21); and
- defers to the decisions of the lower judicatory per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 11 (2017 edition, p. 93).
Therefore, the motion was made, seconded, and carried to find the appeal of the Forners to be frivolous and clearly without merit, and the CJB then dismissed the appeal without a hearing, per BCO Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 6 (2017 edition, p. 93).

**Appeal by Rev. Brian Randazzo against action by the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of New York**

Rev. Brian Randazzo (“Rev. Randazzo”) filed with the Office of the General Synod an appeal (the “Randazzo appeal”) from an action taken by the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod of New York (“RSNYJBC”). The Randazzo appeal was received by the clerk of the General Synod on November 10, 2017, and subsequently referred to the Commission on Judicial Business (“CJB”). The CJB received the record of the case from the clerk of the Regional Synod of New York on December 15, 2017.

The general facts of this case appear to involve a disciplinary matter initiated against Rev. Randazzo as a result of alleged conduct by him while attending and serving as a delegate to the 2016 session of the General Synod. Action *in the nature of discipline* was taken by the Classis of Orange, but it does not appear that any formal charges against Rev. Randazzo were ever filed or acted upon by the classis. Nevertheless, apparently in response to action by the classis or one of its committees, Rev. Randazzo filed an appeal with the Regional Synod of New York (“RSNY”). The appeal was considered by the RSNYJBC. In a September 12, 2017, letter the stated clerk of the RSNY reported the following to Rev. Randazzo and the stated clerk of the Classis of Orange:

> On August 29, 2017, the Synod of New York Judicial Business Committee met to discuss the appeal filed by the Rev. Randazzo against actions taken by the Classis of Orange.

**The decision of the committee regarding the appeal is as follows:**

> The Judicial Business Committee herewith dismisses the Appeal as without merit, as the Appellant offers no evidence that ‘a judgment has been rendered in a lower judicatory’ (*BCO* 2.III.1.1), nor is there any evidence of the same in the records of the classis.

> With the dismissal of the appeal, no further action will be taken in regard to the appeal.

Put simply, the RSNYJBC did not conduct a hearing on Rev. Randazzo’s appeal because there was no formal decision by the classis from which to appeal, and therefore Rev. Randazzo’s “appeal” was improper.

It is from this “action” that Rev. Randazzo has filed his appeal with the General Synod. (The word *action* is put in quotes intentionally because it is actually *inaction* by the RSNY that has precipitated the appeal.)

This commission took the same “inaction” as that of the RSNY and for the same reason. There has been no formal judgment with respect to the behavior or misbehavior of Rev. Randazzo by any judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. There being no formal judgment, necessarily there can be no other decision than to dismiss the appeal of Rev. Randazzo, and such was the action of this commission.

We are disturbed, however, by what we perceive to be unfair treatment of Rev. Randazzo by the Classis of Orange. On the one hand, it can be argued that the suspension of Rev.
Randazzo was defective ab initio since the BCO gives authority to a consistory to close the pulpit to a minister for “any notorious or scandalous offense” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 4b [2017 edition, p. 78]); the consistory of Brick Church took no such action. Alternatively, classis (no mention of a committee of a classis) “shall have exclusive jurisdiction in the case of a charge against a minister … if the charge is proven” to suspend or depose from office (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3, Section 4c [2017 edition, p. 78]).

In the instant case, the Administrative Committee of Orange Classis made a decision on its own that Rev. Randazzo committed “notorious and scandalous” acts at General Synod and should be suspended from ministry for some indefinite period. The committee, without hearing or trial, decided that the case was proven and took action to suspend Rev. Randazzo. Even if it is assumed, notwithstanding the language of the BCO, that a classis committee could suspend a minister of Word and sacrament (the committee’s own decision being the only proof required), we come to an action of Orange Classis at its regular session on February 23, 2017, which by its resolution RS17-18 lifted the suspension of Rev. Randazzo and by the quoted words of the stated clerk of classis “… the Rev. B. Randazzo’s suspension has been lifted he once again became a voting member of the classis … .” This could, and possibly should, have been the end of this matter.

Classis, or some part of classis, was not satisfied with this result. The Administrative Committee had already put in place a Charge Committee which intended to charge Rev. Randazzo with the civil crimes of assault, battery, and defamation (which are beyond the scope of church discipline), as well as the BCO offenses of violation of his ordination oath, unseemly behavior, and lack of knowledge of RCA polity. It was these charges that were to be considered in executive session at the February 23, 2017, meeting. Prior to the meeting in an “email dump,” several letters and statements from purported witnesses to Rev. Randazzo’s bad behavior at General Synod were sent to all members of classis and possibly others, in violation of the BCO prohibition against circulation by anyone of “any written or printed arguments or briefs upon any charges before the final disposition of same …” (BCO Chapter 2, Part I, Article 5, Section 11b [2017 edition, p. 83]). These now-public letters and statements were to be used in determining whether or not to bring formal charges. The BCO assures parties that they may cross-examine witnesses and specifically prohibits the use of affidavits at trial. Rev. Randazzo had no opportunity to challenge these statements, nor to cross-examine the authors thereof, nor to bring in statements for his defense. Yet, even with no rebuttal whatsoever of the statements against him, the delegates’ votes on the charges were in favor for bringing some of the charges by the barest of margins. It seems these charges now exist but are not acted upon, casting a dark shadow across the mission of the Classis of Orange and especially the life of the Brick Church, to say nothing of the devastation caused to the life of Rev. Randazzo and his family.

From the record before us, it appears that the entire matter of Rev. Randazzo’s actions at General Synod 2016, and his subsequent suspension, is unresolved. We would urge that some resolution be made promptly. The Book of Church Order sets forth the Nature of Discipline in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 1, both as to its purpose (Section 1) and its exercise and the levels thereof (Section 2), be they pastoral or judicial. We suggest that the Classis of Orange give careful consideration to pastoral discipline in this case, but it may be that a trial with the full protections to the parties provided by Articles 4 and 5 of BCO Chapter 2, Part I (2017 edition, pp. 80–85) is the best alternative to reach a final decision. Classis must rely upon prayer and Christian love to discern the best way to end this continuing discord, but end it must.

Respectfully submitted,
Russell Paarlberg, moderator
The CJB met by conference call on Wednesday, October 25, 2017; Wednesday, December 13, 2017; Wednesday, January 3, 2018; and Thursday, February 15, 2018. For reasons stated in this report, no hearings were conducted. Commission member Jack Van Slambrouck (representing the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes) did not participate in any discussions of the matter filed by Phillip and Diane Forner, and commission member Kendra Van Houten (representing the Regional Synod of New York) did not participate in any discussions of the matter filed by Rev. Brian Randazzo.
Report of the Commission on Nominations

The Commission on Nominations convened in person on October 12–13, 2017, and January 16, 2018, and teleconferenced on February 13, March 6, April 3, April 24, and May 8, 2018. Two final electronic votes were held through email, ending on May 15 and May 18.

Throughout the year, members of the commission actively sought qualified candidates, solicited completed profile forms (a brief two-page document), and checked references of those who were interested in serving on a commission or agency of the General Synod or on the board of directors or trustees of an RCA-related institution. In these ways the commission sought to fulfill its responsibilities as stated in the Bylaws of the General Synod—namely, “in consultation with the general secretary, [the commission] shall search the denomination for suitable nominees. In making nominations it shall consider the geographic location, occupation, and record of previous service to the denomination of persons suggested by classes, regional synods, and other sources. It shall consider this and other pertinent data in light of each commission’s or agency’s responsibilities, membership needs, suggested nominees, and place and schedule of meetings” (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8c[2]; 2017 edition, p. 114).

The commission seeks to nominate individuals for service on agencies, commissions, and boards of directors on the basis of their spiritual gifts, interests, heart (or passion), abilities, personality, experience, and special leadership abilities. When possible, it also seeks to involve young adult members of the RCA so that they can be nurtured and encouraged to serve the RCA in a variety of ways in the future. Through its efforts, the Commission on Nominations has proactively fulfilled its responsibility to “search the denomination” and believes those nominated have traits that make them well-suited for the work of the positions to which they are being nominated. The commission is pleased to report once again that it has, to the best of its ability, fulfilled its responsibility to ensure that the requirements of the Book of Church Order are upheld.

When the number of qualified candidates from which to choose increases, the commission’s work is enhanced and the work of the General Synod’s agencies and commissions is carried out more effectively. Consequently, the commission encourages anyone interested in serving to submit a completed profile form to the Commission on Nominations according to the instructions indicated on the form. Profile forms are available from Laura Tarbous, denominational staff to the Commission on Nominations (908-812-7897 or ltarbous@rca.org), or on the RCA website (www.rca.org/profile).

Nominations

Nominees identified by the Commission on Nominations are as follows (* indicates a final term and # indicates an official nomination from the assembly, institution, or agency listed):
GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL
Class of 2019
Rev. Jamie Dykstra
Class of 2021
*Betty Jo Shuster
Class of 2022
*Rev. Ned Beadel (Regional Synod of the Far West) #
*Hellen Harvey (African American Black Council) #
*Rev. Robert Johnson
*Rev. Kent McHeard (Regional Synod of Albany) #
*Eric Moreno
*Rev. Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries) #

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN ACTION
Class of 2020
Rev. Mark Ennis
Reginald Smith – Reformed ecumenical observer
Kim Winchell – ELCA ecumenical observer
Class of 2021
Elizabeth Carroll
Rev. Ellen Jo (E.J.) Emerson
Cameron Van Kooten Laughead

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION
Class of 2019
Rev. Troy Nanninga
Class of 2020
Derek Taylor
Class of 2021
Rev. Chad Farrand
*Rev. Bethany Popkes
Rev. Mark Swart

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
Class of 2021
*Rev. Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew
*Rev. Kathryn Davelaar Guthrie
Lowell TenClay

COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
Class of 2019
Rev. Lisa Tice
Class of 2020
Rev. Dirk Gieser
Class of 2021
Rev. Kent Frens
Rev. Troy Van Beek

COMMISSION ON CHURCH ORDER
Class of 2021
*Philip De Koster
*Rev. Linda Gold
COMMISSION ON HISTORY
Class of 2021
Alexander Arthurs
David Tripold

COMMISSION ON JUDICIAL BUSINESS
Class of 2020
Rev. Kendra Van Houten (Regional Synod of New York) #
Class of 2021
*Rev. Paul Janssen (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics) #
*Russell Paarlberg (Regional Synod of Mid-America) #
*Rev. Barry Wynveen (Regional Synod of Canada) #

COMMISSION ON NOMINATIONS
Class of 2021
*Rev. Carl Boersma (Regional Synod of the Heartland) #
Rev. Ock Kee Byun (Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries) #
*Rev. Micheal Edwards (Regional Synod of New York) #
*Robert Montgomery (Regional Synod of Canada) #

COMMISSION ON RACE AND ETHNICITY
Class of 2020
Rev. Matthew Waterstone
Class of 2021
*Karla Camacho
Rafael Garcia (Council for Hispanic Ministries) #
Rev. Kelvin Spooner (African American Black Council) #

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY
Class of 2020
Rev. William Russell – ELCA ecumenical observer
Class of 2021
Rev. Travis Else
Elizabeth Estes
*Kristen Johnson

COMMISSION FOR WOMEN
Class of 2021
Rev. Melisa Blankenship
*Kristin Intelisano
Rev. Daniel Jelsma

BOARD OF BENEFITS SERVICES
Class of 2021
Dana Chapman
Ralph Condis

As is provided for in its bylaws, BOBS has reduced its membership from 13 to 12 for the 2018–2019 year:

CHURCH GROWTH FUND
Class of 2021
*Rod Douma
*Diane Smith Faubion
MINISTERIAL FORMATION CERTIFICATION AGENCY
Class of 2021
Rev. Scott Christiansen
Rev. Shirley Lin

The 2017 General Synod approved a revision to the MFCA bylaws resulting in a membership reduction from 11 to 9.

NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2021
*Danielle Brown
Rev. Gregory Dunlap (Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantics)
Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier
*Gay Morris (Regional Synod of the Far West)
*Evan Spagner
*Amaury Tanon-Santos

As is provided for in its bylaws, the NBTS board has reduced its membership from 23 to 21 for the 2018–2019 year.

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2020
Percy Gilbert
Fred Johnson
Class of 2021
Rev. Andrea Godwin-Stremler
Matthew Haworth
Alden Highstreet
Timothy Hillegonds
Doug Honholt
Philip Miller
Steve Spoelhof
Rev. Cora Taitt
Vacancy (RSC)
Vacancy (RSH)

CENTRAL COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2022
Barbara Kniff-McCulla

HOPE COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2019
Rev. Dennis Voskuil
Class of 2022
Rev. Grace Claus

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Class of 2020
Catherine Bloom

N 18-1
To elect the above-named nominees to the General Synod commissions and agencies and the boards of directors or trustees of RCA-related educational institutions as indicated. (ADOPTED)
N 18-2
To elect Carl Boersma as moderator of the Commission on Nominations for the 2018–2019 term. (ADOPTED)

The Commission on Nominations thanks Shuo-Min (Imos) Wu, Dan Gillett, and Don Poest for their service. Their membership on the Commission on Nominations is concluding, and we are grateful for their prayers, insight, and contribution to our ministry. The Commission on Nominations appreciates Laura Tarbous, RCA staff to our commission, for her tireless attention to detail and diligent service in so many ways. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,
Carl Boersma, moderator
Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb …” (Revelation 7:9).

The RCA: Thriving, Missional, Multiracial

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are Douglas Banks, Karla Camacho, Rick DeBruyne (moderator), June Denny, Rafael Garcia, Jo Anna Lougin (vice moderator), and Kyunghoon Suh. Alina Coipel serves as staff to the commission.

CORE had one vacant seat beginning in January due to the resignation of Minsuk Lee. Minsuk returned to her home country to care for her ailing mother. The commission was sorry to see her go and thanks her for her service.

The commission met via video/phone conference on March 21, May 16, June 27, September 18, November 8, and December 13, 2017; and February 14, March 14, and May 9, 2018. It also met October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

CORE thanks James Steward, a member the Commission on Nominations, for attending and observing our October meeting. CORE also thanks James Nakakihara for his willingness to attend and observe this spring; however, the commission did not hold a second face-to-face meeting.

CORE had a conference call with staff member Earl James on March 7, 2018, and quarterly connect meetings with the three staff coordinators for the racial and ethnic councils on October 4, 2017, and January 17 and April 18, 2018.

Official Responsibilities of CORE

The Book of Church Order names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (p. 113, 2017 edition):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Toward a Multicultural Future Freed From Racism

CORE affirms the direction and progress that has been made in the RCA toward being a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church, but also recognizes that there is still more to be done. While we have made gains in terms of the number of people of color involved and actively participating in the structures, life, and ministries of the church, there are deeper questions of how power is shared, how our racial/ethnic churches...
and members are involved in setting the pace and direction of the church, and how our
story is changing so the various streams of culture and color are included in the narrative
of who we are and what we do.

Monitoring of Recommendations from R-91 Task Force on White Privilege

The 2014 General Synod instructed the Commission on Race and Ethnicity “to monitor
the successful implementation of recommendations proposed by the R-91 Task Force on
White Privilege and adopted by the 2013 and 2014 General Synods; and further, to include
this information in their reports to General Synod for the next five years” (MGS 2014,
R-17, p. 116).

One of the approved recommendations (MGS 2014, R-15, pp. 113–114) directed the
General Synod Council to create a task force to assess the RCA’s governance utilizing the
Five-Fold Test and make recommendations for changes to its order that are consistent with
the tenets of the Belhar Confession and that will aid the RCA’s transition to becoming a
more multicultural denomination that is freer from racism.

The task force was to include the general secretary, the racial/ethnic council presidents,
the General Synod president or vice president, the GSC moderator, a representative of the
Commission on Church Order, and a number of additional members necessary to create
a membership that is at least 50 percent people of color and contains experts in cultural
competency in the RCA’s most populous racial/ethnic groups.

The task force was to make an interim report to General Synod 2015 and a final report to
General Synod 2016. In 2016 CORE expressed concern that “since June 2014, when these
two recommendations were passed at General Synod, very little has been accomplished
to carry out the mandates” (MGS 2016, p. 300). Last year CORE reported that it was
pleased with the new progress and momentum of the task force. The task force had been
meeting, it selected a chair, had a conference call with the ECC, and was enthusiastic about
engaging its work.

Unfortunately, with the loss of Tom De Vries and Tony Campbell, the work faltered and
the task force has not been able to regroup. The task force is reporting to this General
Synod that it has not been able to complete its assignment and is recommending that the
effort be discontinued.

Joint Meeting of CORE, Councils, and Staff

CORE had been in conversation with the general secretary, members of the Five-Fold Test
Task Force, and some members of the racial/ethnic councils about having a joint assembly
of the councils in fall 2018 to hear the voices of our racial/ethnic members and to discern
where the RCA is and what still needs to done for the RCA to be a thriving, missional,
multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. Again, with Tom De Vries’s resignation, the
death of Tony Campbell (who was staffing the task force), and ensuing confusion about the
proposed joint meeting, the event was cancelled.

Racial/Ethnic Councils

CORE continues to inform itself about the work of the racial/ethnic councils by having
periodic calls with the staff coordinators of the racial and ethnic councils: Earl James
(staff to the African American Black Council), Eddy Alemán (coordinator of Hispanic
ministries), and En Young Kim (coordinator for Pacific and Asian American Ministries).
CORE thanks the coordinators for their time and willingness to help CORE keep current. Members of CORE who are also members of the councils also keep the commission updated.

Native American/First Nations

CORE continues its effort to include Native American/First Nations people in its work. We are pleased to report that June Denny, a member of the Mescalero Apache and Mescalero Reformed Church in Mescalero, New Mexico, is serving as a commissioner. Thank you, June, for being willing to serve and thank you to the Commission on Nominations for your part in bringing June on.

June Denny, Rick DeBruyne, and Alina Coipel had a videoconference meeting with Luis Ruiz, who works with the RCA’s Native American congregations. For the last year Luis has been holding monthly meetings with pastors of the Native American churches. June Denny will be participating in those monthly meetings as well.

In 2017 Jo Anna Lougin attended the annual gathering of the Native American/First Nations people to represent CORE. June Denny attended the 2018 gathering, which took place April 23–25, in Hinton, Oklahoma.

Monitoring Diversity

CORE continues to perform its task of monitoring the racial and ethnic makeup of staff, GSC, commissions, task forces, etc., to make sure that all voices are heard. Of 144 total people currently on the GSC, commissions, and agency boards, 18 are African American/Haitian American, 12 are Pacific/Asian American, 10 are Hispanic, and 2 are Native American/Aboriginal. The total racial/ethnic representation is 29 percent (42 people out of 144). It is encouraging to see that more racial and ethnic people are serving on most commissions and on the GSC. CORE thanks the Commission on Nominations for its diligence and persistence in its ongoing efforts toward inclusivity.

As stated last year, CORE is concerned that the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business have no racial/ethnic commissioners. The same is true for the Church Growth Fund board. CORE recommends that General Synod encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions themselves to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates for these and other commissions. CORE has also suggested to the Commission on Nominations that they review their processes and update their forms and outreach methods in ways that will be more user-friendly for all of the church.

RE 18-1
To continue to actively encourage congregations, classes, regional synods, GSC, the racial/ethnic councils, and the commissions to intentionally identify and recruit more racial/ethnic members as candidates to serve on commissions, particularly the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Judicial Business. (ADOPTED)

Ministry in Local Congregations

In 2008 the General Synod instructed the General Synod Council to revise the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) to include two questions: How does your church reflect the racial and cultural context in which you conduct your ministry? What are you doing to
build bridges that develop and deepen mutual ministry that is multiracial or multicultural? (*MGS 2008*, R-68, p. 267).

In the intervening years, a two-page section that included these questions was eliminated from the CRF. Last year’s General Synod approved adding these questions back into the Consistorial Report Form for at least five years. CORE looks forward to receiving the responses and will report further to the 2019 General Synod.

**Mass Incarceration**

CORE continues to support efforts being made with regard to mass incarceration in the U.S. This is an important matter. Although the work of CORE is specifically focused on the RCA’s commitment to a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural future freed from racism, it affirms and supports work that addresses racial/ethnic concerns within society at large.

**Webinars**

CORE continues to be in conversation with Earl James about more effective formats, as well as new topics, for webinars.

**Electronic and Social Media**

CORE maintains a Facebook page to stay in touch and communicate with the rest of the RCA. Please visit and “like” the page at www.facebook.com/RCACORE. Please contact Alina Coipel (acoipel@rca.org) if you would like to receive emails from CORE about its current activities and issues.

**Giving Thanks**

Again, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity thanks Minsuk Lee for her contributions to CORE. The commission also thanks Alina Coipel, its staff person, who has been tirelessly invaluable in accessing information, organizing meetings, and faithfully serving CORE in so many ways.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator
Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology (COT) met October 12–14, 2017, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in conjunction with the annual joint meeting of all General Synod commissions and the General Synod Council (GSC), and February 9–10, 2018, in Atlanta, Georgia. It also met by video and conference call on February 22 to complete work in progress for inclusion in this report.

The COT is privileged to do this work for the church and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way. The commission’s primary task this year was assigned by General Synod 2017; however, the commission also continued discussion of several topics of theological significance to the church.

Referral Regarding a Theology of Office at Assemblies

From General Synod 2015, R-51 directed the General Synod Council to create a task force to bring a proposal to General Synod for changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* regarding the creation of diaconal assemblies at the classis level; and further, that the task force report on subsequent action that may be needed at the regional synod and General Synod levels (*MGS 2015*, p. 242).

During General Synod 2017, the report of the Diaconal Assemblies Task Force included two recommendations. The first was “to encourage classes and regional synods to form diaconal conferences in all the assemblies of the church, for the purposes of collaboration, education, and encouragement of deacons and diaconal ministries; and further, to instruct the general secretary to help facilitate the creation of at least one such diaconal conference utilizing Transformed & Transforming funding” (*MGS 2017*, R 17-15, p. 89). The recommendation was adopted. The second recommendation was to include deacons in all assemblies of the church (classis, regional synod, and General Synod) through a local option that authorized consistories to choose whether to delegate an elder or a deacon—a change from permitting only elders to serve as delegates (*MGS 2017*, R 17-16, pp. 91–94). The second recommendation was referred to the Commission on Theology.

In response to General Synod 2017 (“To refer R 17-16 to the Commission on Theology for the review of the matter of office at assemblies and report back to General Synod 2018,” *MGS 2017*, p. 94), and in its desire to serve the church well, the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on History, reviewed the matter of a Reformed theology of office at assemblies and presents the following paper.

**THE NATURE OF OFFICE AND ASSEMBLY**

**Overview**

Current denominational discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is governance. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, but they are neither the same nor interchangeable. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. The recommendation of this commission is to affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper “The Nature of Office and
Assembly” that offices are not interchangeable and that, as currently structured, the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament.

Introduction

A few elders and ministers representing three churches are seated around a table, coffee in hand, waiting for the General Synod meeting to begin. To everyone’s relief, there are no contentious issues on the day’s agenda. As the group settles in, one elder cautiously asks, “If everything is going well, do we really have to meet?”

A few others at the table look shocked, but most look curious, their eyes glancing toward one of the ministers. The unspoken question hangs in the air: WHY are we here? Why are WE here? What is the purpose of these people gathering in this group?

This table shares these questions with many in our denomination. Competing accounts differ on why we gather as classes, regional synods, and General Synod, as well as on who should be present at these assemblies and what qualifies them to be present. At every level of our polity, people are asking WHY are we here? And why are WE here?

This paper will argue that a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office. After a brief overview of our current conversations around office and assembly, it will examine two different visions for the nature of ecclesiastical office, before answering why we have assemblies in the church.

Current Conversations on Office and Assembly

Our current discussions reveal questions about the role of ministers, elders, and deacons at classis, regional synod, and General Synod. For decades, we have debated whether deacons should be included in these higher assemblies. A consistory is made up of ministers, elders, and deacons. Why should classis only have elders and ministers? Should the deacons be included, especially when so much of the ministry discussed at the higher assemblies is seemingly diaconal in nature—namely, ministries of “mercy, service, and outreach”? Is the work of the classis more akin to the board of elders, which would not require the presence of deacons? Much ink has been spilled, but the issue has not been settled. Beneath the presenting question of deacon inclusion are the deeper questions about who should go to our assemblies and why.

More recently, the manner of how commissioned pastors should be included at higher assemblies has sharpened these questions. A commissioned pastor is an elder who has been commissioned to a particular ministry within the bounds of a classis. Commissioned pastors are members of that classis for the duration of their commission. How should they go to General Synod: 1) As one of the members of classis, all the rest of whom are ministers; or 2) as one of the elders, none of whom is a member of classis? A paper authored by the Commission on Theology in 2017, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies,” argued that commissioned pastors ought to attend General Synod in the office to which they have been ordained: elder.

These various discussions reveal a need for a more integrated understanding of the relationship between a Reformed understanding of church office and a Reformed understanding of the assemblies of the church.
Two Visions of Ecclesiastical Office

The challenge of a theology of ecclesiastical office centers on the offices’ relationship to the common ministry of the church and the ongoing ministry of Christ. Every Christian receives a ministry. As our liturgy says, “By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work.” On the one hand, there are those who argue that ministers, elders, and deacons are simply participating in this common ministry of the church. They have no special authority or representative function. These office-bearers simply exercise a particular set of gifts for ministry. Office is functional in nature. The ministers, elders, and deacons are just like every other member of the congregation but happen to do this particular service based upon the calling and equipping of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there are those who favor a more “sacramental” understanding of office, whereby the offices represent Christ in a strong sense and come with the authority of Christ himself. Thus, the work of the minister, elder, and deacon is different from the ordinary ministry of the non-ordained person and should be more closely identified with the ongoing ministry of Christ.

The Reformed Church has often undertaken the difficult task of navigating between these two poles. The offices cannot simply be identified with the ministry given to all believers. Instead, ministers, elders, and deacons are “set apart for a ministry.” They “represent Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.” At the same time, ecclesiastical office is one of “servanthood and service.” It is a calling through which the ordinary ministry of the church is built up. It is never merely naked authority or a title devoid of responsibilities. The Reformed Church has sought to avoid both of these extremes.

However, our recent discussion has often brought more confusion than clarity.

An initial study, “The Nature of the Ministry,” presented a functional view of ecclesiastical office: ministers, elders, and deacons were called not to an office, with its “rights and privileges,” but to do the particular task of ministry, with its emphasis on service. The study lamented the current church structures that, it argued, drew sharp distinctions between clergy and laity, privileged authority over service, and were artifacts of the seventeenth century. The paper argued that a functional view of office is rooted in the New Testament. Christ is the head of his body, the church, and all believers are equal members of that body. “There is no hierarchy of members—‘The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.’ The only distinctions are those of function or service.” According to 1 Corinthians 12, all members are equally important in the body but have their specific gifts for service. Ministry is the responsibility of the whole church and can be structured in different ways to accomplish this goal. The various different lists of functions in the New Testament highlight this flexibility. The Holy Spirit calls and equips people for the common ministry of the church. “There is no one biblical form” of church government. The special forms of service that we call “offices” may change as the Spirit leads the church into new contexts.

“The Nature of the Ministry” argues for removing the language of ordination from the Reformed Church Constitution and practice and replacing it with the language of “commissioning.” Ordination is not an “indelible mark” placed upon the one ordained. A functional view of ministry means that one only inhabits the office during the period in which one is serving in that function. Commissioning would end when the service in that position ends, and one would need to be recommissioned in each subsequent ministry. In this way, the paper sought to emphasize the common ministry of all Christians by virtue of their baptism. The various officeholders in the church exist to serve the church in its common ministry. The distinction between officeholders and the rest of the congregation is...
a practical one that exists solely for equipping the church in its common ministry.

A subsequent study, "The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry," presented both a response and a clarification to this purely functional view of ministry. Offices are the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church; they include specific functions but cannot be reduced to function alone. "Function is an important aspect of office, but it is not an adequate definition of office." In the Old Testament as well as the New, the people of God were given particular offices to serve as a continuing authority in the church. The Holy Spirit came upon and anointed Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus is the true fulfillment of these offices, and his Spirit has come upon the church. However, not all gifts of the Spirit are the same. Even in a church filled with the Spirit, there is need for particular gifts "for the purpose of quickening and directing all other gifts." The frequent mention of elders, deacons, and bishops/overseers in the New Testament attests to the reality of what we today call offices. While they include particular functions, offices are given by God to the church to "represent, interpret, and proclaim the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ through the generations, and in doing so, to govern the church authoritatively by his grace and according to his purposes." The offices of minister, elder, and deacon represent Christ and his authority to the church. They are the God-given means by which Christ exercises his lordship over the church in a continuous way.

"The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry" argues for retaining the language of ordination. Ordination is neither an "indelible mark" whereby the ordained is given special grace, nor merely a prayer of blessing for someone about to undertake the task of ministry. Instead, ordination is a setting apart of an individual for a particular duty. "By it the church sets apart for specific duties those in whom it sees the gifts and divine calling requisite for the ministry of the gospel of grace and the authority necessary to govern and serve God’s people." Ordination is a consecration. The one who is ordained is presented before God as a holy, living sacrifice before the Holy Spirit to be filled and strengthened and before the church as one with the calling and gifts needed for the office. Ordination is also a legitimation. The one who is ordained is now authorized to perform the tasks of his or her office.

These two papers share many common commitments. Both claim that Christ is the prototype and source of Christian ministry. Both seek to emphasize ministry as service instead of privilege. Both seek to honor the common ministry given to the church by Christ. Both reject ordination as an "indelible mark" and the stark division between clergy and laity.

However, there are numerous tensions between the papers. Most significantly, they differ on whether the offices of minister, elder, and deacon should continue as offices and whether those who serve in those offices immediately renounce their office upon leaving their post. Whereas "The Nature of the Ministry" sees an antithesis between function and office, "The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry" sees them as compatible concepts. Additionally, there is disagreement on the nature of the church’s spiritual power. The initial study pushes strongly against any form of hierarchy within the body of Christ, so that no believer can truly stand in authority over another. However, the second study sees the proper exercise of authority by those ordained to office as part of the way Christ exercises authority over the church. While they agree on the source of ministry (Christ) and the goal of ministry (the building up of Christ’s church), a vast chasm separates them regarding how Christ accomplishes this work and the role ministers, elders, and deacons play.

Recommended changes to the Book of Church Order stemming from “The Nature of
the Ministry” were passed by the 1973 General Synod and confirmed by the classes in 1974. Perhaps the most prominent of these, still in our current Preamble, is the claim that “the ecclesiastical offices which the Reformed Church deems necessary for its ordering are understood to be essentially functional in nature, and the term ‘office’ is everywhere viewed in terms of service.” Since then, various smaller changes have been made to other areas of the BCO, cumulatively pushing our polity in the direction outlined in “The Nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ministry.”

The way forward, it seems, is to remember that office and function should not be set in opposition. In every instance, officeholders within the church carry out their ministry in service to the body of Christ, which is to say that they do not carry out ministry as the exercise of power. Following the New Testament, the Reformed tradition affirms that, unlike deacons, elders bear the burden of governance. As the doctrinal standards, Liturgy, and the Book of Church Order teach, elders must be prepared to set forth the doctrine, worship, and government of the church. Accordingly, unlike deacons, elders and ministers are particularly responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church. This ministry (function) is itself the outworking of the calling, gifting of the Spirit, and election to the office of elder or minister. A Reformed understanding of office is one that maintains a vision of parity rather than hierarchy. When this critical insight is lost, a political rather than properly ecclesial understanding of authority and power threatens the proper exercise of office. All who are ordained to offices in the church carry out their ministry in service to Christ through the anointing and guidance of the Spirit. The church is one ministry— the ministry of Christ. The parity under consideration is manifest in exercise of ecclesiastical authority by “presbyters” or “elders.” Accordingly, ministers and elders share equally in the responsibility to govern the church. Indeed, this is the case at “higher” assemblies—classes, regional synods, and the General Synod—where minister and elder delegates exercise the ministry of governance.

The Nature of Ecclesiastical Assembly

Church governance is a matter of wisdom rather than divine law. There were no “classes” or “synods,” as we know them, in the New Testament. They were not needed, because the church still had the apostles, who visited, instructed, and guided the churches. In addition to the whole church, each individual church can rightly be called the “temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16), the “bride of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2), and the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). There is no hierarchy between churches but a fundamental parity between them. Each church is equally a part of the larger church and believers constitute the united body of Christ through union with an individual church. These various churches, while independent, were in relationship to one another through mutual prayer, mutual support, and the teaching of the apostles. These churches gathered among themselves to settle disputes but also, on occasion, sent delegates to other churches to settle disputes. The gatherings of Acts 1, 6, 15, and 21 demonstrate that “synod” gatherings are permitted by Scripture even if they are not mandated. The synodical structure of the church is not necessary for the essence of church but is permitted and necessary for the well-being of the church.

The desire to uphold the clear commands of Scripture across the broad communions of the church led to the development of classes and synods. The church is to “[make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The one body of Christ must not be torn asunder, nor should it be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). The church is to maintain the truth of the gospel in the face of false teaching (2 Timothy 4:3-4; Acts 20:28-30; 2 Peter 3:14-18; 1 John 4:1-6; Matthew 7:15-
20), correct faults for the purpose of living faithfully (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Timothy 3:16, 4:2), continue to reach out in mission (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; Acts 13:47; Romans 10:13-14), and care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan (Matthew 25:35; Luke 4:18, 14:14; 1 John 3:16-17; James 1:27-2:6; Acts 24:17). In doing these things, “we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV). On a local level, Christ has given the church the offices of minister, elder, and deacon to bear witness to Christ’s ongoing ministry and guide the common ministry of the church into flourishing and faithfulness. As Herman Bavinck says, “The office does not suppress the gifts [of the church] but, rather, only guides them.” The ministers teach and admonish so that the garden of the Lord might be watered and produce much fruit. The elders exercise governance so that the sheep might be protected from wolves and faithfully follow the voice of the good shepherd. The deacons take leadership in mercy and compassion to free the oppressed and preach good news to the poor. Each office fulfills its calling so that the body grows up into maturity. Again, in the words of Bavinck:

The church is a field that needs to be constantly weeded, a tree that must be pruned at the proper time, a flock that must be led and pastured, a house that requires constant renovation, a bride who must be prepared to be presented as a pure virgin to her husband. There are the sick, the dying, the tested, the grieving; those who are under attack, conflicted, in doubt, fallen, imprisoned, and so forth, who need teaching and instruction, admonition and consolation. And even apart from these things, the church must increase in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In order that this might be so, Christ gave his church apostles, prophets, and evangelists and continues to give the church ministers, elders, and deacons (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3; 1 Peter 5). On a local level, the three offices of deacon, minister, and elder aid the congregation in carrying out the mission of its head, Jesus Christ. “Together they enable the whole mission of the church. Everything in the church will be done decently and in order when faithful persons are called to office, and responsibly fulfill their charge.”

The ordinary ministry of ministers, elders, and deacons takes place within churches and communities. But how does the church maintain unity of doctrine, discipline, and worship across its breadth, while also responding faithfully and as one to the particular challenges of this historical moment? This unity is found in Christ and secured by Christ. He is the sole head of the church and has united his church into one body. Yet, the way Christ exercises this headship has been conceived in different ways. The Roman Catholic Church maintains unity of doctrine, life, and witness through hierarchy. The unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of any given church is maintained by its communion with and submission to its bishop and, particularly, through the bishop of Rome. One congregation maintains its relationship with the head of the church, Christ, by maintaining its relationship with Christ’s vicar, the Pope. The Reformation rejected this formulation for at least two reasons and has recognized that this governance is exercised through the offices of minister and elder. First, the Reformation denied that the apostolic office continued in the person of the Pope. The office of apostle was an extraordinary office that ceased upon the death of the first apostles. The apostolic character of the church is maintained by its faithfulness to the witness of the apostles (Old and New Testaments), not by submitting to their successors (papacy). Second, the Reformation denied the hierarchy of various churches. One church does not have inherent authority over another. Whether a church was large, was home to a prominent minister, or was placed in a prominent location did not give it authority over any other church. Even parent churches were not of higher authority than the churches they planted. The churches were bound together, not by unity under the bishop of Rome
and the churches under his authority, but under the authority of the apostolic teaching, the Word of God.

The stewardship of this apostolic teaching and the governance of the body of Christ were exercised through the ministry of ministers and elders. The three offices of minister, elder, and deacon are equal in dignity, yet remain distinct. All three are offices of “servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit.” All three serve, all three represent Christ, and all three are empowered by the action of the Holy Spirit. Yet, these three offices are neither the same nor interchangeable. “The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way.” Elders are “to study God’s Word, to oversee the household of faith, to encourage spiritual growth, to maintain loving discipline, and to provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.” Deacons “are set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach.” Both elders and ministers are charged with three main tasks: Word, sacrament, and discipline. They both proclaim the Word and guard the proclamation of the Word from error and abuse. They both provide for the administration of the sacraments and guard the sacraments from being profaned. They exercise discipline. The ministry of mercy, service, and outreach performed by the deacon is vital for the health of the church. It is a calling from God and of immense value for the life and witness of the church in the world. Yet, these three offices are different and fulfill different callings within the body of Christ.

Yet how could this unity of doctrine, life, and witness be maintained beyond the local level to the larger church? In other words, how could Protestants, who maintain the Scriptures as the only rule for faith and life, hold to both the apostolicity and catholicity of the church? The sixteenth-century church developed synods in response this problem.

Synodical church government first developed in France. Meetings of pastors had taken place in Zurich, Geneva, and the Lutheran church from early in the Reformation. However, it was the Huguenots who first gathered for a synod in Paris on May 26, 1559. The church in France was expanding quickly, and the synod gathered to adopt a common confession and church order. Both historically and ontologically, the General Synod was prior to the other higher assemblies. The General Synod created provincial synods and, in 1572, created the first classes. National synods were gathered to maintain unity of doctrine, worship, and discipline so that the local churches could be united in mission.

The Dutch Reformed churches were one of many Reformed bodies—including those in Poland, Hungary, Germany, Scotland, and England—later to adopt synodical church government. However, almost upon its inception, there were objections to the structure of synods. It was believed to reintroduce hierarchy into the church and promote the tyranny of the synod over the individual church.

The assemblies of the church actually serve to subvert hierarchy. The Preamble to the BCO states that there are three kinds of authority exercised by the church: ministerial, declarative, and spiritual. In particular, the spiritual authority of the church “is the right to govern the life and activity of the church and to administer its affairs.” This authority is given to office-bearers and is exercised within the assemblies of the church. Spiritual authority is exercised by the gathered assembly, not the individual or even a handful of members. Furthermore, “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.” The synod structure seeks to ward off
abuse by circumscribing the spiritual authority of the church so that it is exercised in its proper place. Not every person will be called to office, and “some persons will always be subject, within the proper exercise of authority, to the decisions of others. Since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.” The placement of assemblies serves to protect one person or one group from exercising undue authority over others without saying that there is never a place for authority to be exercised. By placing boundaries around the exercise of spiritual authority, assemblies can subvert the natural hierarchies found in our culture based on wealth, prestige, gender, race, and power.

There is profound wisdom in having regular assemblies of the church. While having no biblical mandate, it represents a wise way of maintaining the catholic and apostolic character of the church. The church is called at all times to faithful witness to Jesus Christ, and that faithful witness is encouraged by the work of the offices as they assemble to promote the unity of the church’s worship, discipline, and doctrine.

Who Should Gather in These Assemblies?

The Reformed Church has maintained that the church is governed best by those called by God to serve in the ordinary offices of the church. Having been called, they are equipped for this work of service for the good of the church and therefore for the good of the world. The various assemblies are gatherings of those who have been called by God to help maintain the unity, faithfulness, and witness of the church. As the Preamble to the *BCO* states:

> While governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies, the church expresses its full ministry through all its members in a variety of tasks. Each assembly is charged with determining the nature and extent of its ministry in faithful obedience to Scripture and in responsible concern for the church’s mission in the world. Every member receives a ministry in baptism and is called with the whole church to embody Christ’s intentions for the world.

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. In short, guidance and governance. This perspective about the purpose of the assemblies is reflected in the *BCO*, which states that “the purpose of church government is to aid the church in the development of its own life, in order that it may carry out the mission of its Head—to announce the good news of his Saviorhood and extend his Lordship throughout the world.” The assemblies are said to have judicial and legislative powers, with the board of elders, classis, regional synod, and General Synod having both powers. The deacons only have legislative power in the consistory and never judicial power. This is a result of the specific nature of the callings of the different offices and the work required by the various assemblies. Therefore, since the task of the greater assemblies is guidance (legislative) and governance (judicial), the offices that should be gathered at those assemblies should be those tasked with guiding and governing the church. It is for this reason that the Reformed Church has filled its greater assemblies with elders and ministers. According to the Preamble to the *BCO*, in the New Testament:

> The churches then were ruled by “presbyters” or “elders,” just as the synagogues from which the first Christian converts came were ruled by elders. The Reformed
churches consider the minister to be an elder of a special kind, called in some churches of the Reformed order, the “teaching elder.” Ministers and elders therefore govern the church together. They also assist in the governing of the larger church by becoming from time to time members of the higher legislative assemblies or courts of the church.\(^\text{32}\)

The Reformed churches followed the New Testament—where rule was exercised by elders and ministers—because the particular calling of their office entails the particular functions required for the larger assemblies. A change of the composition of classis, regional synod, and General Synod would entail a change of the very nature and purpose of those assemblies. If the primary purpose of the greater assemblies is guarding the unity of the doctrine, life, and witness of the church, then these assemblies should be filled with elders and ministers.

As the recent paper “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” concludes, “Careful distinctions, alongside a fundamental commitment to the parity (rather than hierarchy) of the offices, are necessary to the good order and wellbeing of the church and its witness to the gospel.”\(^\text{33}\) Behind this affirmation lay the presiding issue of how commissioned pastors could be delegates at the higher assemblies of regional and/or General Synod. The Commission on Theology affirmed the teaching of the church set out in the Preamble to the \textit{BCO}, that “since the whole church cannot meet together at one time and place to deliberate, representative governing bodies must be established on the various levels. The unity of the church is preserved in acceptance of the fact that all are governed by the decisions made in their behalf by those who represent them.”\(^\text{34}\)

Recognizing the need to honor and celebrate the unique ministry of commissioned pastors (ordained elders whose ministry often shares a functional semblance to that carried out by ministers of Word and sacrament), and, at the same time, signaling the importance of their ordination as elders, “A Theological Rationale for Commissioned Pastors at the Broader Assemblies” argued that commissioned pastors ought to be permitted to serve as elder delegates on the basis of their office as elder.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The coffee break midway through the General Synod meeting is about to be interrupted so commission reports can continue, and one elder is brave enough to ask: “So WHY are we here?” Every eye turns toward the ministers, and the silence hangs around the table. It is a question that has been asked before and left unanswered.

Only this time, one quiet elder softly says, “God has called us here. He placed us here to help the church be faithful, to help the church proclaim the Word of God, baptize, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, to reach out to the lost, and to praise Jesus. I’m sure God could do all that without us, but he doesn’t choose to.” There are a few nods as everyone takes a deep breath and gets back to work.

The purpose of an assembly determines its composition. The primary purpose of the greater assemblies of the church is to maintain the unity of the church’s doctrine, life, and witness in the world. If a Reformed theology of assembly grows out of a Reformed theology of office, the perspective of this commission is that the offices of elder and minister best serve the greater assemblies.
To affirm the Reformed principles outlined in the paper “The Nature of Office and Assembly,” that offices are not interchangeable and that the higher assemblies require the specific contributions of those gifted and called to the offices of elder and minister of Word and sacrament. (ADOPTED)

Ongoing Work

The COT continued discussion of items assigned to it as well as items the commission considers to have theological significance for the church. During its October and February meetings, the commission continued examining the roles and training available for commissioned pastors. The COT hopes to serve as a support and resource for those involved in training commissioned pastors and other leaders in the church. The COT also consulted with the Commission on Church Order regarding the tensions around the term “commissioned pastor.” It also agreed to offer support to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education as it begins a project to produce resources to teach children about a Reformed understanding of faith, covenant, and identity using historical exemplars of the faith. Finally, responding to a request from the RCA director of communication, the COT began the process of reviewing the “Questions of Faith” pages on the RCA website. The commission always welcomes appropriate inquiries of theological significance from members of the RCA, and it continues to trust that its work serves the RCA and specifically the General Synod and brings glory to the triune God.

Acknowledgments

In closing, the commission offers thanks to Jill Caratini, a specialized minister from Atlanta, Georgia, and John Young, an elder from LaGrangeville, New York, for their faithful service. Their membership on the Commission on Theology is ending, and the COT is deeply grateful for their gifts, perspectives, and contributions to the ministry of the RCA. The commission also offers thanks to Terry DeYoung, staff to the commission, for his constant and effective guidance of its work.

Respectfully submitted,
Laird Edman, moderator

1. *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13); Chapter 1, Part I, Article 6, Section 1 (2017 edition, 22).
17 Bavinck, 433.
18 Bavinck, 418.
19 Bavinck, 422.
20 Liturgy for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons (2000).
21 *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Sections 4; 8; 10 (2017 edition, 12–13).
22 *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 4 (2017 edition, 12).
23 *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 8 (2017 edition, 13).
24 *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 10 (2017 edition, 13).
25 Bavinck, 432.
33 *MGS 2017*, 317.
Report of the Commission for Women

The Commission for Women (CfW) is a group of eight women and men, lay and clergy, committed to the work of advocacy in the Reformed Church in America. Honoring the gifts of women strengthens the church and invites the full participation of all of God’s people. The Commission for Women seeks to raise awareness to provide opportunities for women in the church, to provide information so that women can participate in the leadership and life of the church, to work on systemic changes in the church for the full inclusion of women, and to collaborate and celebrate with other RCA bodies on women’s issues.

The Commission for Women met twice this year; our fall meeting was held in Grand Rapids with the other commissions and General Synod Council, and our 2018 winter meeting was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 2 and 3. We were hosted by Liberti Church in Philadelphia and were heartened to see the good work that they are doing for their community and the support they have for women’s gifts and talents in the life of their church.

There were several topics at hand that the Commission for Women discussed, including the celebration of 40 years of women’s ordination in the RCA at General Synod 2018, working with the Commissions on Christian Action and Christian Discipleship and Education on their respective projects, and continuing to hear the stories of women in the RCA. However, the CfW felt that the main issue that we wanted to focus on and highlight in 2018 is the issue of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women, especially in light of the #metoo and #churchtoo movements and the #wearespeaking statement put out by the RCA (www.rca.org/we-are-speaking/full-statement). To this end, we would like to make the following recommendation:

W 18-1
To affirm the #wearespeaking statement; and further,

To encourage that this statement and the subject of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence be used to inform services of worship; to encourage pastors to preach on this topic as well as to care for victims of harassment, abuse, and sexual violence; and to encourage congregations to form study groups to explore and reflect upon this topic. (ADOPTED)

In addition to being a moral and ethical issue, harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women is also a financial issue. The CfW understands that there are churches already being dropped by insurance companies because these companies deemed churches to be a liability and a risk. Hence, the Commission for Women would like to submit the following recommendations:

W 18-2
To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and further,

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistories, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation.
A motion was made and supported to amend W 18-2 as follows (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken):

To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and furthermore ensure that investigations into such allegations will result in protection and non-retaliatory behaviors toward the reporters; and

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistories, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation.

VOTED: To amend W 18-2.

A motion was made and supported to refer W 18-2 as amended to the Committee of Reference to consider and report back to the General Synod before conclusion of the 2018 session.

VOTED: To not refer W 18-2 as amended.

VOTED: To adopt W 18-2 as amended.

W 18-2
To instruct the GSC to develop and implement a sexual harassment policy and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents; and furthermore ensure that investigations into such allegations will result in protection and non-retaliatory behaviors toward the reporters; and

To enact denomination-wide education and training to include boards, institutions, agencies, commissions, regional synods, classes, consistories, and congregations, reporting back to General Synod 2019 its progress and details of implementation. (ADOPTED)

W 18-3
To urge every classis to have a sexual harassment training in place by General Synod 2019 and to have a plan for sustained accountability through continued education. (ADOPTED)

In this joyful year of celebrating women’s leadership, gifts, and roles in the Reformed Church in America, the Commission for Women remains dedicated to honoring women’s stories and experiences. We believe that a church that honors women honors all people of the church, strengthening the work that we do together in service of God and God’s people.

Respectfully submitted,
Shirley Lin, moderator
The office of General Synod professor involves representing “the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry” as well as exercising “the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 70]). We fulfill this office both individually and collectively. Elected and installed by the General Synod, we remain amenable to the General Synod in matters of doctrine, striving at all times and in all ways to fulfill our calling faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully. This is the professorate’s seventh annual report to the General Synod.

We have met twice in the past year. Our fall meeting was held September 29–30, 2017, at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Our spring meeting was held March 2–3, 2018, at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

Part of our collective calling is to facilitate theological reflection throughout the church so that our witness as a church may be more faithful and effective. One of the ways we lived into this calling this past year was by engaging with General Synod president Lee DeYoung, General Synod vice president James Nakakihara, and interim general secretary Don Poest in a discussion of the nature, purpose, and history of the office of General Synod professor. We very much welcomed this opportunity, which came at President DeYoung’s invitation. This discussion took place in Holland, Michigan, on January 28, 2018, with the Midwestern members of the professorate in attendance. The discussion served as a rich reminder of our call “to offer, collectively and individually, the ministry of teaching within the RCA as a whole, and to represent the living tradition of the church in the preparation and certification of candidates for its ministry” (BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8, Section 1 [2017 edition, p. 70]).

In accordance with this calling, we have been active this year in matters of theological education and the formation of persons for ministry. We are represented on the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (formerly the Call, Care, Standards, and Collaboration group) and are sharing with that group the task of evaluating the RCA’s eight Standards for the Preparation for Ministry. We are also represented on the committees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) that recommend the granting of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to, respectively, students at non-RCA seminaries and candidates pursuing the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) to ordination. We also set and evaluate the written examinations for the AAR candidates.

There are presently nine General Synod professors: Jaeseung Cha, Renée House, and Allan Janssen from New Brunswick Theological Seminary; Carol Bechtel, Timothy Brown, James Brownson, and Thomas Boogaart from Western Theological Seminary; and Chad Pierce and Cornelis Kors from the MFCA. Each professor was nominated by a theological agent of the General Synod and then elected by the synod so they can exercise a substantial and continuing role in preparing candidates for ministry in the RCA under the authority of their nominating agency.

This year we express our deep appreciation for the work and leadership of three of our number who anticipate retirement in the coming year. Allan Janssen and Renée House will be retiring from their teaching responsibilities at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in June 2018, while Thomas Boogaart will be retiring from his teaching responsibilities at Western Theological Seminary in December 2018. We are grateful for their collegial spirit, their love for the church of Jesus Christ, and for countless hours poured into preparing students for effective ministry in the RCA. We pray every grace upon them in their retirement.
According to the Book of Church Order, the professorate is responsible to “engage the church in reflection on theological matters that in its judgment are central to the life and ministry of the church” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 6, Section 2a [2017 edition, p. 117]). Toward this end, we offer the following two reflections that we hope will encourage not only the current General Synod but also the whole church to engage in deep and prayerful discussion of matters that are of critical importance to the health and witness of the Reformed Church in America. The first is in the tradition of the biblical lament psalms, which feature not only laments but praises. The second is a reflection on the role of geography in establishing the boundaries of classes in the Reformed Church in America.

Laments and Praises

The first responsibility of the professorate is that it “shall engage the church in reflection on theological matters that in its judgment are central to the life and ministry of the church” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 6, Section 2a [2017 edition, p. 117]).

The Reformed church has enjoyed the heritage of a polity that broke from a hierarchy where the church was governed by individuals (bishops) to a synodical form of governance. We have defended that synodical polity as biblically and theologically sound. It has served us well. In recent years, some have become frustrated as majority opinion in a synod could not achieve the requisite super-majority among the classes. There are advantages to this polity; it has allowed the church to act deliberately when constitutional changes are considered. The result of the frustration has been a polarization that threatens to estrange brothers and sisters in Christ in a church division.

Hence, the professorate fulfills this responsibility by offering the following laments and praises:

- We are saddened by a polarization within the church that threatens both the unity and the catholicity of the church (two fundamental attributes confessed in the Nicene Creed). We see members of the synod—and of the church—retreating into echo chambers with decreasing chance for dialogue, in contrast with the focus of our own Belhar Confession on the centrality of reconciliation. In our paper on the unity of the church (MGS 2016, pp. 323–328), we noted that unity is not uniformity. Indeed, we pointed out that the declaration that ministers and professors make to “subscribe to the Standards as ‘historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God’” allows for considerable diversity, including the meaning of the Standards themselves (MGS 2016, p. 324). While our unity is in Christ (not in ourselves), so our diversity is the work of the Spirit, whose work is inherently multifaceted (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12).
- We are saddened by the paucity of scriptural engagement around issues within the synod itself, particularly as the synod gathers in its annual session. Scripture (and confessional) debate and discussion appear to be little more than citations that allow little or no time for deeper reflection. This deficiency has particularly plagued recent deliberations on human sexuality.
- We are saddened that the historic Reformed polity has been diminished. Reformed polity has insisted that matters be determined in a mutual conversation, and that in Reformed governance, decisions are made at the most local level possible, and the greater assemblies practice appropriate oversight. That polity is being transformed. It is our task to remind us all that decisions that shaped that polity emerged from theological commitments, and that a shift in polity is a shift in how the church manifests its nature.
- We are saddened that, in the loss of discussion, we have lost an avenue given to us by God to discover the truth. For in discussion we meet our brother or
sister in Christ as the “other,” as one who challenges our certainties, indeed our prejudices. This is particularly true in scriptural discernment, as we listen to the voice of the other (both as one who comes to us from the past and as one who meets us in the present), thereby to listen together for what God might be saying to the church.

- We are saddened as we see bonds of unity stretched, and as we also hear the pain of those who have been left behind in the church’s councils. And yet we do not despair. For our trust is not in human plans and projects but in the God who has led God’s people through wilderness places and waters and feeds them along the way. God will not be deterred but will use even God’s own struggling church for the glorious purposes of God’s reign.

- We are grateful to be servants of a church that, with its mothers and fathers and with churches throughout the world, believes that Jesus Christ is Lord of all times and places.

- We are grateful to be part of a church constituted by Christ’s presence in Word and sacrament and to follow in joyful obedience the Scripture that addresses us with that Word. Moreover, we are glad as professors to educate ministers of Word and sacrament in a deeper and broader understanding of Scripture.

- We are grateful to be part of a church that has heard the Lord’s call to “go … and make disciples of all nations,” as a church that has, from its outset, set itself in mission to the uttermost parts of the globe (Matthew 28:19).

- We are grateful to unite in a tradition that cherished its past while looking to a future where all God’s children are welcomed around the Lord’s one table, open to confess our sin, and encouraged by grace to venture forward.

- We are grateful to enjoy a polity that requires us to deliberate together until we can come together, “together on the way” (synod).

- We are grateful to follow a sovereign Lord whose reign has already begun, whose Spirit roams widely beyond the church, and whose beloved community will triumph, beckoning us forward.

- We are grateful to stand in a tradition that refuses to compromise in its confession of God’s graceful turn toward creation.

- We are grateful to serve together in a church that delights in God’s good creation, united in the Lord who speaks to us and meets us in the struggles and joys of our created reality.

- Finally, we are glad to serve the synod and the church as stewards of a biblical and theological tradition that you have given us as our responsibility, always ready to share with the church the fruit of our faltering labor as sisters and brothers serving the one Lord for the sake of his beloved world.

Classis Bounds and Geography

The professorate would like to raise some issues surrounding the role of geography in establishing the boundaries of classes in the Reformed Church in America. At stake is the meaning of the words “bounds” or “boundaries” as found in the Book of Church Order. At the opening of the section of the BCO devoted to classes (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1 [2017 edition, p. 29]), it states, “The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds.”

What is the meaning of this last, underlined phrase? The same word appears in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 2, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 9; Chapter 1, Part II, Article 19, Section 1; and Chapter 1, Part II, Article 19, Section 2. Moreover, this word is interpreted in an explicitly geographic way
When an organizing church is initiated by a classis not within the classis’s own geographic area, the initiating classis shall receive the permission of the classis in which it intends to initiate its ministry. Since a classis is composed of “all the churches within its bounds” (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1), normally an organizing church shall become a part of the classis to which it is geographically most proximate within a period of ten years from the date of its first gathering for worship. However, the transfer of the congregation to the other classis happens through consultation between the two classes and the regional synod or synods affected, and the vote of approval by both classes, acting for the best interests of the new congregation.

Moreover, the same word, “bounds,” occurs at multiple points in the BCO discussion of regional synods (Chapter 1, Part III, Article 1, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 1, Section 2; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 1; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 4; Chapter 1, Part III, Article 4, Section 2; and Chapter 1, Part III, Article 7, Section 1), as well as in various portions of the BCO devoted to the General Synod (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 8.c.3), as well as in Formulary #2 in the Appendix. Twice the BCO speaks of “boundaries” rather than “bounds” (Preamble and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 3).

Events over the last number of years, however, have called into question the traditional meaning of “bounds” or “boundaries,” which are interpreted geographically in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6. The creation of City Classis by the Regional Synod of the Far West originally defined its bounds as equivalent to those of the Far West Region of the RCA. This, of course, overlapped with many other classes in that region, but some clarity was provided when it was made clear that the focus of the new classis was upon urban areas with populations greater than 500,000 people. Thus some sort of geographic bounds were envisioned. The inclusion somewhat later into this classis of churches in the Philadelphia area complicated this discussion of “bounds” even further, because these churches are geographically not found in the Far West Region at all, though a generous interpretation of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 8, Section 6 in the BCO (listed above) conceivably allows for such a provision.

But recent action by the Regional Synod of the Far West in creating the Classis of the Americas complicates this matter even further. Its proposal states that it will be a new classis “in the Far West Region for the unique and primary purpose of doing ministry from, to, and through multi-generational and multicultural Hispanic communities.” The proposal goes on to state that “all Hispanic pastors and congregations will be invited to consider being a part of Classis of the Americas. Each will have the opportunity to accept that invitation or to continue in their current classis.” Thus, the new classis again will not be defined by any sort of geographic boundary but instead by the ethnicity of the churches that are members of the classis. Although the proposal doesn’t say so explicitly, one assumption appears to be that Hispanic churches that are part of other regional synods can also join this classis, though this apparently has not yet happened.

But even if this has not yet happened, we see within the Far West Region a radically different interpretation of the meaning of “bounds” in the BCO, understanding it to refer not to geography but to ethnicity.

This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, other regions of the RCA have already rejected in the past some proposals to establish ethnic classes (e.g., a proposal to establish a Korean classis from the Classis of Greater Palisades). These other parts of the church
that have considered this option have resisted it, pointing to the Belhar Confession, with its focus upon reconciliation and the catholicity of the church, as well as the Belhar’s insistence that the church’s unity “must become visible.” In addition, the New Testament itself speaks of churches using geographic terminology (e.g. “the churches in Galatia”) and profoundly resists demarcation along other—particularly ethnic—lines (e.g. “Jewish” or “Gentile” churches). Furthermore, the professorate believes that matters of guidance and discipline in a classis are significantly more difficult when churches are spread widely and are not geographically contiguous with each other, even when they are ethnically similar. Finally, the professorate believes that ethnic minorities need to be heard throughout the RCA and should not be focused in only one classis, which, we believe, would ultimately diminish their influence in the RCA overall. Ethnic minorities are already represented in racial/ethnic councils established by the General Synod Council (Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b [2017 edition, p. 105]) and thus centralized access to denominational structures is already in place. What need to be cultivated are broader contacts throughout the denomination, and consolidating ethnicities in a single classis would work against this. Individual classes can also find a variety of means to empower the voices of minorities in their own life.

The professorate of the RCA therefore believes that this non-geographic interpretation of classis “bounds” needs to be tested, because it represents a substantial change in our order going forward. With this in mind, the professorate offers the following recommendation:

TE 18-1
To request the Commission on Church Order to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order, defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod.

A motion was made and supported to amend TE 18-1 as follows (additions are underlined):

To request the Commission on Church Order, Commission on History, and Commission on Theology to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order…..

VOTED: To amend TE 18-1.

TE 18-1 as amended was before the house.

VOTED: To adopt TE 18-1 as amended.

The final version of TE 18-1 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

TE 18-1
To request the Commission on Church Order, Commission on History, and Commission on Theology to offer its interpretation of the word “bounds” in the Book of Church Order, defining specifically its relationship to geographic boundaries and its implications for ethnic classes, for report back to the 2019 General Synod. (ADOPTED)
Conclusion

In all of this work, we continue to explore new possibilities for our collective role. We are grateful for having been charged with this call and are deeply sensible of our responsibility to the church. We solicit your prayers and your advice, and we are committed to engaging conversation at all levels of the RCA’s life and work.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Bechtel, moderator
together with the entire professorate, including Thomas Boogaart, Timothy Brown, James Brownson, Jaeseung Cha, Cornelis Kors, Renée House, Chad Pierce, and Allan Janssen.
Report of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

General Synod exercises oversight of ministerial formation and the standards for preparation for ministry through its two seminaries and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA). Like the RCA seminaries (though they are quite different from one another), the MFCA possesses a deep commitment to developing faithful, educated, and evangelical Reformed leaders. Its purpose is the preparation of men and women for the ministries of Christ and his church, most specifically those called to the office of minister of Word and sacrament.

From its inception 20 years ago, the MFCA has both been tasked with and also embraced a mandate to expand opportunities for RCA ordination to groups not previously served. This is clearly stated in the MFCA Board of Trustees’ mission statement:

The Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) exists to strengthen the ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by awarding Certificates of Fitness for Ministry to specific groups of candidates and working cooperatively with partners inside and outside the RCA to broaden opportunities for diverse ministerial formation.

Given the authority delegated to it by General Synod, the MFCA board, its Certification Committee members, and its staff continue to accomplish this mission by:

- Awarding the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to RCA candidates graduating from non-RCA seminaries (via Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care, or RCSC) or pursuing an approved alternate route (AAR);
- Evaluating, through the RCSC and AAR certification committees and staff, the progress of candidates and their continuation in and completion of the process leading to the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, as their achievements dictate;
- Periodically ensuring that the RCA Standards for Preparation for Ministry are upheld in the oversight of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and are reviewed, with recommendations made to the appropriate RCA body if the MFCA board believes changes would be appropriate;
- Providing graduate-level courses designed to meet the standards for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry;
- Collaborating with and providing counsel to congregations and classes in the care and nurture of candidates for the ministry who are seeking the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry through the MFCA; and
- Interpreting and advocating for the work of the MFCA to the larger church.

The MFCA has evolved from its predecessor, the Theological Education Agency (TEA). The TEA had been established as an RCA institution to serve the then-growing Regional Synod of the Far West, with the largest number of its candidates, almost all of whom were white and male, attending Fuller Theological Seminary. The following enrollment statistics as of January 27, 2018, indicate the significant changes in just two decades:

There are currently 87 candidates enrolled in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process; 20 (23 percent) of these are pursuing the Certificate through the Approved Alternate Route (AAR), which did not exist until the MFCA was established.

Enrollment in the MFCA continues to cluster in the eastern half of the United States. Eighty-two percent of the candidates reside east of the Rocky Mountains. More than 62 percent (62.2 percent) are east of the Mississippi.
Just over 27 percent (27.5 percent) of the candidates are female. This is again an increase from the prior year (23.5 percent).

Forty percent of the AAR candidates represent a racial/ethnic minority group. More than 34 percent (34.6 percent) of all our candidates represent racial/ethnic minorities.

Given the continuing significant changes in the RCA and its official goals as expressed by Transformed & Transforming, the current church climate, and changes in technology and the contexts of pastoral education, the MFCA will continue to adapt and broaden its methods of accomplishing this mission and will seek to work with all the partners God provides to accomplish this work, with special emphasis on the following:

- Adapting its operations and programs where necessary to embrace a multiracial future freed of racism;
- Arranging for instruction in Korean and Spanish to ensure that talented candidates of all backgrounds can pursue appropriate pastoral education; and
- As appropriate, given our polity, working with classes and institutions to enhance educational opportunities for commissioned pastors and others and to encourage a seamless transition to study for the ministry of Word and sacrament where possible.

These initiatives are not new, but they have taken on more denominational importance.

How the MFCA Board Operates

By permission and approval of the General Synod Council (GSC), the MFCA Board of Trustees operates under policy governance. In accordance with the tenets of policy governance, which are also used elsewhere in the RCA, the board intentionally focuses on visioning and policy development, setting clear goals for the agency but delegating the means of achieving them to the executive director and his staff, subject only to explicit executive limitations. The board stays abreast of the MFCA program through the monitoring reports of the director and direct experience with candidates. Some board members serve or have served on the RCSC and AAR committees and some received the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry through one of these routes.

Future Vision for the Agency

The MFCA Board of Trustees continues to dedicate significant time to discussing the future of the agency. We are grateful for and have participated in the work of the Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee (PFCC) in taking up the important work of seeking clarity and consistency in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry among the three theological agents. We are hopeful that this ongoing conversation among the agents and throughout the denomination will strengthen the work of classes and agents in coordinating and supervising candidates for ministry.

We continue to engage in discussion around various structural options for the agency and the financial resources to sustain this important work of robust ministerial formation.

Budgets and Finances

The MFCA's finances have been under strain for a number of years, and the agency continues to draw from reserves on an annual basis. Unlike the two seminaries, MFCA is no longer an independent corporation (as it was for several years after its chartering).
The agency receives minimal support from congregations and individuals. Whereas the seminaries have major campaigns focused on building projects available to them, the MFCA has no such capacity to raise funds. The lack of “bricks and mortar” leaves efforts and programs unfunded. This is especially true when it comes to candidate assistance and scholarships. The average candidate continues to invest more than $2,000, over and above regular education costs in order to complete the requirements for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM). The agency appeals to General Synod and churches to consider financial support of the agency, even if it is through direct support of candidates.

Seventy-nine percent of the MFCA budget comes from the theological education assessment. The remainder comes from user fees, tuition, and investment income. The MFCA Board of Trustees is grateful for the generous support of General Synod through the assessments. The agency would not exist if it was not for the theological education assessment income.

Cooperative Efforts

Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services

The MFCA has continued to participate in several cooperative efforts. One such effort is with Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services and the DeVos Family Foundation. Along with Calvin Theological Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Western Theological Seminary, the MFCA is assisting in the development of parish-based Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) programs throughout North America. Participants from the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the RCA will engage CPE at various locations in North America. Karl Van Harn of Pine Rest will be facilitating the program. Programs have been completed in New Jersey; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Southern California. A program in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, should be close to completion at the time of General Synod.

Western Theological Seminary

The MFCA has also entered into what is presently an informal arrangement with Western Theological Seminary (WTS). The agency has hosted a number of WTS courses in its building in Paramount, California. Courses have been offered in both English and Spanish. The MFCA board hopes this location will become a regular site for WTS as it reaches more distance students. The MFCA has a number of Approved Alternate Route (AAR) candidates enrolled in the WTS Distance Learning Program in order to complete the requirements toward the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry.

Certificates of Fitness for Ministry Awarded

The Board of Trustees awarded 18 Certificates of Fitness for Ministry in the past year: 12 through the RCSC process and six through the AAR process.

Reformed Candidates’ Supervision and Care (RCSC)

William Lynn Borror
Tien-Heng Chiu
Jonathan Edward Davis
Jonathan Edward DeGroot
Yakuv Gurung
Hyunsung Chris Jeong

Classis of Delaware-Raritan
Classis of Queens
Classis of the City
Classis of West Sioux
Classis of Great Lakes City
Classis of Delaware-Raritan
Approved Alternate Route (AAR)

David Russell Komline  Classis of Holland
Han-luen Kantzer-Komline  Classis of Holland
Branson LaVern Parler  Classis of North Grand Rapids
Brenna Peterson Rubio  Classis of the City
Christopher George Schaefer  Classis of Minnesota
Betsy Lynn Westman  Classis of Montgomery

In addition to the geographic and demographic diversity of these candidates, we note that several of those earning the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry this year and some others currently under care are either holders of Ph.Ds. or from western and southern areas with non-Reformed backgrounds, adding further diversity to our ministerial corps.

Alternate Means and Petitions

1. **Reduction in 24-Month Requirement**: The Classis of Holland request, on behalf of Mike Lamson, to substitute a period of time to make up any deficiency of the 24 months of being in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process was approved by the board (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3 [pp. 44–45, 2017 edition]). The board recognized the ministry supervised by the Classis of Holland for part of the requirement.

2. **Reduction in 24-Month Requirement**: The Classis of North Grand Rapids request, on behalf of Jason Vermeulen, to substitute a period of time to make up any deficiency of the 24 months of being in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process was approved by the board (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3 [pp. 44–45, 2017 edition]). The board recognized the ministry supervised by the Classis of North Grand Rapids at Casnovia Reformed Church, as well as at Life Spring Church in Fish Hawk, Florida, for part of the requirement.

3. **Alternate Means for Biblical Languages**: The Classis of Nassau-Suffolk request, on behalf of Susan Converse, to substitute the MFCA online Biblical Tools courses to meet the biblical language requirement was approved by the board (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 3 [pp. 47–48, 2017 edition]).

4. **Alternate Means for Biblical Languages**: The Classis of the City request, on behalf of Diana Macias, to substitute the MFCA online Biblical Tools courses to meet the biblical language requirement was approved by the board (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 3 [pp. 47–48, 2017 edition]).
Embracing the Vision: NBTS, a Seminary of the Reformed Church in America

Since arriving at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), I have immersed myself in the history and theology of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). I was honored to visit West End Collegiate Church in New York and see the millstone from mill loft in the small colonial town of New Amsterdam. I have also had the pleasure of visiting Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, the oldest evangelical church in North America with a continuous ministry.

Moreover, I am honored to serve as president of the seminary that has its roots in the Reformation of the 1500s. At one time many years ago, the church sent ministers to Holland to be ordained, but in 1784, the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church elected John Henry Livingston as professor to prepare students for the ordained ministry. When I enter my office every day and walk by the writing desk of John Henry Livingston, made in 1780, I am reminded of the history and theology of the RCA. I am also reminded of the struggle that occurred as the church shifted from Dutch-language worship to English.

As we seek to develop a Doctor of Ministry concentration in missiology, I am inspired by the RCA’s early focus on missions in Asia and Africa. I am particularly aware of our graduates Elihu Doty, class of 1836, and John Van Nest Talmage, class of 1845, who were both missionaries to China. It is my strong desire and commitment to continue in the RCA tradition of involving the seminary and the church in worldwide mission efforts and services. We are currently developing an intensive course to be taught in South Africa and will partner with the RCA Global Mission department and its rich 233-year history and experiences.

Regarding missions and church life, it is befitting that we have a Korean Christian church worshipping in our building because of our unique commitment to embrace diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds. In 2007, in an effort to promote understanding and confront some of the subtle and overt forms of racism, the seminary took the bold step of forming the Anti-Racism Transformation Team (ARTT). This team is composed of students, alumni/ae, faculty, and trustees. As a result of the work of ARTT, the NBTS Board of Trustees adopted the following anti-racism statement:

We, the Board of Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, have decided to take a stand against racism and insidious structure of privilege and power. We are committed to identifying and dismantling all such structures in this seminary. We make this commitment in full knowledge and understanding that it will involve uncomfortable and painful self-examination, both personal and corporate, and that it will require deep and difficult changes at all levels of our beloved institution, including this board. We are humbly yet firmly convinced that in making this commitment we are being led in Spirit, we are demonstrating obedience to God’s will and plan, and we are following the example of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We pray that God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer will redeem our sins and guide, bless and help our creative efforts to let God do a “new thing” at New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

NBTS has been deeply committed to missions since the 1800s. More specifically, from 1855 to 1889, NBTS sent Reformed Church missionaries to serve in India, Korea, and Arabia. From the Scudder family to the Chamberlain family, NBTS has a history of “growing” and sending Christian missionaries. Today, NBTS continues to celebrate
our 1884 graduate Horace G. Underwood, who was an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church and an appointee of the American Presbyterian Church as a missionary to Korea.

Our efforts to embrace diversity and non-discrimination have been a part of the fabric of the NBTS throughout its history. In 1879, Islay Walden and John Bergen were recorded as the first African Americans to graduate from NBTS. Additionally, in 1882 NBTS graduated two Japanese students, Kumage Kimura and Moto Oghimi.

New Brunswick Theological Seminary also made an impact on the RCA at large in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s as it sought to welcome people from non-Dutch backgrounds. NBTS alumni can be found listed among the men and women working with the RCA racial/ethnic councils throughout the years. Our alumni/ae continue to help the RCA address issues of race, ethnicity, and gender as they relate to Pacific and Asian Americans, Latino and Latina Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, and women.

The first female RCA minister was ordained in 1973, and ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament was opened to all women by an act of the General Synod in 1979. NBTS first received a proposal to admit a female student in 1906, but it was not until 1961 that the first woman, Martha Houck, was admitted to take classes at NBTS. Margaret Yoder was the first woman to graduate from the seminary in 1971. Today women comprise more than 70 percent of our student body, and their service as pastors, members of church staffs, specialized ministers, and delegates to the RCA General Synod has increased over the years.

Like the Reformed Church in America, NBTS has moved into the twenty-first century, rooted and established in a theology of education, mission, and service that is based on Scripture. The seminary continues to embrace a theology of ministry, requiring scholarship, critical discernment, and dialogical learning rooted in the tradition of the Reformed Church in America.

I am humbled and honored to be the new president and lead shepherd of such a phenomenal institution as NBTS. I also appreciate the Classis of New Brunswick, which is open to receiving me as an RCA minister of the Word and sacrament. I am further honored that the NBTS Board of Trustees is willing to confer upon me the title of Livingston Professor of Theology, which has been bestowed on each president of NBTS since 1959.

Accomplishments of 2017

Notable Changes among Existing Personnel

Alycia Bencivengo was promoted to executive assistant to the president. Willard Ashley was promoted to vice president of strategic institutional initiatives and faculty director of the Center of Social Justice and Leadership Development. Ken Termott was promoted to vice president of operations. Beth Tanner was appointed as dean of academic affairs for three years. Terry Ann Smith was promoted to associate dean of institutional assessment and assistant professor of biblical studies. Faye Taylor was appointed director of field placement and director of the NBTS-NY campus. Jinhong Kim was appointed to the Horace G. Underwood Chair in Global Christianity.

Notable New NBTS Positions

In January 2018, R. Scott Sheldon was hired as director of seminary advancement and
relations. Sheldon comes to NBTS with more than 30 years of strategic leader and advisor experience in the nonprofit sector. He has a broad background with philanthropic organizations and is a seasoned fundraiser with excellent donor relation skills. Sheldon will use his skills in development, communications/marketing, and financial management within the nonprofit sector for the benefit of our wonderful seminary.

John Coakley will serve as interim director of the Gardner A. Sage Library, effective March 1, 2018. Coakley will be on site for ten hours per week, supervising library staff, assisting the staff in proving library services to students and community patrons, and representing the library as a member of the administrative and faculty councils. A formal search for a permanent director has been launched.

In addition to serving as the part-time director of the Reformed Church Center at NBTS, James Brumm will assume additional duties to further develop both the Center for Theological Writing and the NBTS Archives. Brumm has been working with the library staff to equip students for the rigors of theological writing, analytical reading, and critical thinking for theological education. As the director of seminary archives, in consultation with the archives of the RCA, which is also housed in the Sage Library, Brumm collects, preserves, and provides access to archival materials of NBTS.

**Doctor of Ministry Restructure**

The Doctor of Ministry degree program has been restructured so that all faculty are involved in the program. A key faculty member is the concentration advisor, and each student is assigned a faculty reader for the doctoral thesis. We now have a full-time program director who directs all the concentrations and cohorts. The new Doctor of Ministry concentration and cohort director is Carol Patterson. This fall we will initiate a new concentration in missiology and global Christianity. We will also start a new cohort in pastoral care and another cohort in counseling and transformational preaching.

**Association of Theological Schools and Middle States**

NBTS hosted a successful Association of Theological Schools (ATS) focused visit. A summary of that visit is included with this report.

We received a “Yes” recommendation to proceed to the next step by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education liaison. An accreditation visit from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education will occur in August 2018. We also received a Future Ministers Peer Learning Group Grant from ATS.

**Strategic Planning**

We received invaluable feedback from the ATS and Middle States accrediting bodies regarding our strategic planning process. Most notably, an institutional assessment plan was identified as the primary mechanism by which we can guide and measure institutional outcomes over time. A plan for ongoing institutional assessment will be included in the final strategic plan. A financial plan will be developed with input from working groups that will include financial needs for each group’s area of focus. Additionally, a plan for student recruitment is critical to the institution’s goals and should have strategies for expansion and enhancement formulated in an appropriate place in the strategic plan. Terry Ann Smith is leading the ongoing strategic planning process. Smith has convened meetings with the staff, faculty, board, and students. The final strategic planning document is available on our website, www.nbts.edu.
Roundtable Discussions

In February 2018, President McCreary began holding roundtable discussions with various constituencies of the seminary, including students, alumni/ae, churches, and denominational representatives. To date we have received very positive feedback from participants.

Presidential Inauguration and Graduation (May 18–19, 2018)

The Board of Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, along with its faculty, staff, students, alumni/ae, and other invited guests, are pleased to share our joy for a two-day celebration on our campus with the theme of “Rejoice and Be Glad.” On the afternoon of Friday, May 18, our Board of Trustees held its spring meeting, and alumni/ae gathered for our annual reunion. Following a reception for the seminary community, we came together in the evening at Mast Chapel for the inauguration of President McCreary as the twelfth president of NBTS and the baccalaureate ceremony for our graduating students, their families, and our supporting community.

On Saturday, May 19, we will offer a symposium led by Frank M. Yamada, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, who will moderate an academic panel on “Theological Schools and Transformative Learning.” Other guests will have opportunities to gain “Insights on Our History” at the Gardner A. Sage Library, led by John W. Coakley, professor of church history emeritus and current interim librarian. Later that morning we will proceed to Kirkpatrick Chapel on the Rutgers campus and gather for commencement to honor our graduating students for their achievements.

This year marks our 234th commencement at NBTS. The commencement addressee will be John W. Kinney, pastor for more than 40 years at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Beaverdam, Virginia, and professor of theology and director of the Center for African American Pentecostalism and Leadership Development at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University. A reception and a concert in our new courtyard will feature Urban Doxology, a professional ministry group based in Richmond, Virginia, that writes and sings songs of reconciliation and inspiration. We welcome all who will come to wish us well as we celebrate our mission and vision going forward with God’s guidance.

Two Recommendations

New Brunswick Theological Seminary would like to offer two recommendations to the RCA General Synod.

Accept with Regret the Resignation of Renée House from the Office of General Synod Professor

Upon the request of Renée House, the Board of Trustees of New Brunswick Theological Seminary acted at its January 2018 meeting to accept with regret, but with thanks for her service to the seminary, the resignation of Renée House as General Synod professor, and to forward this as a recommendation to the General Synod.

TE 18-2
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Renée S. House has taught at New Brunswick Theological Seminary since 1987, serving as director of
Gardner A. Sage Library from 1987 to 2005, as associate professor of practical theology from 1996 to 2013, as dean of the seminary from 1996 to 1999 and again from 2008 to 2012, and as adjunct associate professor of practical theology from 2013 until the present, inspiring generations of students as Christian educators, mentoring countless pastors into their ministries in Christ’s church, and nurturing the RCA’s unique and irreplaceable treasury of resources in Sage Library; and

WHEREAS Dr. House has brought her ministry, consistently and enthusiastically, to local congregations throughout her career, through regular preaching and worship leading as well as teaching in local Christian education programs and providing leadership for various and sundry workshops and lay education courses; and

WHEREAS Dr. House has served as a General Synod professor from 2003 to 2005 and again from 2009 until the present, serving not only within the professorate but on multiple commissions, boards, classical committees, and task forces of the RCA, its classes, and its regional synods—for several of them taking on added responsibility as moderator—and as an RCA representative to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches; and

WHEREAS Dr. House has brought her gifts and insights to other ecumenical dialogues as well as professional associations, community boards, and social service groups, working for justice, peace, and the welfare of all God’s people wherever they may be; and

WHEREAS, since 2013, Dr. House has served as pastor and teacher of Old Dutch Church in Kingston, New York, engaged in leading that congregation in its ministry to bring God’s justice and transformation to all of those living on the margins in that particular corner of this lost and broken world so loved by God; and

WHEREAS Dr. House now seeks to answer the Spirit’s call on her life to devote her full time energy and attention to ministry in that particular role while continuing to offer prayers and encouragement to her colleagues, friends, and family at the seminary she has served for more than three decades,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 7 through 12, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, expresses gratitude to God for the life and ministry of Dr. Renée House, along with the deepest gratitude to Dr. House for her ministry among us, and offers its prayers for continued fulfilling ministry and life with her husband, Richard;

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod accept with regret, but with thanks for her service to the seminary,
the resignation of the Rev. Dr. Renée House as General Synod professor. (ADOPTED)

Acknowledge the Retirement of Allan Janssen and Recommend He Be Declared General Synod Professor Emeritus

Dr. Janssen will complete his teaching at New Brunswick Theological Seminary with the completion of the International Summer School in the summer of 2018. As a result, he will no longer be eligible to be a General Synod professor. The Board of Trustees therefore recommends to the General Synod that he be declared retired and that he be declared a General Synod professor emeritus.

TE 18-3
WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Allan Janssen has served the Reformed Church in America as a General Synod professor since 2012; and

WHEREAS Dr. Janssen, who was ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America in 1973 and served several congregations in the 40 years that followed, has taught at New Brunswick Theological Seminary since 1999, becoming an affiliate faculty member in 2006 and, from that same year, has regularly taught courses through the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; and

WHEREAS Dr. Janssen has served the Reformed Church in America faithfully on its boards, committees, and commissions and in ecumenical bodies; and

WHEREAS through his teaching, his service on the Commission on Church Order, his publications, and his wise advice in settings formal and informal, Dr. Janssen has earned the church’s deep appreciation for his insights into the Book of Church Order and its value for shaping our ministry and mission; and

WHEREAS Dr. Janssen, through his teaching and writing as well as through his leadership of New Brunswick Seminary’s biennial International Summer School of Theology in the Netherlands, has introduced many students and others, both in and beyond the Reformed Church in America, to the rich traditions of Dutch theology;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 7 through 12, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, expresses its deepest gratitude to Dr. Janssen for his years of service, and offers its prayers for a fulfilling retirement along with his wife, Colleen;

AND BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that the Rev. Dr. Allan Janssen be declared a General Synod professor emeritus as of June 13, 2018. (ADOPTED)

Micah McCreary
President of New Brunswick Theological Seminary
References


Report of Western Theological Seminary

The mission, identity, and vision statements of Western Theological Seminary (WTS) guide its life together:

Mission Statement

It is the purpose of Western Theological Seminary to prepare Christians called by God to lead the church in mission.

Identity Statement

Western Theological Seminary (WTS) is an evangelical and ecumenical community of faith and learning in the Reformed tradition that serves the church of Jesus Christ. In covenant with the Reformed Church in America, Western equips men and women for Christ-centered, biblically based, theologically integrated, culturally competent, mission-oriented Christian leadership.

Vision Statement

By 2020 Western Theological Seminary will be a nationally recognized center that forms leaders to empower, renew, and plant congregations and ministries that participate in God’s ongoing redemptive work in the world.

Our New Day

In the summer of 2016, the Our New Day capital campaign was formally launched. We are nearing the completion of the $25 million campaign. The campaign has had two sides: an endowment side with a goal to raise $10 million for scholarships, facilities, and faculty support; and capital side with a goal of $14.9 million for extensive renovation and new construction. At the writing of this report, we are happy to have surpassed our endowment goal with $10.4 million committed. We are very close to meeting our capital goal with $14.6 million committed. Construction is in full force with various parts of the building coming online throughout the summer and fall of this year. Students arriving to Western this coming academic year will be treated to a seminary that has had 95 percent of its physical space either renovated or newly constructed.

Financial Support

Western Theological Seminary enjoyed another strong year of giving in 2016–2017. Overall giving to the seminary reached more than $8.5 million with close to $5.5 million in gifts to the building project of the Our New Day campaign. This represents the strongest single year of giving in the history of the seminary.

Enrollment

Western Theological Seminary experienced an increase in overall enrollment for the 2017–2018 academic year. This was due in part to the new Hispanic Ministries Program and 55 students making up two cohorts enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry. During the 2017–2018 academic year, a total of 337 students were enrolled: 84 candidates in the residential Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program, 81 candidates in the distance learning M.Div. program, and 15 in the Newbigin House cohort. There were 107 RCA candidates enrolled in all M.Div. programs. The Master of Arts program
continues to grow with enrollment increasing to 43 students. Consistent with industry trends, we continue to see level numbers of in-residence students and growing numbers in the distance-learning programs. Eleven students are enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Disability Ministry (GCDM) program. Students are also enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program, Master of Theology program, Graduate Program for Christian Educators, and as non-degree students.

Seminary News

Hispanic Ministries Program Launched

In May of 2017, Joseph Ocasio arrived on campus to begin his role as director of the Hispanic Ministries Program. During the summer of 2017, we contextualized our existing Graduate Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry (GCUPM) into a program specifically aimed at preparing and empowering Hispanic men and women to lead the church. So far, three cohorts (in Delaware, Southern California, and West Michigan, each consisting of more than 20 pastors and leaders) have launched, and these students are taking courses in leadership, biblical studies, theology, urban ministry, and the ecclesial concerns of the Hispanic church. While the denominational mix of these students tends to be varied, the cohort in Southern California is entirely made up of RCA students.

Providing Theological Education to Underserved Markets

WTS is reaching more men and women seeking theological education by implementing a new cohort model of learning in the Doctor of Ministry program. In November, WTS partnered with Mario da Silva and Filadelfia University (or UNIFIL) in Londrina, Brazil, to provide a Doctor of Ministry program for a group of about 20 students. The UNIFIL group is the first in a new model of cohort-based learning that will characterize the D.Min. program moving forward. D.Min. director Mark Poppen believes this new model will revolutionize the program. Not only will it allow more students to study (usually 12 per cohort), but the topics of study will be more directed, and learning will be more community-based. Also, the model works well cross-culturally where a strong group dynamic is valued.

Student Debt Falls 40 Percent

In 2013, Western Theological Seminary became one of 67 seminaries to receive a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. to address the economic challenges facing people entering ministry. Chief among the concerns was the high levels of educational debt new pastors were carrying into their ministries. Over the last four years, Western added a required financial literacy workshop to the in-residence M.Div. curriculum and offered other financial training and tools to students. The topic of money management has become part of seminary conversations. The Class of 2017 was the first to graduate under this new culture, and we are pleased to report significant progress. The average seminary debt among borrowers has decreased from $36,396 for the Class of 2012 to $22,541 for the Class of 2017—a drop of 40 percent.

Graduate Program for Christian Educators

The seminary introduced a new graduate program in 2017 specifically for Christian school educators looking to enrich integration between faith and learning in their classes. This 15-credit-hour program involves four core classes in Old and New Testament, theology, and discipleship, as well as an elective in counseling, disability and ministry, leadership, or spiritual formation.
New Full-Tuition Merit Scholarship

The Girod Fellowship is a full-tuition scholarship for the research assistant to the Gordon H. Girod Research Chair of Reformed Theology. It is meant for high-achieving M.Div. students with outstanding research and writing skills who have a heart for the church’s ministry in the world. It is renewable for three years and involves a part-time paid position as a research assistant. Already this scholarship is generating interest in undergrad religion departments. The first fellowship was awarded in the spring of 2018.

Seminary Events

Stoutemire Lecture

During the seventh annual Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry on September 19, 2017, Soong-Chan Rah of North Park Theological Seminary and author of *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* spoke about the American church’s need for lament in order to move forward from a history of racial injustice. Rah suggested that American Christianity’s narrative of triumphalism and exceptionalism has cultivated subtle forms of white supremacy that prevent it from addressing the suffering of minorities, immigrants, and refugees. The Stoutemire lectures seek to equip seminarians and Christian leaders with resources for increased intercultural competence for greater effectiveness in ministry.

Disability as an Aspect of Diversity

Among seminaries and divinity schools, Western Theological Seminary is leading the way in disability ministry. After the completion of our renovation and additions, our facility will be beyond the compliances required in the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), but we want our culture to be as welcoming and accessible as our buildings. On November 2, 2017, faculty and staff participated in a half-day workshop under the guidance of Lennard Davis to consider how we might prepare our environment to receive people with disabilities. Davis, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is an internationally known expert in disability studies who has written or edited some of the most impactful books in the field. Later that day, Davis gave a public lecture to a large audience in Mulder Chapel. The lecture can be viewed at www.westernsem.edu/dr-lennard-davis-disability-as-an-aspect-of-diversity. Afterward, RCA coordinator for Disability Concerns Terry DeYoung and director of CRC Disability Concerns Mark Stephenson facilitated a discussion on how the concepts set forth by Davis apply to congregational ministry.

Bast Preaching Festival

The Bast Preaching Festival in November featured Richard J. Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary. Richard Mouw taught in the Calvin College philosophy department for 17 years. In 1985, he moved to Fuller Theological Seminary, and beginning in 1993, he served as Fuller’s president for two decades. He has now returned to full-time teaching at Fuller as professor of faith and public life. Mouw presented two plenary lectures: “Discipleship Today: Some Major Challenges” and “Formation for Holy Worldliness.” Other workshops were led by James Ellis of Hope College, Jared Ayers of Ligerti Church in Philadelphia, and Ron Rienstra and Sue Rozeboom of WTS.

Osterhaven Lectures

The Osterhaven Lecture Series on Theology was pleased to present “Recovering Biblical Christianity: Roman Catholic and Reformed Perspectives” on March 12–13, 2018. This
year the event was co-sponsored by the Saint Benedict Institute at Hope College. Scholars Matthew Levering of Mundelein Seminary and Kevin VanHoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School gave lectures, and a panel discussion was held with Levering, VanHoozer, and Jared Ortiz of Hope College and Sue Rozeboom of WTS.

“The Prosperity Gospel and the Dying”

On April 16, 2018, Kate Bowler—a Duke Divinity School expert on the prosperity gospel, a cancer patient, and a stunning speaker—was a guest of Western Theological Seminary. In the afternoon, Bowler discussed “The Prosperity Gospel in the American Church Today” with Dennis Voskuil, who has done a great deal of research on movements of positive thinking and the prosperity gospel in the church. In the evening, Bowler gave a plenary address, “The Prosperity Gospel and the Dying,” followed by a time for discussion.

142nd Commencement

On May 7, 2018, Western celebrated its 142nd commencement by graduating 48 candidates in the Master of Divinity, Master of Arts, Master of Theology, and Doctor of Ministry degree programs. Scottish theologian John Swinton gave the commencement address in addition to a public lecture at the seminary in the afternoon. May 7 was also Alumni/ae Day in which we celebrated the reunions of the Classes of 1968 and 1978. David Bast (‘76) was the Distinguished Alumnus.

Friendship House Anniversary

This year we celebrated ten years of the Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House. On May 7, the six Friends walked across the stage at commencement as some of them prepared to transition out of the Friendship House and into their next stage of life and independence. Some of the Friends will be moving into the Red Bricks apartments together. The Friends have each grown tremendously in confidence and independence over the last decade and are excited for this next step in their lives. The following evening, on May 8, the seminary held a banquet in their honor, inviting family members, former Friendship House roommates, and donors who made the whole successful endeavor possible. Applications are being received for the new Friends who will become part of the WTS community in the fall of 2018.

Staff and Faculty Transitions

Joseph Ocasio was hired as director of the Hispanic Ministries Program in April 2017.

Lannette Zylman-TenHave was hired as executive assistant to the president in April 2017.

Dawn Boelkins, associate professor of biblical languages, retired on June 30, 2017, after more than 25 years of service.

Theresa Latini, associate dean of diversity and cultural competency and professor of practical theology and pastoral care, concluded her work at WTS on June 30, 2017, to become president of United Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Duane Loynes, visiting assistant professor of theology and director of the Doctor of Ministry program, concluded his work at WTS on June 30, 2017, to become the professor of African-American religion and theology at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.
Ben Conner was promoted to professor of practical theology and appointed director of the Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry program effective July 1, 2017.

Chuck DeGroat was promoted to professor of pastoral care and counseling effective July 1, 2017.

Sue Rozeboom was promoted to associate professor of liturgical theology effective July 1, 2017.

Gordon Govens was appointed faculty fellow for the 2017–2018 academic year.

Jeff Munroe was promoted to executive vice president in September 2017.

Jill English was promoted to director of admissions in September 2017. Jill succeeded Mark Poppen, who now serves as senior admissions officer and director of the Doctor of Ministry program.

Andy Bast was promoted to director of development in November 2017. Andy succeeded Doug Honholt, who retired in November 2017 and rejoined the WTS Board of Trustees in February 2018.

Kyle Wigboldy was hired as registrar and financial aid administrator in December 2017.

Steven VanderMolen, director of Journey, retired in December 2017 after five years of service.

Mary Huisman, manager of the Sacred Page Bookstore, retired in December 2017 after 14 years of service.

Drew Peirce, WTS M.Div. ’02, was hired as associate director of development in January 2018.

Celebrating Faculty Accomplishments


Kristen Deede Johnson, associate professor of theology and Christian formation, authored several articles:

• “Go Into Your Room, Close the Door and Engage the World,” *Comment Magazine*, Fall 2017.
• “Are We Missing the Point of Spiritual Disciplines?” *Christianity Today*, September/October 2017.

Han-luen Kantzer-Komline, assistant professor of church history and theology, was ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA on December 17, 2018. She spoke at the Wheaton Theology Conference in April on Marilynne Robinson and Augustinian theology. Other presenters included Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson, former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and Lauren Winner. Kantzer-Komline was appointed a member of the steering committee of the Development of Early Christian Theology program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature and also authored two articles:


David Komline, assistant professor of church history, was ordained as minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA on December 17, 2018.


Professor of New Testament Robert Van Voorst’s course on world religions, based on his book *World RELG* (Cengage Learning Company), was made into a nationally-offered electronic course by Savant Learning Systems in Belmont, Tennessee.

**Trustee Appointments**

Two new members joined Western’s Board of Trustees effective July 1, 2017. Percy Gilbert is vice president of systems product engineering and memory development for IBM and a member of Hopewell Reformed Church in New York. Fred Johnson is an associate professor of history at Hope College and a member of Messiah Missionary Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Trustees Wilbert Hamstra and Robert Hilarides completed their terms of service on June 30, 2017.

Trustee Kenneth Harris resigned from the WTS board in September 2017, citing his added responsibilities as the new president of Ecumenical Theological Seminary. He was replaced by former trustee Doug Honholt, who retired from WTS in November 2017. Honholt will serve the remainder of Harris’s term through June 30, 2018.

**Petitions Approved by the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary**

The Board of Trustees approved a petition of the Classis of Holland to substitute a period of supervised ministry for part of the 24-month requirement of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry for David Celeskey.
The Board of Trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Sheri Harris.

The Board of Trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Rodolfo Rubio.

The Board of Trustees approved the request for an alternate means of meeting the biblical languages requirement for Jason Pierce.

**Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation**

Earlier this year, the seminary and its board executive committee decided to eliminate one of the standing committees referenced in its bylaws, and this prompted a full formal review of the bylaws. In the course of that review, many needed updates and revisions were identified. The revised draft was reviewed and further revised by an attorney, who also reviewed the articles of incorporation and proposed necessary updates to those as well.

On May 8, 2018, Western Theological Seminary’s board of trustees voted to adopt restated bylaws and articles of incorporation for Western Theological Seminary. Western now presents these restated bylaws and articles of incorporation to the General Synod for its approval, pursuant to *Book of Church Order* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 7, Section 1 (2017 edition, p. 118).

**Summary of Changes**

The following summary of changes was presented to Western’s board of trustees prior to its adoption of the restated bylaws and articles of incorporation and is presented here to General Synod delegates to provide an overview of the changes represented in the revised enabling documents.

Article I, “Name” – Added section 2, which gives the board latitude to change the name of the seminary.

Article II – Changes name from “Members” (which was inaccurate) to “Member.” Removes sections 2 and 3, which were extraneous. Adds a new section 2 clarifying the General Synod’s role.

Article III, “Purpose” – Simplifies this article.

Article IV, “Powers” – A new section, stating things misplaced under “Member” and “Purpose” in the earlier document. Adds boilerplate language about IRS regulations and political activity.

Article V – Title changed from “Membership” to “Trustees.” Changes from “give of time and talents” to “contribute wealth, wisdom, work, and witness.” Gives the faculty the power to waive the requirement that the faculty representative to the board be a tenured faculty member or General Synod professor. Incorporates the previous Article V on nominations and elections into “Trustees” section. Removes language “inactivity or incompetence of a trustee (determined by the remaining trustees)” and “disciplinary suspension or disciplinary termination of the membership of a trustee in his/her church shall create a vacancy.” Locates the responsibility for board performance under Article IX, section 3, “Executive Committee.”
Article VI – Changes the title from “Meetings” to “Meeting of the Board.” Removes the responsibility of the executive committee to call meetings, changes the notice requirement from “Written notice of each stated meeting shall be by mail” to “Notice of each meeting must be given.” Section 3 adds language about how notice of meetings will be given and provides more options than mail. Section 7 recognizes that the president of the seminary is present for executive session and gives the board the right to go into executive session without the president. Sections 8–12 are additions stating that the board will follow parliamentary procedure, that members may participate via conference telephone, and that the board has the right to act via writing or electronic transmission without calling a board meeting.

Article VII, “Officers” – Changes the name of the moderator and vice-moderator to “chair.” Removes the language about duties of officers since there is a section about that below. Changes the election of the president from “the president of the seminary shall be elected by a majority of the Board by secret ballot” to “the president of the Seminary must be elected by the Board.”

Article VIII, “Duties of Officers” – Removes the responsibility of the vice-moderator for worship and new member orientation. Removes the requirement that the treasurer be bonded, with the premium paid by the seminary. Adds that the board must perform an annual performance review of the president.

Article IX, “Committees” – Changes the name of one standing committee from “Student Life” to “Student and Community Life” and eliminates the continuing education committee. Adds that all standing committees must consist of trustees.

Article X, “Indemnification” – Adds article indemnifying trustees.

Article XI – Adds article titled “General Provisions.”

Article XII – Adds article titled “Dedication of Assets.”

Articles of Incorporation
These are a rewrite to bring them into compliance with nonprofit standards and Michigan law. Nothing substantive is changed. For historical notes, the board [and the General Synod] may be interested to learn that the seminary’s articles of incorporation were originally filed with the state on June 25, 1940. The seminary had existed, in one form or another, for 70 years prior to that.

New Texts

Following are the revised texts of both the bylaws and articles of incorporation of Western Theological Seminary, which General Synod is being asked to approve.
Article I

Name

Sec. 1 The name of this corporation is The Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America (the “Corporation”).

Sec. 2 The Corporation will operate under the assumed name Western Theological Seminary and such other assumed names as may be approved by the Board of Trustees of the Corporation (the “Board”).

Article II

Member

Sec. 1 The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the “General Synod”), or its successor by any merger or consolidation, will be the sole member of the Corporation. The General Synod, acting in accordance with applicable law, may exercise all rights granted to members of nonprofit corporations by the laws of the state of Michigan.

Sec. 2 The date, time and purpose of the annual or any special meeting of the General Synod intending to take any action required or permitted to be taken by the General Synod pursuant to the Articles of Incorporation of this Corporation (the “Articles”) or these Bylaws will be determined by the General Synod.

Article III

Purposes

Sec. 1 The purposes of this Corporation are as stated in the Articles.

Article IV

Powers

Sec. 1 The Corporation may exercise any power that is consistent with the purposes described in the Articles and that a nonprofit corporation organized under the provisions of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act may exercise. The Corporation may deal with and distribute the Corporation’s property in any manner as will best promote the Corporation’s objectives and
purposes, without limitation except as may be contained, if any, in instruments under which the property is conveyed to the Corporation.

Sec. 2

Notwithstanding any other provision of the Articles or these Bylaws, the Corporation must not carry on any activity or have any purpose that is not permitted for (a) an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and other related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may in the future be amended or (b) an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Internal Revenue Code and related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may in the future be amended. No substantial part of the Corporation’s direct or indirect activities is to consist of carrying on propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The Corporation must not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

Article V

Trustees

Sec. 1

The General Synod entrusts to the Board all authority and power necessary for the proper oversight and direction of the Corporation and its seminary (the “Seminary”), as well as the control of the Corporation’s finances, securities, and property.

Sec. 2

All members of the Board must be confessing Christians who acknowledge a commitment to the authority of the Bible over all matters of faith and practice, the sovereignty of God, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. The members also must be interested in and willing to contribute their wealth, wisdom, work and witness.

Sec. 3

The Board must consist of a minimum of twelve and a maximum of twenty-four members who are to be elected for a term of three years beginning the first day of July following their election by the General Synod and continuing until the end of June when their successors have been elected. Members may serve three consecutive full terms but must be off the Board for two years before becoming eligible again for re-election to the Board.

Sec. 4

All trustees must be recommended by the Board and elected by the General Synod at its annual meeting or at any special meeting. The membership of the Board must at all times include one member from each of the regional synods of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 5

The president of the Seminary will be an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.
Sec. 6  One member of the faculty of the Seminary who is tenured or who holds the office of General Synod Professor of Theology of the Seminary must be elected by the faculty to serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board. The faculty may waive the tenure/General Synod Professor requirement.

Sec. 7  The student council president of the Seminary is to serve as an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.

Sec. 8  The general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, or a representative appointed by the general secretary, is to be an ex-officio member, without vote, of the Board.

Sec. 9  A trustee may resign by written notice to the Corporation’s secretary. The death or resignation of a trustee will create a vacancy. Vacancies must be filled for the remaining portion of the term by the Executive Committee, subject to approval by General Synod, at any regular or special meeting of the General Synod. The General Synod may remove a trustee with or without cause.

Sec. 10  The Board assumes the responsibility for providing the Corporation with such property and buildings, information resources, equipment, and supplies as are necessary for the effective accomplishment of the Corporation’s mission.

**Article VI**

**Meetings of the Board**

Sec. 1  The Board must meet at least three times per year, with the annual meeting to be in the spring. Notice of each meeting must be given thirty days prior to the date of the meeting.

Sec. 2  A special meeting of the Board may be called by the chairperson or vice-chairperson of the Board. The chairperson or vice-chairperson is obliged to call such a meeting if so requested in writing by any five trustees. If the chairperson or vice-chairperson fails to call the meeting within ten days of such request, the secretary must issue the call to meeting based on the trustees’ written request. Notice of special meetings, stating the nature of the business to be considered, must be given to all trustees not less than ten days prior to each such meeting. No other business is to be considered at such special meetings except by two-thirds vote of those present at the meeting.

Sec. 3  Notice of the annual or any special meeting stating the time and place of the meeting must be given to each trustee by one of the following methods:

a. by mailing a written notice to such address as the trustee designates from time to time or, in the absence of designation, to the last known address of the trustee;

b. by personally delivering a written notice to the trustee;
c. by orally notifying the trustee, either personally or by telephone; or

d. by electronic transmission to the trustee in a manner authorized by the trustee entitled to the notice;

except that, if the transmitted notice is returned as undeliverable, a different permitted method of notification must be used.

Sec. 4  
A majority of all voting trustees of the Board constitutes a quorum. If there is less than a quorum present, the meeting will be adjourned. Motions may be passed by a majority of those present. Each trustee present in person at a Board meeting is entitled to one vote.

Sec. 5  
The Trustees must receive the agenda at least ten days prior to the meeting of the Board.

Sec. 6  
Every meeting of the Board must be opened and closed with prayer.

Sec. 7  
The Board may meet in executive session for a portion of any business meeting at which time only voting trustees and the president of the Seminary are to be present. The Board may also ask to meet without the president during executive session.

Sec. 8  
A trustee’s attendance at or participation in a meeting waives notice to the trustee of the meeting, unless the trustee at the beginning of the meeting, or when the trustee arrives, objects to the meeting or the transacting of business at the meeting and after objecting does not vote for or assent to any action taken at the meeting. A trustee may waive any right to notice before or at the meeting.

Sec. 9  
Trustees’ meetings must generally follow accepted rules of parliamentary procedure. The presiding official has authority over matters of procedure and may adopt any other form of procedure suited to the business being conducted.

Sec. 10  
Unless otherwise provided by the Articles or these Bylaws, any action permitted to be taken under authorization voted at a meeting of the Board or a committee of the Board may be taken without a meeting if, before or after the action, all members of the Board then in office or of the committee consent to the action in writing or by electronic transmission. The written consent must be filed with the minutes of the proceedings of the Board or committee. The consent has the same effect as a vote of the Board or committee for all purposes.

Sec. 11  
A trustee or a member of a committee may participate in a meeting by means of a conference telephone or similar communications equipment by means of which all persons participating in the meeting can hear each other. Such participation in a meeting constitutes presence in person at the meeting.
Sec. 12 A trustee who is present at a trustees’ meeting, or at a meeting of a committee of which the trustee is a member, at which action on a corporate matter is taken is presumed to have concurred in that action taken unless a dissent is entered in the minutes of the meeting or unless the trustee files a written dissent to such action with the person acting as the secretary of the meeting before or promptly after its adjournment. A trustee who is absent from a meeting of the Board or of a committee of which the trustee is a member at which any such action is taken is presumed to have concurred in the action unless the trustee files a written dissent with the secretary of the meeting within a reasonable time after obtaining knowledge of the action.

Article VII

Officers

Sec. 1 The elected officers of the Board must consist of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a secretary, and a treasurer, all of whom must be members of the Board.

Sec. 2 The president of the Seminary must serve as the chief executive officer of the Corporation.

Sec. 3 The Executive Committee must present a slate of officers for Board approval at its annual meeting.

Sec. 4 The term of each office begins July 1 and will be for one year or until successors are elected and properly qualified. A vacancy in any office must be filled at the next regular or special meeting of the Board.

Sec. 5 In the event of the death or disability of both the chairperson and the vice-chairperson, the Executive Committee must appoint a member of the Board to serve as chairperson until the next annual meeting of the Board.

Sec. 6 The president of the Seminary must be elected by the Board.

Article VIII

Duties of Officers

Sec. 1 The chairperson must call and preside at all regular and special meetings of the Board, will be an ex-officio member of all committees of the Board, and is authorized to perform such other duties and exercise such other powers as usually pertain to the office. The chairperson is entitled to vote on all matters coming before the Board for decision.

Sec. 2 The vice-chairperson must assist the chairperson in the performance of the duties of the office of chairperson, and in the absence of the chairperson, is to perform all the duties and exercise all powers of that office.
Sec. 3  The secretary must keep a true and accurate record of all proceedings of the Board, a separate minute book for all actions taken in executive session, and perform such other duties as usually pertain to the office.

Sec. 4  The treasurer or his/her agent will be the fiscal officer of the Corporation and is responsible for the proper custody of all corporate funds and securities. The treasurer is responsible for making certain that proper books of account setting forth all corporate receipts, disbursements, and assets are kept and is responsible for making certain that all corporate funds are deposited in such banks and other depositories as the Board designates. The treasurer must also perform such other duties as may be directed by the Board.

Sec. 5  The duties of the president of the Seminary includes the position description as adopted by the Board and the provisions of the contract at the time of employment. The board must conduct an annual performance review of the president.

Article IX

Committees

Sec. 1  The Board has established the following standing committees: Executive, Student and Community Life, Academic, Advancement, and Finance and Audit. The Board may establish such ad hoc committees as it deems necessary to carry out the business of the Seminary.

Sec. 2  The Executive Committee is to consist of the officers of the Board and the chairs of the other standing committees. The Board may designate one or more individuals who are not trustees to receive notice of, attend, and be heard at a committee meeting, but such individuals cannot vote. The Executive Committee is empowered to conduct all the business of the Board between its stated meetings. The Executive Committee has no power to:

a.  amend the Articles of Incorporation or these Bylaws;
b.  change the mission of the Corporation;
c.  adopt an agreement of merger or conversion;
d.  recommend to the member the sale, lease, or exchange of all or substantially all of the Corporation’s property and assets;
e.  fill vacancies in the Board;
f.  fix compensation of the trustees for serving on the board or committee; or
g.  terminate memberships.

All Executive Committee actions are to be reviewed and are subject to ratification by the Board at its next meeting. The Executive Committee is responsible for the annual performance review of the president of the Seminary with recommendation
to the full Board regarding compensation. When unexpected vacancies on the Executive Committee occur, the vacancy is to be filled by election by the remaining members of the Executive Committee. The elected member is to serve until the next annual meeting of the Board.

Sec. 3  The Executive Committee must review the vitality, effectiveness and appropriateness of the Board’s functioning and make recommendations for change; continuously develop a list of potential Board members; gather information regarding their qualifications and preparedness to serve if nominated; prepare nominations of Board members for consideration by the Board; arrange and oversee the orientation and training of members of the Board; arrange for the full involvement of members of the Board in the activities of the Board; give leadership in encouraging members to evaluate their own performance; and provide appropriate recognition for the service of members of the Board.

Sec. 4  All other standing committees must consist of trustees. All ad hoc committees established by the Board are to consist of such persons as are selected by the Board and may or may not consist of individuals who are trustees or officers. All other standing committees and ad hoc committees serve solely to assist in the conduct of the Corporation’s affairs and cannot exercise any of the Board’s powers or authority. The resolution that establishes the committee must state the purpose and functions of the committee, the terms and qualifications of the committee members, and the ways in which the members of the committee are selected and removed.

**Article X**

*Indemnification*

Sec. 1  The Corporation shall indemnify the Corporation’s trustees and officers against expenses (including but not limited to attorneys’ fees), judgments, fines, and amounts paid in settlement actually and reasonably incurred by them in connection with any actions or suits brought or threatened against them, including actions by or in the right of the Corporation, by reason of the fact that such person was serving as a trustee or officer, employee, non-trustee volunteer, or agent of the Corporation, to the fullest extent permitted by both the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act and Chapter 42 of the Internal Revenue Code. The Corporation may indemnify persons who are not trustees or officers to the extent authorized by resolution of the Board or by contractual agreement authorized by the Board. A change in the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act, the Articles, or these Bylaws that reduces the scope of indemnification does not apply to any action or omission that occurs before the change.
Sec. 2  The Corporation may purchase and maintain insurance on behalf of any person who is or was a trustee, officer, employee, non-trustee volunteer, or agent of this Corporation or is or was serving at the Corporation’s request in any other enterprise against any liability incurred in such capacity.

**Article XI**

*General Provisions*

Sec. 1  All Corporation checks or demands for money and notes must be signed by such persons as the Board designates.

Sec. 2  The Corporation’s fiscal year is as fixed by the Board.

**Article XII**

*Dedication of Assets*

Sec. 1  The Corporation’s funds and property must be used exclusively for the Corporation’s purposes set forth in the Articles. No part of the income or assets of the Corporation may inure to the benefit of any individual or trustee.

Sec. 2  The Corporation must hold and administer all of the Corporation’s assets and accumulated income to effectuate the Corporation’s tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this Corporation will inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the Corporation’s purposes fail or if the Corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the Corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the Corporation’s assets and accumulated income must be distributed to the General Synod. The Corporation must be dissolved after all of the Corporation’s property has been so distributed.

**Article XIII**

*Amendment of the Bylaws*

Sec. 1  These Bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the Board at any regular meeting after ten days’ notice to the trustees and the approval of the General Synod.

**Article XIV**

*Adoption of the Bylaws*

Sec. 1  These Bylaws, when adopted by the Board and the General Synod, will supersede all previous Bylaws controlling the affairs of the Corporation.
RESTATED ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

The following Restated Articles of Incorporation supersede the Articles of Incorporation as amended and shall be the Articles of Incorporation for the corporation:

ARTICLE I
Name

The name of the corporation is The Western Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church in America.

ARTICLE II
Purposes

The purpose or purposes of this corporation are:

(a) To maintain and operate a theological seminary (the “Seminary”) for the purpose of providing courses of study in theology, religion, church history, and other subjects suitable for the training of men and women for the Gospel ministry, and for the teaching of religion according to the doctrines and standards of The Reformed Church in America, as based on the Holy Scriptures.

(b) To acquire by purchase, gift, or otherwise, property of every description, real and personal, for the use and benefit of the Seminary, and to exchange, sell, or dispose of such property.

(c) To do each and everything necessary, suitable, or proper for the accomplishment of the above purposes or which at any time appear convenient for or conducive to the accomplishment of such purposes.

Notwithstanding any other provision of these Articles, the corporation shall not carry on any activity or have any purpose that is not permitted for (i) an organization exempt from federal income taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (the “Code”) and other related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended or (ii) an organization contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Code and related legislation and regulations as they now exist or may hereafter be amended. No substantial part of the corporation’s direct or indirect activities shall consist of carrying on propaganda or otherwise attempting to influence legislation. The corporation shall not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

ARTICLE III
Form of Organization and Financing

The corporation is formed on a nonstock basis.

The general plan under which the corporation is to be financed is as follows:
(a) By income derived from endowment funds previously acquired by the corporation and/or by the trustees of the corporation, by gift, bequest, or devise and by such other endowment funds as may be acquired in the future by gift, bequest, devise, or otherwise.

(b) By contributions and appropriations from the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the “General Synod”), from the particular synods, classes and churches of The Reformed Church in America, and from individuals interested in promoting the advancement of The Reformed Church in America and/or religious and social education and welfare.

The corporation is formed on a membership basis.

**ARTICLE IV  
Registered Office and Resident Agent**

The street address (which is the mailing address) of the corporation’s registered office is 101 East 13th Street, Holland, Michigan 49423.

The name of the resident agent at the registered office is Dr. Timothy L. Brown.

**ARTICLE V  
Duration**

The term of the corporate existence is perpetual.

**ARTICLE VI  
Member**

The sole member of the corporation is the General Synod.

**ARTICLE VII  
Seminary**

The Seminary shall be under the control and support of the General Synod, subject to the remaining provisions of the Articles.

**ARTICLE VIII  
Degrees**

Upon the recommendation of the faculty of the Seminary, the trustees of the corporation are authorized to grant the degrees of Bachelor of Divinity or Master of Divinity (M.Div.), whichever is by custom and usage recognized as the terminal award for the first professional degree program, and the degrees Master of Theology (Th.M.), Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) and Master of Arts (M.A.), as well as certificate programs.

**ARTICLE IX  
Trustees**

The affairs of the corporation will be conducted by a board of trustees. The board of trustees has the power to provide for the organization of the board,
the conduct of the affairs of the board, the performance of the function of the corporation, and in general to have all of the powers legally vesting in such boards by virtue of the law of the State of Michigan. Without limiting the above, the board is to hold in trust such property, either real, personal or mixed, as may be granted, conveyed, given, or in any other manner acquired by the corporation and to hold, invest, sell, transfer, or dispose of the such property for the purposes of the corporation.

The number, qualifications, classifications, terms of office, and manner of election or removal of the trustees of the corporation are as prescribed in the corporation’s bylaws. Any bylaw for those purposes may be made or altered only by the General Synod.

ARTICLE X
Limitation of Trustee’s and Volunteer Officer’s Liability

A trustee or volunteer officer shall not be personally liable to the corporation for money damages for any action taken or any failure to take any action as a trustee or volunteer officer, except liability for any of the following:

1. the amount of a financial benefit received by a trustee or volunteer officer to which he or she is not entitled;

2. intentional infliction of harm on the corporation or its member;

3. a violation of Section 551 of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act (which relates to the making of unauthorized distributions or loans);

4. an intentional criminal act; or

5. a liability imposed under Section 497(a) of the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act (which upon termination of a derivative proceeding permits a court to order the plaintiff to pay defendant’s expenses incurred in defending the proceeding).

Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

If the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act is amended to further eliminate or limit the liability of a trustee or volunteer officer, then a trustee or volunteer officer (in addition to the circumstances in which a trustee or officer is not personally liable as set forth in the preceding paragraph) shall, to the fullest extent permitted by the Michigan Nonprofit Corporation Act as so amended, not be liable to the corporation. No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this Article shall increase the liability or alleged liability of any trustee or volunteer officer of the corporation for or concerning any act or omission of such trustee or officer occurring before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal.
The above limitation of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

ARTICLE XI
Assumption of Liability for Acts of Volunteers

The corporation shall assume the liability for all acts or omissions of a volunteer trustee, volunteer officer or other volunteer, if all of the following conditions are met:

1. the volunteer was acting or reasonably believed he or she was acting within the scope of his or her authority;
2. the volunteer was acting in good faith;
3. the volunteer’s conduct did not amount to gross negligence or willful and wanton misconduct;
4. the volunteer’s conduct was not an intentional tort; and
5. the volunteer’s conduct was not a tort arising out of the ownership, maintenance, or use of a motor vehicle for which tort liability may be imposed as provided by Section 3135 of the Michigan Insurance Code of 1956.

No amendment to or alteration, modification or repeal of this article shall reduce the scope of the corporation’s assumption of liability under this article for or concerning any volunteer’s acts or omissions that occur before such amendment, alteration, modification or repeal. Provisions of this article added by amendment shall apply only to acts or omissions and to breaches of duty occurring after the date the amended article was adopted.

The above assumption of liability will not apply to the extent it is inconsistent with the status of the corporation as an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.

ARTICLE XII
Dedication of Assets

The corporation shall hold and administer all its assets and accumulated income to effectuate its tax-exempt purposes. No part of the income or assets of this corporation shall inure to the private benefit of any individual or trustee. If the corporation’s purposes fail or if the corporation ceases to be approved as a tax-exempt organization under the Internal Revenue Code, and any such defect is not cured by appropriate amendment, or if the corporation voluntarily dissolves, then all of the corporation’s assets and accumulated income shall be distributed to the General Synod. The corporation shall be dissolved after all its property has been so distributed.
ARTICLE XIII
Amendments

The Synod may amend or repeal any provision contained in these Articles and add additional articles in the manner prescribed by statute.

TE 18-4
To approve the restated bylaws and articles of incorporation of Western Theological Seminary as presented in this report. (ADOPTED)
Report of Central College

Central College, founded in 1853, is a private, residential four-year liberal arts college in Pella, Iowa. Central is known for its academic rigor and strength in global experiential learning, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses, sustainability education, athletics success and tradition, and leadership and service.

For more than 100 years, Central has valued its covenantal relationship with the Reformed Church in America. Central’s connection with the RCA proves invaluable for students as they learn to live out their faith through service, missions, and internship opportunities. RCA members play an important role for Central as members of the board of trustees, and Reformed churches support students through the Journey Scholarship Fund. RCA students can also receive the Heritage Award. Central graduates go on to serve as leaders in RCA congregations around the world.

Part of Central College’s mission is to integrate career preparation with the development of values essential to responsible citizenship. Central empowers graduates for effective service in local, national, and international communities. A Central education prepares students for civic responsibility, to “learn to do good; seek justice” (Isaiah 1:17). Through activities, courses, service opportunities, and Central’s relationship with the RCA, students learn to take their place in the world as people who seek justice.

Reformation Conference

Central hosted a conference dedicated to discussing the relationship of reason and faith on October 13–14, 2017. “Reason and Faith on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation” was organized by professor of religion Terence Kleven and assistant professor of philosophy Mark Thomas. The conference marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The Lilly Fellows Program sponsored the conference with a grant awarded to Thomas and Kleven. The Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts seeks to strengthen the quality and shape the character of church-related institutions of higher learning. Central is part of the program’s national network of church-related colleges and universities.

Campus Ministries

Campus Ministries students plan and lead a variety of activities and events on campus. The Calm, a weekly worship service, carries an average participation of 100 students throughout the year. Students stay very involved with local churches, including assisting with Sunday worship services, helping with youth and children’s ministries, and participating in music groups and Bible studies. In addition, community members and college staff serve with Campus Ministries through its discipleship program.

Students involved with Campus Ministries hold several fundraisers throughout the year to raise money for organizations like World Vision, Water to Thrive, Pella’s Freedom House, and Many Hands for Haiti.

Mission Trips

Mission trips are a way Campus Ministries participants serve others while also growing in their own faith. The group takes several trips throughout the year, with varying numbers of students.
Senior Caitlyn Conway has gone on several mission trips with Central. “You learn how to trust God with every fiber of your body,” she said. “You learn that when everything is silent, he speaks volumes. The impact that missions have had on my life is how I have changed from being a micromanager and trying to control all of my life to allowing God to move and allow my life to be in his hands completely. I would also say that meeting a six-year-old boy living in Tanzania, Africa, who raises his four-year-old brother with nothing but a big toothless smile and Jesus impacts your life because he only has Jesus to depend on.”

During fall break in October 2017, Campus Ministries sponsored a trip to Springfield, Missouri, where two students worked on flood recovery efforts.

The annual winter break trip often finds Central students in Texas. This year, 25 students spent time in Mission, Texas. Projects included building two houses and coordinating outreach carnivals for families in poor neighborhoods, serving meals, and handing out food. Central alumni participated onsite on this trip. Campus Ministries focuses on including Central alumni on its mission trips because they can provide valuable support, make connections, and offer special expertise.

During spring break 2018, students participated in three trips. Three students completed anti-human trafficking efforts in the red-light district of Chiang Mai, Thailand. Ten students worked on Hurricane Harvey recovery efforts in Corpus Christi, Texas. Eight students partnered with Hope of the Nations in Kigoma, Tanzania, to lead vacation Bible school, construct a Bible college, and implement other projects. Kurt Ritema, a Central graduate, works for Hope of the Nations and traveled with the group.

Service

Service plays a major role on Central’s campus. The idea of service is expressed through student organizations, classes with service-learning components, and independent projects taken on by students, faculty, and staff. Each year more than 400 students participate in service learning. In 2017, 33 courses at Central included a service component.

Students and faculty individually pursue a number of service commitments, too. Students often initiate their own service or social justice-oriented groups. For example, students recently started the group Students Against Human Trafficking. Staff and faculty members give their time to serve on committees and boards. Last summer, Iowa governor Kim Reynolds appointed Cheri Doane, director of community-based learning at Central, to the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service. This group helps organizations mobilize and leverage volunteers for the benefit of all Iowans.

Community service weaves closely with the notion of civic engagement. By engaging with the community, students live out their lives treating others with the care and respect they would wish to receive.

Service and Civic Engagement

Red Rock Rocks: Held during Welcome Week after students arrive in August, this event exposes incoming first-year students to Central’s service ethos. This past fall, about 55 student participants joined faculty, staff, and park rangers to remove invasive brush and timber at Lake Red Rock.

School Visits: Central’s community-based learning program collaborates with the
admission department to offer college visits to students served by Central’s community partners. This strengthens the college’s goal of increasing college access to students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural perspectives. School visits included a July 2017 visit by 30 high school and middle school children from the Children and Family Urban Movement, part of Des Moines’ Wyld Girls and Backyard Boyz programs. Students enjoyed a college visit, participated in educational/fun sessions, and took a trip to Lake Red Rock. In November 2017, about 70 third grade students from Findley Elementary in Des Moines visited the campus. The Findley students enjoyed ten activity modules facilitated by faculty, staff, and college students.

_Hunger and Homelessness Awareness:_ In November 2017, the college collaborated with community partners to host Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week. Activities included the Oxfam Hunger Banquet, an interactive meal designed to draw attention to food inequality by distributing food quantity and quality through the luck of the draw. The week also included an online poverty simulation where students made choices on how to spend their low-income wage. In addition, Kate Gatzke, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, worked with the Central Activities Board to create two artistic displays of homeless camps on campus to demonstrate the pervasiveness of poverty and homelessness.

_Food Security Projects:_ Students from several courses engaged in work to feed those in need. Projects included an individual student’s effort to collect fresh produce from college employees and the college garden to donate to area food pantries. Another student created food information cards for the Pella Food Shelf to promote healthy choices and educate clients about meal preparation.

_All Campus Service Day:_ Central’s 2018 Service Day took place April 10. Each year on service day, classes are canceled so that students, faculty, and staff can collaborate on projects that address a community need. Many of the organizations that propose service projects are faith-based.

_Civic Responsibility_

Living a servant-hearted life means understanding one’s responsibility to others and the pursuit of justice for all. Central remains committed to fostering a spirit of civic responsibility through multiple activities.

_Martin Luther King Jr. Day:_ This year’s MLK Day observance focused on the theme of economic justice. Students, faculty, and staff participated in a film viewing and a World Café conversation-focused event. They also participated in a service project that created blankets for children with disabilities.

_Democracy Rocks!:_ This series was designed to help students engage with society’s significant concerns and become part of a more just world. Topics included race and class inequality, how to engage in respectful political conversation, and how best to learn about people unlike oneself.

_Financial Aid_

Central recognizes and encourages incoming students’ service commitments every year with community service scholarships. Currently, 193 students are receiving a total of $253,900 in Community Service Awards. These scholarships are based on prospective students’ past community engagement and their expression of future plans for engagement in and after college. Central also recognizes the importance of welcoming students who
have national service experience. The Segal Education Award is matched for incoming students, and current students can earn an education award as part of the AmeriCorps State program—the Iowa College AmeriCorps program.

Conclusion

Central takes seriously its mission of preparing students to become future leaders. Part of this preparation is the understanding of what it means to serve and how students can make an impact on the world for the greater good. This necessitates learning about both service and civic responsibility, both of which are integral to the life of a Christian. The college’s relationship with the RCA is central to this mission. Central values the support through gifts, guidance, and prayer that the RCA offers in provision of this vital undertaking.
Report of Hope College

Hope College is a four-year liberal arts college where academic excellence and vibrant Christian faith integrate in a supportive and welcoming community. Affiliated with the Reformed Church in America since its founding in 1866, we are known for our invitational, ecumenical Christian atmosphere, friendly campus community, and outstanding academic and co-curricular offerings. We are intentional about our mission, and our commitment to academic excellence is evident and broadly shared by our faculty and staff.

Hope is a recognized leader in undergraduate research, scholarship, and preparation for graduate school and the workplace. Nearly 360 faculty members offer an academically rigorous, coeducational, and residential education to 3,150 undergraduate students from more than 40 states and 45 countries. Our teachers and talented researchers engage students in small classes and one-to-one collaborative research opportunities for an 11-to-one student to faculty ratio. Hope offers more than 1,800 internships and 300 study abroad opportunities in more than 60 countries to provide a global perspective and experience that equips our graduates to excel in a global society. Ninety-three percent of our graduates join the workforce or enroll in graduate school within six months of graduation. The college’s eighty-plus student groups are marked by tradition, service, and enthusiasm, through which students are encouraged to explore their interests, build their leadership skills, and give back to the community.

Our beautiful campus is located just steps from downtown Holland, Michigan, a city of 35,000 enriched by an ever-growing, diverse population. Located on the scenic shores of Lake Michigan and Lake Macatawa, the area features white-sand beaches, parks, miles of hiking and biking trails, and a historic downtown.

Presidential Transition

Hope College is in the midst of a presidential transition. In July 2017, John Knapp concluded his tenure as Hope’s thirteenth president to become president of Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania. The Hope College Board of Trustees appointed Dennis Voskuil to serve as our interim president during a national presidential search. Prior to his appointment as Hope’s president, Voskuil was a member of our religion faculty from 1977 to 1994 and had been the director of our A.C. VanRaalte Institute since 2015. He also served as president of Western Theological Seminary from 1994 to 2008 and continued to teach as the Marvin and Jerene DeWitt Professor of Church History until 2014, when he became a senior research fellow with the VanRaalte Institute.

The college has created a website to share information about the search process, as well as to serve as a resource for candidates and individuals interested in making a nomination: www.hope.edu/offices/president/presidential-search. We encourage you to visit the website, we ask for your prayers, and we seek your nominations of individuals you believe would be excellent presidential candidates.

Faculty Achievements and Academic Excellence

Hope’s academic community offers students a rigorous intellectual experience. Our professors expect excellence, both from their students and from themselves. They are active teacher-scholars, as committed to their students as they are to their research. Under their mentorship, Hope students participate in our longstanding tradition of collaborative faculty-student research, gaining what has been called a “graduate-level undergraduate experience.”
For many Hope students, this engagement leads to the life-changing discovery of an academic passion or a professional calling. With such a strong legacy of faculty impact, Hope is blessed to celebrate, year after year, accomplishments and accolades that distinguish our academic programs, and 2017 was no exception. To highlight the year, we launched our Mellon Grand Challenges Initiative, earned the Campus-Wide Award for Undergraduate Research Accomplishments from the Council on Undergraduate Research, and received a record eighth Beckman Scholars Program award from the Arnold and Mabel Beckman Foundation.

In February of this year, we published the inaugural issue of Spera, a magazine spotlighting the research, scholarship, and creative performance of our faculty. Spera features 13 books and 27 scholarly articles, and can be viewed in its entirety online at spera.hope.edu.

**Student Excellence in Research, Creative Performance, and Athletics**

Our students excel in scholarship, research, artistic performance, and athletics. One annual opportunity for Hope students to showcase their work to the community is our Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creative Performance. First presented in 2001, the celebration is designed to spotlight the quality and importance of student-faculty collaborative research, a teaching model used at the college for several decades. Students throughout the college conduct original research and creative projects in collaboration with faculty mentors during both the academic year and the summer. More than 350 Hope students from more than 25 departments and programs present their research to nearly a thousand visitors, reflecting the extent and significance of such scholarly activity at the college.

Hope’s students also receive distinction in creative performance. This past December, the Hope College Department of Theatre performed the original production “The Line Between” at the Region III Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF) in Indianapolis. Hope’s production was one of only seven that were invited to be performed during the festival. Our students received three top awards, including the prestigious Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship Audition Award.

At Hope College, we believe that intercollegiate sport is a powerful vehicle for education as well as for personal development. Our athletics program is part of our Kinesiology Department and is guided by a community of coaches, scholars, and leaders who prioritize excellence and the student-athlete experience. The members of our athletics program are committed to the utmost integrity in competition, are engaged in Christian faith formation, and are dedicated to excelling in sports, academics, and life. In addition to sponsoring intercollegiate play in 20 sports for men and women, Hope College offers several opportunities for students to participate in club sports which are student-run and organized with the support of the college.

**Serving Christ and the Community**

Service is an important part of Hope College life and faith, and our students have a heart for others. Through volunteer opportunities like our annual Time to Serve, spring break immersion trips, our Children’s After School Achievement (CASA) tutoring program, and so much more, our students make a difference locally, nationally, and globally.

- Time to Serve is our annual new-student day of service. Each year, more than 300 new students volunteer at more than 30 nonprofit sites throughout the Holland and Zeeland communities.
At Hope, we believe our students can be change agents in the world. Spring break immersion trips are opportunities for students to challenge their ideas about injustice, deepen their faith, stretch their relationships, and change the way they see the world. This year students traveled to 11 national and four international locations to cross-culturally encounter God, share the good news, disciple, and serve others.

Our Children’s After School Achievement (CASA) program is a community-wide program to assist at-risk, school-age children by providing free after-school tutoring. The program also provides individualized summer school and other educational and cultural enrichment programs. Over the past 30 years, thousands of Holland-area children have been tutored and mentored by hundreds of Hope College students.

Campus Master Plan

In the fall of 2017, Hope College completed a campus-wide master planning process to envision how the campus environment can support our mission and strategic priorities over the next 20 years. The process was a multi-phase initiative that took a holistic approach to understanding our unique role in the city of Holland, the evolution of the campus since the completion of the last master plan in 1985, current conditions that impact experience, and the aspirations of the college community.

A key goal of the master planning process was to connect with a wide cross-section of groups on campus, including our administration, academic leadership, students, alumni, parents, and a variety of external stakeholders from Holland. These campus and community connections took the form of one-on-one conversations, campus open houses, small group meetings, and a constituent survey. These engagement exercises and supportive data collection uncovered a wide range of priorities from programmatic space needs, sustainability and technology aspirations, and the image and identity goals of a twenty-first century learning landscape.

The campus master planning process identified the needs of the campus community that were not previously met and areas where policy or aspirations could be more effectively addressed through the physical environment. These needs, observations, and themes were synthesized into flexible frameworks for change and system improvements that will serve as tools for campus change over the coming years.

Conclusion

Hope College offers a liberal arts curriculum, graduate-school-style research, hands-on opportunities, and challenging collaborations. We are committed to cultivating a diverse and inclusive campus community that allows each of us to grow in our cultural understanding, engagement, and proficiency. Ours is an environment of the highest standards where students can explore and become all that God intends them to be.
Report of Northwestern College

In honor of his tenth anniversary at Northwestern, President Christy shared the following letter with key college constituents in January of 2018.

Friends,

As we begin a new year, I would like to share a “State of the College” from my vantage point as your president the past decade. Many things have changed in higher education since I began in January 2008. However, when it comes to our foundational values as an institution, we are more resolute and committed to our mission than ever.

What remains unchanged since 2008?

Living out Our Mission

Everything we do at Northwestern begins and ends with our mission, which states that “Northwestern College is a Christian academic community engaging students in courageous and faithful learning and living that empowers them to follow Christ and pursue God’s redeeming work in the world.” A clear and compelling mission is only as strong as the faculty, staff, students, and alumni living it out. At Northwestern, I meet with every candidate who interviews for employment. I ask who Jesus Christ is to them and how their understanding of Christ and calling will impact their work and ability to live out our mission. Our employee handbooks say, “Appointees shall be in fundamental agreement with the purposes of the College … and shall express an active Christian commitment.” Northwestern attentively evaluates and encourages faculty members’ ability to make meaningful connections between their academic disciplines and the claims of Scripture and the Christian faith.

Commitment to the Authority of Scripture

Northwestern College stands with the historic Christian faith and confessions of the Reformed tradition in its belief that Holy Scripture occupies a privileged position as the final authority for the faith and practice of the people of God. While the prevailing winds of culture may pressure all Christian institutions to waver in their commitments, Northwestern continues to hold firm to the biblical exhortation of Paul in Romans 12:1-2: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

While there are many cultural issues that threaten to distort God’s vision for human flourishing, issues related to human sexuality are at the forefront. Pornography, premarital sex, adultery, sexual assault, the objectification of women, and same-sex activity all exemplify the brokenness of sexual desire and expression. Like all good gifts from God, the gift of human sexuality is to be honored, cherished, and expressed in ways that bring glory to God. It is within this context that sexual promiscuity of any sort is always wrong, and it’s the reason we call all members of our community to chastity—to celibacy outside of marriage and faithfulness within marriage. I hope you take comfort in the fact that our board has affirmed in our faculty, staff, and student handbooks, “the college lifts up the Christian ideal of marriage between a man and a woman and contends that all sexual intimacy shall be within the bounds of such marriage.” While this vision of marriage is being challenged both inside and outside the church, we believe it reflects the call of
Scripture and God’s best for us as human beings. At Northwestern, we strive to live out this vision by holding to the truth while loving each other with the grace God bestows upon every one of us.

What has changed since 2008?

Campus

Visitors compliment our beautiful, modern campus, which is thanks to expansions and improvements like these:

- 2011: Completed summer renovation of the four-court area of the Rowenhorst Student Center (RSC)
- 2011: Opened North Suites, a 68-bed men’s suite-style residence
- 2012: Completed renovation of the cafeteria and Vermeer Dining Room
- 2013: Completed DeWitt Learning Commons and new campus entrance
- 2013: Upgraded RSC mini-gym with a new fitness facility, racquetball courts, and game zone
- 2014: Completely refurbished and converted Ramaker to our Student Life Center
- 2015: Opened Juffer Athletic Fieldhouse for golf, baseball, softball, and weight training for all athletes
- 2016: Converted former Korver Weight Room to the Paul Bartlett Wrestling Facility
- 2018: Will open new science center for biology, chemistry, and nursing

Curriculum

This fall we established a new academic leadership structure with four divisional deans reporting to Mark Husbands, vice president for academic affairs. During my tenure, we have launched new undergraduate programs in biochemistry, criminal justice, genetics, sport management, translation and interpretation, and worship arts, and existing programs in ag-business and computer science are being strengthened. Our new Master of Education program has four tracks: early childhood, special education, master teacher, and teacher leadership. We plan to offer Master of Science in Athletic Training degrees in 2018–19 and launch a master’s program in physician assistant studies in 2019–20.

Enrollment

It has become harder to recruit undergraduate, residential students. There are fewer students graduating from high schools in the Midwest, and more of them are choosing two-year colleges and public universities due to three primary factors: the 2008 market collapse, the housing bubble burst, and the perception of cost. Compared with 10 years ago, families are more concerned with price; they want measurable, concrete results as a return on their investment. Fortunately, we proactively diversified by adding programs for graduate students and adult learners, a growing market in our region. We are cautiously optimistic about undergraduate enrollment for the fall of 2018, and we continue to be pleased with steady growth in our graduate programs.

Giving

When an institution is blessed with a clear and compelling Christian mission, it not only
leads to an increased number of students but also strong growth in financial support. During 2016–17 we received more than $9.1 million in donations, shattering the previous record of $6.5 million in 2013–14! This is thanks to the diligent work of our advancement team, as well as a new culture of volunteer leadership exemplified by the chairs of our last two campaigns, Dave Bomgaars (’77) and Bryan Den Hartog (’81).

**Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI)**

For the past four years we have contracted with BCWI to survey our employees about their satisfaction with NWC. On the most recent survey, our employees ranked us at 3.86 (out of 5) for overall satisfaction, our highest score yet. We are especially pleased with the feedback we received regarding our supervisors. Acclaimed author Marcus Buckingham says, “[E]mployees don’t leave organizations; they leave because of their supervisors.” The highest ranking we received from employees was a 4.45, with this statement: “My supervisor cares about me as a person.” What a great affirmation of the effective and compassionate people NWC is blessed with.

**Students**

Everything we do is aimed at providing transformational experiences for students academically, spiritually, socially, and personally, and our students and alumni consistently provide evidence of this. Our most recent accounting graduates had the fifth-highest U.S. scores on the CPA exam. Pre-med students who took the MCAT in 2017 finished in the 77th percentile, putting them in the top quarter among test-takers worldwide. We have added more than 60 new paid internship opportunities since 2014; one of them, at Ernst & Young, led to a job offer for Chris Sietstra (’17), who wrote:

> Positions at [Big Four accounting firms] are highly sought after. I was competing with candidates from some of the biggest state and private schools in the country, and at times wondered how I would stack up. During the interview process, I realized how impressive my Northwestern College education is. Nearly everyone I interviewed with asked, “What college do you go to?” I’d answer, “Northwestern College in Iowa,” and they’d say, “If you’re an example of the quality of education there, I’m sending my kids!”

Chris’s story is remarkable but certainly not unique. Northwestern College grads are highly sought after. That’s why 96 percent of our graduates, on average, are employed or in grad school within six months of graduation.

In addition to landing good jobs and being accepted into the nation’s most prestigious graduate programs, our students are also being prepared for meaningful lives and kingdom purposes. Having traveled the U.S. for a decade, I have found Northwestern College graduates to be courageous and faithful followers of Christ who are leaders in their homes, churches, professions, and communities. I am inspired by them and deeply grateful for your partnership through your friendship, advocacy, financial support, and especially your prayers. May God bless you richly in 2018 and beyond.

Blessings,
Greg Christy, president
CLOSING

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

James Nakakihara, General Synod vice president, was elected General Synod president. Rev. EJ de Waard, minister delegate from the Classis of Montgomery, was elected General Synod vice president.

CLOSE OF GENERAL SYNOD

WORSHIP SERVICE
(INCLUDING SERVICE OF INSTALLATION
OF GENERAL SECRETARY)
AND ADJOURNMENT

The closing worship service (including the service of installation for the general secretary) concluded at 12:15 p.m. Thus, the 212th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America adjourned at 12:15 p.m. on Tuesday, June 12, 2017.
**SUPPLEMENT A:** CHANGES IN CHURCH STATUS/NAME
**JANUARY 2017 THROUGH JUNE 2018**

12/16, organized
Grace Christian Church in Bayside
Bayside Hills, New York

1/17, organized
Voyage Church
Kalamazoo, Michigan

1/17, organized
River Rock Community Church
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

1/17, received from PCA
Intown Church
Portland, Oregon

1/17, organized
Centro Cristiano Palabra de Fe
Reading, Pennsylvania

11/17, received from UCC
Faith Community Church
Wishek, North Dakota

1/18, organized
Crossroads Church
Stony Brook, New York

5/18, organized
The Bridge in Allegan
Allegan, Michigan

**************

1/17, disbanded
Bethel Reformed Church
Exeter, Ontario

2/17, disbanded
Han Ma Um Reformed Church
Paramus, New Jersey

3/17, disbanded
Voice of Hope Church
Wayland, Michigan

4/17, disbanded
Open Hearts Community Church
Wyoming, Michigan

6/17, disbanded
Hope Reformed Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

7/17, disbanded
Forest Ridge Community Church
Monument, Colorado

8/17, disbanded
Casnovia Reformed Church
Casnovia, Michigan

8/17, disbanded
RiverTree Community Church
Wyoming, Michigan
10/17, disbanded  Taiwanese American Reformed Church in Queens que
  Bayside Hills, New York

11/17, released  Via Church cc
  Fresno, California

11/17, disbanded  Reformed Church of Schodack Landing c-g
  Schodack Landing, New York

12/17, disbanded  Grace Reformed Church wis
  Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin

12/17, disbanded  Calvary Community Church wis
  New Berlin, Wisconsin

4/18, disbanded  Twin Lakes Reformed Church swm
  Kalamazoo, Michigan

**************

9/17, classis transfer  Trinity Reformed Church nt
  Munster, Indiana (from i-f)
(see below)

11/17, classis transfer  Iglesia El Calvario amer
  Hemet, California (from cal)

11/17, classis transfer  Iglesia La Senda amer
  Corona, California (from cal)

11/17 classis transfer  Emmanuel Reformed Church amer
  Paramount, California (from city)

1/18, classis transfer  First Reformed Church nt
  Wheatfield, Indiana (from i-f)

6/18, classis transfer  Faith Community Reformed Church city
  Stickney, Illinois (from chi)

**************

10/17, merged  Faith Reformed Church, nt
  Dyer, Indiana,
  merged with
  Trinity Reformed Church
  Munster, Indiana,
  becoming:
  Faith Reformed Church,
  Dyer, Indiana
1/18, merged
Ebenezer Reformed Church,
Mississauga, Ontario,
merged with
New Alliance Christian Church,
Mississauga, Ontario,
becoming:
New Hope Reformed Church
Mississauga, Ontario

**************

9/17, created as a collegiate church
CenterPoint Churches
Lewis Center, Ohio
a collegiate church comprised of
CenterPoint Church (previously a new start)
Gahanna, Ohio;
CenterPoint Church (previously organized)
Lewis Center, Ohio;
CenterPoint Church (previously a new start)
Westerville, Ohio

**************

1/17, dba name change
Dongsan Korean Reformed Church
Yonkers, New York
legally remains
New Hope Reformed Church

6/17, name change
Good Shepherd Reformed Church
Bayside Hills, New York
formerly
Nakwon Reformed Church

7/17, name change
Faith Harvest Church
Warren, Michigan
formerly
Church of the Master

**************

11/17, classis formed
Classis of the Americas
RSFW
FINANCIAL REPORTS

Recent audited financial statements for the General Synod Council, RCA Fund, Endowment Fund, Church Growth Fund, Board of Benefits Services Insurance Fund, Board of Benefits Services General Fund, and Board of Benefits Services Retirement Fund are available at www.rca.org/financials. For questions about the statements, please contact the treasurer at 616-698-7071; 4500 60th St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512; or jteitsma@rca.org. The financial statements and audited reports from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary are available from the seminaries. Copies are also housed in the RCA Archives.

As a matter of public record, copies of audited financial reports are always available by calling the treasurer’s office at 616-698-7071, ext. 1874, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time), Monday through Friday. These financial reports are now available online at www.rca.org/finance. Audited financial reports are also housed in the RCA Archives.

2017 STATISTICAL TABLES

Statistical tables containing data from the Consistorial Report Form from 2000 to 2017 are available online at crf.rca.org/public.
INDEX

This is the first time that the synod minutes are using a “back-of-the-book” index rather than the traditional contents/index used for many years. The goal is to make the information more accessible to a wide variety of users, especially those who will access the material online and seek only single pages for download.

The index is two parts. Part one is the typical index of biblical citations, arranged in the order of the books of the Bible. This index includes citations included in the numerous reports made to synod by agencies, assemblies, and commissions. It does not include citations in reprinted reference and informational sources (e.g. the Marriage Catechism) submitted in the overtures.

Part two is the subject index. The major report divisions are included, as are all names mentioned in the many reports, including those listed as submitting the report or listed as members of a body in the report. Not included are the names of delegates, nominees appointed to bodies, or members of bodies listed in the front pages of the minutes.

The desire is to provide access to the vast range of information available in the minutes in an efficient manner. Your comments on the accessibility of this style and suggestions for future improvements will be appreciated.

Index of Scripture References

Genesis 12:2-23, 133
Genesis 17:7, 144
Micah 6:8, 111
Matthew 5:15, 113
Matthew 7:15-20, 309
Matthew 9:13, 129
Matthew 13:24-30, 23
Matthew 18, 137
Matthew 18:15-17, 142, 143, 310
Matthew 22:37-38, 93
Matthew 22:39, 241
Matthew 25:35, 310
Matthew 28:16-20, 310
Matthew 28:18-20, 112, 113
Matthew 28:19, 92
Matthew 28:19-20, 161
Psalm 19, 113
Psalm 104, 113
Luke 4:18, 310
Luke 10:25-37, 93
Luke 14:14, 310
Isaiah 1:17, 356
Isaiah 55:1-13, 113
John 12:24, 21
John 14:25-26a, 129
John 16:12-13a, 129
John 17:20-23, 209
John 17:21, 246, 252
John 17:22-23a, 136
Jeremiah 29, 94
Jeremiah 29:7, 93, 111, 112, 113
Jeremiah 29:11, 95
Jeremiah 31:15, 238
Hosea 6:6, 129
Acts 1, 29, 309
Acts 1:8, 310
Acts 2:39, 144
Acts 6, 309
Acts 13:47, 310
Acts 14 & 17, 113
Acts 15, 138, 309
Acts 15:39-40, 137
Acts 20:28-30, 309
Acts 21, 309
Acts 24:17, 310
Romans 1–2, 113
Romans 10:13-14, 310
Romans 12, 94
Romans 12:5, 116
Romans 12:8-13:10, 93
Romans 12:10, 22
Romans 13:1-7, 113
Romans 13:10, 129
Romans 14, 136, 138
1 Corinthians 1:4-5, 76
1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 309
1 Corinthians 5, 138
1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 136
1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 310
1 Corinthians 9:6, 137
1 Corinthians 12, 264, 307
1 Corinthians 12:27, 309
1 Corinthians 14:33, 116
2 Corinthians 1:3-4, 24
2 Corinthians 5:17-18, 148
2 Corinthians 5:18, 133
2 Corinthians 5:18-21, 112
2 Corinthians 6:16, 309
2 Corinthians 11:2, 309
Galatians 5:15, 22
Galatians 5:22-23, 113
Galatians 6:1, 310
Galatians 6:2, 252
Galatians 6:2-4, 22
Ephesians 2:14, 252
Ephesians 4:3, 309
Ephesians 4:11, 310
Ephesians 4:14, 309
Ephesians 4:15, 310
Ephesians 4:25, 239
Ephesians 4:29, 239
Colossians 4:6, 239
Hebrews 13:7, 168
1 Timothy 3, 310
1 Timothy 5:1-2, 310
2 Timothy 3:16, 310
2 Timothy 4:2, 310
2 Timothy 4:3-4, 309
2 Timothy 4:11, 137
James 1:19-20, 239
James 1:27-2:6, 310
1 Peter 2:9-12, 113
1 Peter 2:13-17, 113
1 Peter 5, 310
2 Peter 3:14-18, 309
1 John 3:16-17, 310
1 John 4:1-6, 309
1 John 4:18, 19
Revelation 2:20, 137
Revelation 7:9, 301
INDEX

Subject Index

(Ov) = Overtures received

3DM learning communities, 163
2020 Vision Group, consider overture on seating of delegates, 119; consideration of, 21–22, 149–53; consideration of interpretation of Bible to, 130; consideration of overture for grace-filled and orderly realignment to, 145; consideration of overture on path to reconciliation to, 133; discussion about, 149–53; establishment of, 152–53; referral of interreligious affairs study to, 96; referral of membership on bodies to, 126; results of classis discussions on LGBTQ issues, 139

A
Abel, Robert and Amy, 217
Accra Confession, 247
A Constant State of Emergency, 277
Administration, and General Synod Council, 42–50
Advent devotions, first bilingual effort, 78
Advisory committees, All-Synod, 15; joint CRC/RCA, and congregational renewal, 108–11; and interfaith engagement, 111–14; and new creation, 104–8; collaboration between, 101–4; members of, 14–15; on overtures and new business, report of, 149–54; report of, 101–14
Affirm that RCA welcomes inclusion of LGBTQ persons (Ov), 115–16
African American Black Council, and connection with GSC, 70–71; and Cultural Agility and Advocacy, 210–11; and Transformed & Transforming, 71; conclusion, 72; fall gathering of, 68–70; leadership changes in, 68; proposed anti-racism policy, 70; purpose of, 70; report of, 68–72
Agenda, approval of, 14, 39
Akers, Paul, 182
Alderink, Paul J., 218; necrology for, 197
Alemán, Eddy, 30, 302; and task force for better communication, 71; approved as general secretary, 50; development of leadership resource, 171, 173; experience of, 34–35; firsts with, 18; installation of, 12
Alexander, Barbara, 182
Alexander, David and Char, 25
al-Hoda, synod offering for, 39
Alicea-Báez, Jhonny, 182
Allegro Coaching, 228
Al Raja School, 30
Amanda Bruehl, 67
Amend rules for seating General Synod delegates (Ov), 117–19
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 285
American Immigration Council, 237
American Public Health Association, 239
Anabaptist churches, seek reconciliation with (Ov), 148–49
An Affirmation of Christian Unity, 254
An Enduring Hope, 277
Another Look at the Canons of Dort, 277
Anthony, Cineca, 229
Anti-racism policy, proposed, 70
Archives, RCA. See Historical Services, Office of.
Ashley, Willard, 329
Asian American. See Pacific and Asian American.
Assembly, composition of, 312–13; ecclesiastical, nature of, 309–12; theology of, 305.
See also Office; Theology, Commission on, nature of office and assembly.
Assessments, amount for 2019, 62; and alternate funding plan, update on, 62–63; and the operating budget process, 58–62; changes from 2018 to 2019, 64–65; for Board of Benefits Services Assistance Grant, 63–64; for Theological Education, and the PFOB, 64; for theological education, change nature of (Ov), 128–29
Assistant secretary, appointment of, 41
Atkins, Sharon, 179
Audits, annual for 2017, 53–55
Ayers, Jared, 337

B
Back to God Ministries International, synod offering for, 11
Bahrain, and the RCA, 29–30
Baker, Katherine Lee, 255
Banks, Douglas, 301
Baptism of children, BCO provision for, when parents are not members (Ov), 144
Barnabas Foundation, 57, 67
Barrowclough, Robert “Bob” Wayne, necrology for, 188–89
Bast, Andy, 339
Bast, David, 182, 338
Bast, Eliza Cortés, 199
Bavinck, Herman, 310
Baxter, Richard, 142
Beardslee, Frances, 244
Beardslee, Nancy, 182
Bechtel, Carol, 318, 323
Beebout, Jeremy and Susan, 25
Belgic Confession, 148
Belhar Confession, 302, 322; and arbitrary decisions, 292; and Five-Fold Test, 98, 302; and human sexuality, 140, 146; and reconciliation, 319; emphasizing unity, 265, 322
Bencivengo, Alycia, 329
Bergen, John, 329
Bethany Christian Services, partner with, 81
Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund, 178
Bilbrew, Wanzette Ann, 69
Billings, J. Todd, 339
Biographical Record Theological Seminary: 1784–1934, 334
Blaak, Abram, 182
Board of Benefits Services, and Formulary No. 5, 229; and long-term disability, 229; and policy governance, 42; and the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, 57; annual audit, 232; assistance program, 230–31; communication and education, 231–32; endowments, 230–31; Fidelity Investments, 225–26; financial summary for, 54–55; fund management, 225–26; insurance programs, 228–29; Portfolio
Advisory Service at Work, 226; purpose of, 224; RCA 403(b) retirement contribution verification project, 226–27; reallocation project, 57, 227–28; report of, 224–32; retiree chaplains, 229, 232; retirement programs, 54–55, 225–26; review of ends and executive limitations, 224–25; review of services and ministries, 225–32; Simplified Contribution Platform, 225; transitions, 232; well-being, 231

Bode, Joshua, 99; and Erica, 217
Boelkins, Dawn, 182, 338
Boersma, Carl, as teller, 14; elected moderator of commission on nominations, 300
Boice, Paul, appointment as assistant secretary, 41
Bolsinger, Tod, 21, 35
Boogaart, Thomas, 318, 323

Book of Church Order, amendments to, 39–40; offered in various languages, 78; proposed amendments to, affiliation of local church with more than one denomination, 1:1:9:1, 262–63; classes, formation, disbanding, etc., 1:III:2:3, 258–59; Eight Standards for Theological Education, 1:II:11, 88-89; Formulary No. 5, 260–62; “Rules and Amendments of The Government of the Reformed Church in America and Disciplinary Procedures,” 257–58

Borgdorff, Peter, 14
Boger, Joyce, 256
Borror, William Lynn, Certificate of Fitness for, 326
Bossardet, Andy, 173
Bouwer, Bob, 28, 37
Bouwer, William J., necrology for, 186–187
Bowler, Kate, 338
Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 239
Brandsen, Cheryl, 11
Brandt, Julius Otto, necrology for, 193

Braving the Wilderness, 20
Brazil, offering for, 12; RCA work in, 30–31, 203, 204, 205, 207, 336
Breen, Stephen, 182
Bremer-Bennett, Carol, 14
Briggs, Christopher and Renae, 217
Brink, Emily, 14
Brink, Shari, 99
Brouwer, John Edwin, necrology for, 189
Brown, Brené, 20
Brown, George, Jr., and CERCA, 244; necrology for, 190
Brownson, Bill, and new Words of Hope book, 219
Brownson, James, 91, 318, 323
Brownson, Jonathan, 24, 123
Brown, Timothy, 318, 323
Bruggink, Donald J., resolution for, 277–78
Brumm, James Hart, 278, 289, 330
Budget process. See Assessments.
Bussieres, Claude, 227, 231
Buteyn, John “Jack” Edward, Jr., 218; necrology for, 192
Byun, Ock Kee, 179
C
Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group, and Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee, 82–91. See Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee.
Callender, Nancy Ann, 182
Calsbeek (née Smit), Angeline Jennie, necrology for, 189
Camacho, Karla, 179, 301
Campbell, Antoine “Tony,” 17, 24, 68, 99, 210, 302; necrology for, 192; resolution for, 51
Campolo, Tony, 19
Canoeing the Mountains, 21, 35
CapinCrouse LLP, 53
Caratini, Jill, 314
Care of Creation Ministry Project, 241
Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf, 217
Carver, John and Miriam, 42
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, 237
Center for African American Pentecostalism and Leadership Development, 331
Center of Social Justice and Leadership Development, 329
Central College, report of, 356–59
CERCA, and the RCA, 243–44; establish web pages for, 244; fund for professional growth, 244
Chahine, Michelle, 48
Cha, Jaeseung, 91, 318, 323
Charts: 2017 Expenses, 54; 2017 Income Sources, 53; 2018 GSC Budgeted Income Total $13.7 million, 59; 2018 GSC Operating Budget, 59; California Salary Structure, 46; Change in Assessment from 2018 to 2019, 64; Chicago Salary Structure, 44; Church Growth Fund Financial Highlights, 223; Distribution of Christians, 26; Grand Rapids Salary Structure, 43; Gun Violence, 237–38; Hispanic Council Church Plants, 75; How Each Dollar of General Synod Assessment is Used, 59; Mission Personnel Salary, 42; New Brunswick Salary Structure, 44; New York Salary Structure, 45; Orange City Salary Structure, 45
Children’s Fund (formerly the Orphan’s Fund), 230
Chiu, Tien-Heng, Certificate of Fitness for, 326
Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, 288
Christian Churches Together, 248–49; and immigration reform, 235–36
Christian Discipleship and Education, Commission on, 46; continuing education for church educators, 242–43; directory of Christian educators, 243; historical publication about, 244; RCA and CERCA, 243–44; report of, 242–44
Christian Education, 248
Christian educators, compensation guidelines for, 242; continuing education for, 242–243; directory of, 243
Christianity, global trends in, 26–27
Christian Reformed Church, historical relationship to, 288
Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), cooperation with, 17, 41, 61, 65–66, 78, 81, 91–92, 97, 174, 213, 255; Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (CRC), 91, 112; Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 279; suggestions for collaboration with, 101–104; renewal, and joint CRC/RCA efforts, 108–111. See also Advisory committees, joint CRC/RCA.

Christian Theologies of Salvation: A Comparative Introduction, 339

Christian Unity, Commission on, acknowledgments, 254; and Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue, 249–51; and World Communion of Reformed Churches, 247; and World Council of Churches, 246; celebrating, lamenting, and professing unity, 252–54; ecumenical involvement overview, 245–46; ecumenical responsibilities of, 245; report of, 245–54; work at home and abroad, 251–52

Christian Worship, Commission on, and appreciation, 255–56; joint CRC/RCA worship survey, 255; report of, 255–56; worship life of the RCA, 255

Christ’s kingdom mission, and Local Missional Engagement, 199–202; general secretary’s interpretation of, 199; overview of, 199

Church, affiliation of local, with more than one denomination, 262–63; changes in status/name, 367–69; classis interest in property of, proposal for, 264–66; educators, continuing education for, 242; local, nature of in constitution, 264–66; small, 32-34; transfer of, from one classis to another, proposal for, 258–59

Churches for Middle East Peace, 211

Church Growth Fund, assets, 221; earnings, 222; financial strength, 222–23; financial summary for, 55; future activity, 223; investments, 57; ministry grants, 222; purpose of, 221; report of, 221–23; savings certificates, 221–22; support of Transformed & Transforming, 221

Church Multiplication, 2017 results, 61; five-year goals, 207; new five-year goals, 207; progress on, 206, 207; report on, 205–207; year five goals, 206

Church Multiplication Network, training process of, 75

Church Order, Commission on, 46; actions available to a classis in lieu of charges, 273; affiliation of local church with more than one denomination, 262–63; charge, who could bring a, 269–70; classis divestiture of interest in property of local church, 264–66, 275; commissioned pastor, conclusion, 275; report on commissioned pastors, 273–75; commissioned pastor, tensions identified, 274; commitment to the Formula of Agreement, task force on, 257; consistory responsibility of costs borne by minister when source of minister’s insurance is spouse’s employer-sponsored benefit plan, 260–62; delegates authorized to vote on final declarative Resolution regarding constitutional amendments, 257–58; discipline, historical and theological understandings of, 267–69; discipline, nature of, 266–67; discipline of a classis, 266–73; discipline, procedural questions and concerns about, 269; discipline summary, 272–73; judicatory to conduct trial, 270–71; kinds of discipline imposed on a classis, 271–72; possible ways to resolve the tensions, 274–75; referrals from 2017 to, 257; regional synod formation, combination, and disbanding of classes, and transfer of churches from one classis to another, 258–59; report of, 257–75; restoration conditions after discipline, 272; threshold for presenting a charge, 270

Church World Service, partner with, 81

City Classis, 321; transfer of, as new business, 15–16; transfer to RS Mid-Atlantics, 154

Civil discourse, 239–40; resources on, 240
Classes, regional synod formation, combination, and disbanding of, and transfer of churches from one classis to another, proposal for, 258–59
Classis, bounds and geography of, 320–22; bounds of, study and interpret meaning of, 322; discipline of a, 266–73. See also entries under Discipline.
Classis of the Americas, 321
Coakley, John W., 330, 331
Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, 239
Coipel, Alina, 301, 303, 304
Coleman-James, Norma, 232, 248
Colenbrander, Paul, necrology for, 198
Collaboration, summary scenario on, 103–104
Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 1848–1876: A detailed record of the Persons and Issues, Civil and Religious, in the Dutch Colony of Holland, Michigan, 277
Commissioned pastor, and office, 306; church order report on, 273–75; fuller integration of into RCA polity, 39
Commissions, reports of, 233–323; review process for, 46–47; video synod reports by, 280. See also specific commission, e.g. Christian Action, Commission on.
Communication, and disaster response, 76–77; and Faith Alive Christian Resources partnership, 78; and print media, 77; and the RCA Archives, 78–79; and work of Transformed & Transforming, 76; coordinating variety of forms, 77; improvement of between GSC and councils, 70–71; need for culturally appropriate, 74; report on, 76–79; translation efforts of, 78
Communications, disposition of, 15
Communion, 339
Communities First Association, 69
Congregational renewal, and joint CRC/RCA efforts, 108–111; summary scenario for, 109–111
Congregational Vitality Pathways, 174–75
Conner and Winters, 232
Conner, Ben, 339
Consistorial Report Form, and questions on diversity, 303–304; Christian educators and continuing education, 242–43; question about Christian educators, 243
Consistory responsibility of costs borne by minister when source of minister’s insurance is spouse’s employer-sponsored benefit plan, proposal for, 260–62
Consistory, supersession of, 40; supervisor of, 40
Constitutional amendments, delegates authorized to vote on final declarative resolution regarding, proposal, 257–258
Constitutional Theology, 264, 277
Consultation on Church Union, 286
Contreras, Charlie, 28, 37
Converse, Susan, alternate means for Biblical languages for, 327
Cook, Gordon S., necrology for, 193
Cooper, Jack D., necrology for, 186
Corro, Carlos, 247
Council of Synod Executives and pastoral letter, 20
Councils. See specific council, e.g. African American Black Council.
Covenant, engage in discussion around, 80
Craig’s Catechism, 142
INDEX

Crawford, Blaine, 179
Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity, 163
Creation Care Guiding Coalition, 241
Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High, 240
Cultivate program, 81
Cultural Agility and Advocacy, 2017 results, 61; five-year goals, 212; new five-year goals, 213; progress on, 210–12, 212–13; report on, 209–13; year five goals, 210

D
Danney, Thomas, necrology for, 194
da Silva, Mario, 336
Davelaar, Gerald, 182
Davis, Jonathan Edward, Certificate of Fitness for, 326
Deacons in assemblies of the church. See Theology, Commission on, nature of office and assembly.
DeBeer, Leonard James, necrology for, 188
DeBruyne, Rick, 99, 100, 301, 303, 304
Declarative authority, provide guide on (Ov), 126–27
Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), 235–37
DeGroat, Chuck, 339
DeGroot, Jonathan Edward, Certificate of Fitness for, 326
De Jong, Francis A., necrology for, 195
De Koster, Philip, 257, 275
DeKruif, Lindsey, 244
DeKruif, Paul, 277
Delegates, authorized to vote on final declarative resolution regarding constitutional amendments proposal, 257–58; commission, 7–8; corresponding, 6–9; ecumenical, 9; seating of, 13, 39; seating of, amend rules for (Ov), 117–19
de Moraes, Djiard Cadais, 31
denny, June, 48, 301, 303
De Pree, Max, 17
Detention Watch Network, 237
deVelder, Linda Walvoord, 277
Development, report on, 66–67; responsibility of, 66
De Vries, Tom, 18, 24, 47, 49, 69, 99, 302
de Waard, EJ, elected vice president, 366
DeYoung, Lee, 48, 70, 248, 318; and meeting between Gospel Alliance and Room for All, 28–29; at council meeting, 69; bringing people together, 20; report by, 24–37
DeYoung, Sheri, 24
DeYoung, Terry, 73, 213, 243, 314, 337
Dirkse, Pat, 31
Disability Concerns, 2017 results, 61; and planning for synod, 41; and the Pacific and Asian American Council, 73; awareness Sunday at Japanese American United Church, 73; five-year goals, 214–15; new five-year goals, 215; progress on, 214, 215; report on, 213–15; synod offering for, 11, 39; year five goals, 213–14
Disasters, response to, 76–77
Discipleship, 3DM learning communities, 163; 2017 results, 60; coaching, 162; connection events, 162; faithwalking learning communities, 162; five-year goals, 164; general secretary’s interpretation of, 161; leadership communities, 162; new five-year goals, 165; Next Generation Engagement, 165–67; pathway learning communities, 162; progress on goals, 163–64, 164–65; reports on, 161–67; year five goals, 163; VantagePoint3 learning communities, 163

Discipline, actions available to classis in lieu of charges, 273; charge, threshold for presenting a, 270; charge, who may bring a, 269–70; historical and theological understandings of, 267–69; judicatory to conduct a trial, 270–71; kinds of, to be imposed on a classis, 271–272; nature of, 266–67; procedural questions and concerns about, 269; restoration conditions after, 272; summary of thought, 272–73

Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan, 234

Diversity, and questions on Consistorial Report Form, 303–4; increase on commissions, 303; monitoring, 303


Doty, Elihu, 328

Drones Quilt Project, 235

Drones, weaponized, 234–35

Duensing, Stacey, 247, 248

Duncan’s Latin Catechism, 142

Dutch Cousins, 79

Dykstra, Gerald Gordon, necrology for, 187–88

Dykstra, Jacob, necrology for, 191

E

Ecclesiastical History of New England, 27

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (CRC), 91, 112

Ecumenical relations. See Christian Unity, Commission on.

Ecumenism in the RCA, paper on, 284–289

Ecumenism in the Reformed Church, 277

Ed and Luella Mulder Pastor Assistance Fund, 230

Edman, Laird, 314

Elder and Deacon Leadership Development Journey, 171, 173

Elders, Marcia, 182

Eligibility requirements for agencies and commissions, amend BCO (Ov), 125–26

Ellis, James, 337

Emerging Leaders, 169–73; 2017 results, 60; five-year goals, 171–72; leadership collaboratives, 169–70; leadership development connection events, 169; leadership development leadership communities, 169; leadership development learning communities, 169; new five-year goals, 173; progress, 170–71, 172; year five goals, 170

Employee Assistance Program, 231

Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, 93

Endowment funds, 56

Ends policy, Christ’s kingdom mission, 199; cultivating transformation in Christ, 161; equipping emerging leaders, 168

Engelsman, Scott, 14, 67

English, Jill, 339

Eriks, Kenneth, 183
Essamuah, Casely, 248
Estes, Elizabeth, 277
Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger, 31–32
Evangelical Covenant Church, 99
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 286
Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt—Synod of the Nile, synod offering for, 11
Evangelism and interfaith engagement, 113
Excess operating cash, 55–56
Ezra Project, 175

F
Fairweather, Newton, 183
Faith Alive Christian Resources, partnership with, 78
Faith Community Reformed Church, transfer of, to Classis of the City (Ov), 115
Faith Formation, Convening Table on, 248
Faithwalking learning communities, 162
Family Catechism, 142
Federal Council of Churches, 286
Feeney, Karen, 232
Fidelity Investments, 56
Finance, office of, responsibilities of, 53; report of, 53–66
Finances, and alternate funding plan, update on, 62–63; and the operating budget process, 58–62; assessment for theological education, change nature of (Ov), 128–129; assessments, amount for 2019, 62; audits, annual for 2017, 53–55; changes from 2018 to 2019, 64–65; for Board of Benefits Services Assistance Grant, 63–64; for Theological Education, and the PFCC, 64; Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, finances of, 325–326; Western Theological Seminary, finances, 335
Financial reports, 370
Fiscus, Deidre “Dee,” 68
Fitness for Ministry, certificate of, and PFCC report, 90–91; Church Order to review, 132; Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee to review, 132; process, clarify roles of classis and MFCA in (Ov), 130–32; Pastoral Formation Oversight Board to review, 132. See individual name for granting of certificates.
Five-Fold Test Task Force, concluding action for, 100; report of, 98–100
Floor, privilege of the, 13
Folkert, Victor, 183
Forgiving as We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace, 240
Formation of General Synod, 11–16
Formula of Agreement, 81, 286–87; and immigration, 235-36; relationships, 249; task force on, commitment to, 257
Forner, Phillip and Diane, appeal by, 291–293, 295
Foster, Pam, 232
Frank Williams Fund, 230
Frelinghuysen, Theodorus, 284
Fuller Youth Institute, 166
Further amend BCO definition of office of minister of Word and sacrament (Ov), 116–117
G
Garcia, Rafael, 301
Gasero, Russell, 277, 278, 279
General secretary, description of job of, 49; duties of, 47–48; report of, 17–23; search process for, 47–50
General Synod Council, administration and, 42–50; and the African American Black Council, 70–71; as executive committee, report of, 38–114; financial summary of, 53–54; internal governance and, 42–50; purpose of, 38
General Synod, meeting 2019, 42; planning, 41–42; work of, 54
General Synod professor, eliminate office of (Ov), 123–25
Geneva Catechism of 1541, 141
Gerard De Loof, Gerard, necrology for, 194
Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 239
Gift of Hope Christmas campaign, 77
Gilbert, Percy, 340
Gillett, Daniel, 24, 90, 300; proposal of in 2017, 81
Global Christian Forum, 247–48
Global Grace Café, 277
Global Mission, additional reporting on, 215–18; deaths, 217–18; new mission assignments, 217; partnership in mission shares, 216; personnel, transitions in, 216–18; sharing God’s love with the world, 215
Global Missional Engagement, 2017 results, 61; five-year goals, 204; new five-year goals, 205; progress on, 203–4, 204–5; reports on, 202–5; year five goals, 203
Google AdWords grant, 77
Gospel Alliance, 20; joint letter with Room for All, 35–37; purpose of, 28
Gospel Coalition, 27
Govens, Gordon, 339
Gram, Robert, 183
Granberg-Michaelson, Wesley, 14, 30, 248, 250, 272
Great Lakes City Classis, 34
Grenny, Joseph, 240
Growing Young learning community, 166
Guild-Donovan, Anne L., necrology for, 189–190
Gun safety, 237–39; resources on, 239; write letter to president on violence, 239
Gun Violence Archive, 239
Gurung, Yakuv, 34; Certificate of Fitness for, 326
H
Hamstra, Wilbert, 340
Hanson, Stephen, 232
Hardeman, Michael, 254
Harris, Kenneth, 340
Harrison, Jim, 217
Harris, Sheri, alternate means of meeting the biblical languages approved, 341
Harvey, Hellen, 69
Hayes, Mike, 90, 206
Heeg, Shirley, 183
Heidelberg Catechism, 141; Q&A 108 and 109, rescind 2017 statement, 121–22
Heideman, Eugene, 277
Herrington, Jim, 28, 29
Hervormde Kerk, 268
Hetrick, Susan, 179
Hietbrink, Dennis, 183
Hilarides, Robert, 340
Hispanic Ministries, Council for, and church planting, 74–75; and leadership
development, 75; and the Reformed Leadership Initiative, 75; annual meeting of,
74; conclusion, 76; purpose for, 74; report of, 74–76
Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 279
Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America, 277
Historical Series, RCA, 79, 244, 277–79
Historical Services, Office of, and records storage, 78–79; and the Historical Series, 79;
and the Women’s Sankofa, 79; growth and development of, 79; report of, 78–79;
work of, 278–80
Historic and Faithful Witnesses, paper on the standards as, 281–84
History, Commission on, and reporting at synod, 280; and the Historical Series, 277–78;
and the RCA Archives, 278–80; ecumenism in the RCA, paper on, 284–89;
Historic and Faithful Witnesses, paper on, 281–84; purpose of, 276; report of,
276–90
Hodges, Suzanne, 183
Honholt, Doug, 339, 340
Hope College, report of, 360–62
Hostetter, Paul Esbenshade, necrology for, 186
Houck, Martha, 329
Hough, Jeffery A., 69, 72
House, Renée, 318, 323
House, Renée, resolution on resignation of, 331–33
Hubers, Jeffrey, 248
Hubers, John, 98
Huisman, Mary, 339
Human Rights First, 237
Human sexuality, 117–19, 123, 125–26, 127–28, 133–39, 140–42; and membership,
115–16; harassment policy and procedures urged for GSC and classes, 317;
harassment and violence, 316–17; responses to meetings about, 18–21

I
Immigrants’ Rights Sunday, 235
Immigration reform, 235–37; resources, 237; send letter to the president, 236
In Peril on the Sea, 277
Insurance benefits for minister, proposal for, 260–62
Insurance programs, 228–29
Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, 57
Interfaith engagement, and evangelism, 113; and joint CRC/RCA efforts, 111–14;
definition of, 111, 112; handout questions on, 112–14; importance of, 112
Interfaith Immigration Coalition, 237
Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare, 235
International Detention Coalition, 237
International Institute for Restorative Practices, 233
Interpretation of “Historic and Faithful Witnesses” (Ov), 119–20
Interreligious Relations, Convening Table on, 248
Interreligious relations, coordinator for, 95–96; funding for, 65–66
Interreligious Task Force, and missional mandate, 91; and our call, 93–94; and rich mission history, 92; background for, 91–92; benefits of engagement, 95–96; recommendations of, 95–97; report of, 91–98; urgency of task, 94
Investments, 55–58; socially responsible, 57–58
Isa Al-Khalifa, King Hamad bin, 29
Itzen, John, necrology for, 195

J
Jamaica Deaf Village, 217
James, Earl, 68, 69, 209, 249, 301, 302, 304
Jameson, Debra, 232
Janssen, Allan, 250, 264, 277, 318, 323; declared General Synod professor emeritus, 333; resolution on retirement of, 333
Janssen, Paul, 249
Japinga, Lynn, 28, 37
Jeong, Hyunsung Chris, Certificate of Fitness for, 326
Jesus Retreat, 73
Jiao, Jose, 31
Johnson, Fred, 340
Johnson, Kristen Deede, 339
Johnson, Patricia, 179
Johnson, Tom and Aïchatou, 25
Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, 253
Jones, L. Gregory, 240
Jones, Carol, 243
Jones, Derrick, 72
Jones, Leonard, necrology for, 192–93
Joo, Eun Jae, 91
Justice and Advocacy, Convening Table on, 248
Justice, environmental, 241; expedient Christian action and, 241; restorative, 233–234; restorative, resources for, 234

K
Kadade, Mai-aiki, 25
Kale Hiwot National Church, 216
Kansfield, Norman, 27
Kantzer-Komline, Han-luen, 340; Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Kendra, Van Houten, 295
Kennedy, Earl Wm., 277
Kim, Daniel, 74
Kim, En Young, 302
Kim, Hae Taik, 183
Kim, James Jinhong, 277, 329
Kim, Stephen, 74
Kimura, Kumage, 329
Kinney, John W., 331
Klaaren, Larry, 183
Kleinheksel, Mark, 24
Klumpp, Andrew, 278
Kok, Sarah Grace, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Koller, Allan M., necrology for, 195–96
Komline, David Russell, 340; Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Koopmans, Rodney James, necrology for, 188
Kooyman, Kate, 14
Ko, Peter Je Chul, necrology for, 197
Kors, Cornelis, 91, 318, 323
Korver, Harold, 35
Korver, Ronald, 218
Krutz, Roger, 183

L
Labbe, Ken, 48
LaFleur & Godfrey Investment Management, 57
Lai, George (Chung Chih), 183
Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, 75
Lama, Ajoy Kumar, 25
Laman, Steve, and new Words of Hope book, 220
Lamson, Michael James, Certificate of Fitness for, 327; reduction in 24-month requirement for, 327
Larkin, Thomas, 183
Larryl Humme, 67
Latini, Theresa, 338
Leadership collaboratives, small church, facilitate launch of, 153–54; small church, proposal for, 34
Leadership, Emerging Leaders, 169–73; general secretary’s interpretation of, 168; interactions, proposal for, 31; urge exploration of interactions, 153; overview, 168; report on, 168–81
Lee, Minsuk, 301, 304
Lee, Paul, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Lee, Sung Su, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Lennard Davis, 337
Leonard, Doug, at council meeting, 72
Levering, Matthew, 338
Lewis, Brad, 91
Lewis, Nyla, 183
LGBTQ issues, definitive path forward discussion at classis meetings, 139; definitive resolution and direction to (Ov), 133–39
LGBTQ persons, affirm that RCA welcomes inclusion of, 115–16
Liang, Clarence, necrology for, 196
Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York, 277
Lilly Endowment, 174, 336
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, 75
Lin, Shirley, 317
Lin, Shi Yang, 74
Listening Together, 80; discussions, 17
Liu, Feifei, 226, 229
Livingston, John Henry, 285, 328
Local Missional Engagement, 2017 results, 61; five-year goals, 201; new five-year goals, 202; progress on, 200, 201–2; report on, 199–202; year five goals, 200
Lockton Advisors, 226
Lopez, Antonio R., necrology for, 197
Lougin, Jo Anna, 301, 303
Loynes, Duane, 338
Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service, 237
LVM Capital Management, 56, 57

M
Macias, Diana, alternate means for Biblical languages for, 327
Malave, Carlos, 249
Maple Avenue Ministries, 288
Marriage and sexuality, adopt catechism on, as standard of unity (Ov), 140–42; catechism on, Great Lakes, 155–60; commend catechism on, for study (Ov), 145–48; commend catechism on, to commission on theology and churches for study and response, 148; commend catechism on (Ov), 140
Marriage, declare definition of, constitutional (Ov), 127–28
Mass incarceration, 304
Mass incarceration coalition, 233–34
Masters, Sandra, 183
Mather, Cotton, 27
Mazzotta, Lesley, 177, 179, 181
McClure-Long, Nancy, 183
McCready, Micah, 91, 279, 333; inauguration of at NBTS, 331
McMillan, Ron, 240
Meeter, Daniel J., 249, 265
Meeting Each Other in Doctrine and Liturgy, 265
Meiji Gakuin School, 218
Mescalero Apache, 303
Michaelius, Jonas, 276
Migration Policy Institute, 237
Miller, Larry, 248
Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, and alternate means, 327; and Certificates of Fitness awarded, 326–27; and Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee, 325; and Pine Rest Christian Hospital, 326; and policy governance, 42; and professorate, 318; and Western Theological Seminary, 326; cooperative efforts, 326; finances of, 325–26; future vision for, 325; operational procedure of, 325; report of, 324–27; responsibilities of, 324
Ministers, further amend BCO definition of office of (Ov), 116–17; of Word and sacrament, 40; retired, 182–84
Ministry support services, 54
Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective, 92
Min, Lynn, 74, 179
Minutes, approval of 2017, 13
Mission, call to, 29–32; placements for young adults, 80–81; reports on, 199–218; statement of the RCA, 71
Missional mandate, 92
Missional Mosaic. See Cultural Agility and Advocacy.
INDEX

Missionaries, furloughing, 40
Mold, Frederick, Jr., necrology for, 191
Moussa, Issaka, 32
Mouw, Richard J., 337
Mulder, Edwin, 14; resolution for, 52
Muller, Dawn, 206
Munroe, Jeff, 339
Musekura, Célestin, 240
Muyskens, John David, necrology for, 189

N
Nakakihara, James, 24, 301, 318; elected president, 366
National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 248, 286
National Evangelical Church of Bahrain, 217
Native American/First Nations, 303
Na, Young, 48
Necrology, report on, 185–98
Neevel, Ken, 29–30, 67
Neevel, Sara, 17
New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Anti-Racism Transformation Team, 328; and missions, 328; and personnel, 329–30; and strategic planning, 330; and women in ministry, 329; Center of Social Justice and Leadership Development, 329; Doctor of Ministry restructure, 330; House, Renée, resolution on resignation of, 331–33; inauguration of Micah McCreary, 331; Janssen, Allan, declared General Synod professor emeritus, 333; Janssen, Allan, resolution on retirement of, 333; report of, 328–33

New Brunswick Theological Seminary: An illustrated history, 1784–2014, 334
New business, 15–16
New Creation and joint CRC/RCA efforts, 104–8; summary scenario on, 106–7
New York Missionary Society, 285
Next Generation Engagement, connection events, 165–66; 2017 results, 60; five-year goals, 166–167; growing young learning community, 166; learning communities, 166; new five-year goals, to be determined, 167; progress on, 166; year five goals, 166
Nominations, Commission on, report of, 296–300
Noordmans, Philip, 183
Nordoff, Samuel, 92
Northwestern College, report of, 363–65
Nyenhuis, Jacob, 277

O
Ocasio, Joseph, 336, 338
Offering at synod, 39
Office, affirmation of differences of offices, 314; functional view of, 307–8; more than function, 308; two views of, 307–9. See also Theology, Commission on, nature of office and Assembly.
Officers, election of, 366
Oghimi, Moto, 329
Oikocredit, 58
Old Mud Meeting House, Harrodsburg, Kentucky, 79
Oliveira, Eddie, 17
Opening of General Synod, 11
Ornee, John, 24
Orphan’s Fund. See Children’s Fund.
Ortiz, Jared, 338
Ott, Craig, 93
Otte, John, 277
Otte, Michael, 183
Otterness, Richard, 183; and Carolyn, 216
Our Call, 42
Outreach in the post-Christian era, 27
Overtures: Adopt catechism on marriage and sexuality as standard of unity (New Thing Classis), 140–42; Affirmation regarding interpretation of Scripture (Rockland-Westchester), 129–30; Affirm that RCA welcomes inclusion of LGBTQ persons, 115–16; Amend BCO eligibility requirements for agencies and commissions (Central California), 125–26; Amend rules for seating General Synod delegates (Dakota), 117–19; BCO provision for baptism of children when parents are not members (RS Albany), 144; Change nature of theological education assessment (Zeeland), 128–29; Clarify roles of classis and MFCA in certificate of fitness for ministry process (Rockland-Westchester), 130–32; Commend catechism on marriage and sexuality for study (Great Lakes City Classis), 140; Commend catechism on marriage and sexuality for study (RS Great Lakes), 145–48; Declare commitment to personal reconciliation over discipline (Mid-Hudson), 142–43; Declare definition of marriage constitutional (British Columbia), 127–28; Definitive resolution and direction to LGBTQ issues (Rocky Mountains), 133–39; Eliminate office of General Synod professor (Central California), 123; Eliminate office of General Synod professor (Great Lakes City Classis), 117–18; Further amend BCO definition of office of Minister of Word and Sacrament (Schenectady), 116–17; Interpretation of “Historic and Faithful Witnesses” (Holland), 119; Provide guide on declarative authority (Great Lakes City Classis), 126–27; Rescind R-17-29 (Holland), 121–22; Seek path to reconciliation within the RCA (Passaic Valley), 132–33; Seek reconciliation with Anabaptist churches (RS New York), 148–49; Task Force for grace-filled and orderly realignment (RS Great Lakes), 145; Transfer of congregation between two regional synods (Chicago), 115
Overtures and new business, 115–60

P
Paarlberg, John, 184
Paarlberg, Marilyn, 28, 37
Paarlberg, Russell, 294
Pacific and Asian American Ministries, Council for, and cultivate transformation in Christ, 73; and engage in Christ’s kingdom mission, 72–73; and equip emerging leaders of today and tomorrow, 73; annual consultaion of, 72; conclusion, 74; purpose for, 72; report of, 72–74
Pack, Chad Tanaka, 28, 37
Padilla, Alvin, 91
Page, Jr, John David, necrology for, 185–186
Palms, Sharon, 99
Palsma, Sarah, 256
INDEX

Parker, Lorraine, 177
Parler, Branson La Vern, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Partnership in Mission shares, 216
Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee, and Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, 325; and professorate, 318; purpose of, 82–84; report of, 82–91;
Pastoral Formation Oversight Board. creation of, 86–87
Pater-Ennis, Pamela, 48
Patterson, Kerry, 240
Patterson, Carol, 330
Peace Church, Eagan, Minnesota, and Lao congregation, 73
Peirce, Drew, 339
Pentecostal World Fellowship, 248
People Improving Communities through Organizing, 211
Perea, Stanley Eldon, necrology for, 193
Perry, Belinda, 179
Pierce, Chad, 91, 318, 323
Pierce, Jason, alternate means of meeting the biblical languages approved, 341
Pierce, Monica Schaap, 247, 248, 249, 250, 254
Piet, John, 93
Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, 231, 326
Planned giving programs, 57
Plasman, Daniel, 184
Poest, Cathy, 22
Poest, Donald, 24, 28, 29, 49, 68, 249, 300, 318; appointment as general secretary, 47; at council meeting, 69; report by, 17–23; resolution for, 50–51
Poest, Kevin, 23
Policy governance, 42
Polity, role of, 19–20
Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 247
Poppen, Mark, 336, 339
Poppleton, Drew, 255
Portfolio Advisory Service at Work, 226
Posie, Denise, 14
Prayer, synod delegates offering, 12–13
Presbyterian Church of Manaus, 30; synod offering for, 12, 39
President, report of, 24–37; addendum of letters, 35–37; conclusion, 34–35; coping with division, 27–29; global trends, 26; mission, call to, 29–32; outreach, 27–28; small churches, 32–34; thanksgiving, 24–25; travels around the church, 25–26
Professor, eliminate office of General Synod (Ov), 123, 124–25
Professorate, and classis bounds and geography, 320–22; and diminishing of Reformed polity, 319; and gratitude for the church, 320; and loss of discussion, 319–20; and paucity of scriptural engagement, 319; and polarization within the church, 319; and weakened unity, 320; function of, 318; laments and praises, 319–20; report of, 318–323
Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times, 337
Protestant Church in Oman, 217, 218
Protestant Church in Taiwan, 218
Q
Quorum, declaration of, 13

R
Race and Ethnicity, Commission on, and Native American/First Nations, 303; diversity, increase on commissions, 303; electronic and social media, 304; joint meeting with councils and staff, 302; mass incarceration, 304; ministry in local congregations, 303–4; monitoring diversity, 303; racial/ethnic councils, 302–3; RCA thriving, missional, multiracial, 301; report of, 301–4; responsibilities of, 301; thanksgiving, 304; toward a multicultural future freed from racism, 301–2; webinars, 304; white privilege, monitoring recommendations on, 302

Racism, toward a multicultural future freed from, 301–2
Rah, Soong-Chan, 337
Randazzo, Brian, appeal by, 293–94
RCA Israel-Palestine Ministries, 211
RCA Ministry Fund, 59
RCA retirement plans, and investments, 56–57
RCA Today, 77, 179; and Transformed & Transforming, 77
“RCA Women: A Legacy of Leadership,” 177
Real Appeal weight loss program, 228
Realignment, grace-filled and orderly, task force for (Ov), 145
RECONCILE, 81
Reconciliation, declare commitment to personal, over discipline (Ov), 142–43; personal, members to seek, 143; seek, with Anabaptist churches (Ov), 148–49; within the RCA, seek path to (Ov), 132–33
Referrals from GS 2014, report on, R-15, Five-Fold Test, 98–100
Referrals from GS 2015, report on, 91–98
Referrals from GS 2016, R 16-29, Pastoral Formation Coordinating Committee, 82–91; report on, 82–91
Referrals from GS 2017, 80–82; R 17-40, refugee resources, 81–82; R-39, interreligious task force, 91–98; response to R 17-18 (2017) and covenant, 80; response to R 17-32, mission placements, 80–81
Reformed Benefits Association, 228–229, 260
“Reformed Christian Engagement with People of Other Faiths,” 93
Reformed Church Center, 279, 330
Reformed Churches throughout the World holding a Presbyterian System, 286
Reformed Collaborative, 97; and interreligious relations coordinator, 97
Reformed Ecumenical Council, 247
Reformed Leadership Initiative, 75
Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal, 110–11
Re:Forming Missions process, 204
Refugee resources, 81–82
Regional synod formation, combination, and disbanding of classes, and transfer of churches from one classis to another, 258–259
Regional synod minutes, review of, 39
Reliance Standard, 229
Remember Nhu, 217
Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel of the Lord’s Table, 339
Rescind R 17-29 (Ov), 121–22
Retirement Contribution Verification Project, 226–27
Retirement programs. See Board of Benefit Services.
Rich, Willie, 22
Ridder: Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal), 162, 174
Ridder Church Renewal, 101
Rienstra, Ron, 255
Ritsema, Jack, 184
Rivera, Carlos, 184
Robbins (née Workman), Ruth Adene Fries, necrology for, 190
Robins, Dena, 254
Robinson, Marilynne, 340
Rodriguez, Eduardo, 206
Rodriguez, Steven, 48
Rohrer, Ming Chen Lo, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Rolle, Erma, 48
Roll of General Synod, 1–10
Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue, 249–251
Room for All, 20, 123; joint letter with Gospel Alliance, 35–37; purpose of, 27
Roos, Arvin Wilfred, necrology for, 187
Rotman, Marla, 179
Rozeboom, Sue, 338, 339
Rubio, Brenna Peterson, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Rubio, Rodolfo, alternate means of meeting the biblical languages approved, 341
Ruiz, Luis, 31, 72, 303

S
Salary structure, 42–46
Samuelson, Marte, 179
Sankofa bird, meaning of, 72
Schaaf, Kenneth A., 277
Schaefer, Christopher George, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Scheid, Joshua, 257
Schmidt, John, 184
Scholma, Kellie, 14
Schulze, Eric John, necrology for, 191–92
Schutte, Kevin, 14
Schuyler, Larry, 275
Scripture, affirmation regarding interpretation of (Ov), 129–30
Scudder, Ida, 92, 276
Scudder, John, 285
Scudder, Lewis Rousseau, III, 93, 218; necrology for, 196
Sealy, Patricia, 241
Semeyn, Peter, 184
Serrano, Andres, 48
Sexual harassment policy and procedures for GSC and classes urged, 317
Shalem Mental Health Network, 233
Sheffield, Tricia, 28, 37
She Is Called campaign, 177, 180
Sheldon, R. Scott, 329
Shipley, Thos, 231
Siberell, Justin, 29–30
Sickler, Philip Stephan, necrology for, 196
Singletary, Patricia, 179
Smallbones, Jacqueline, 184
Smith, David, necrology for, 192
Smith, Earl L., 218; necrology for, 187
Smith, Terry Ann, 329
Smothers, Andrew, 217
Snyder, Noel, 256
Soderstrom, Stephanie, 14, 207
*Sojourners*, 27
Speaking Christian, 239–40; resources on, 240
Spoolstra, Franklin, necrology for, 194
Staff compensation. See Salary structure.
Standards as “Historic and Faithful Witnesses” (Ov), 119–20
Statistical tables, 370
Stephenson, Mark, 337
Steward, James, 68, 69, 70, 301
Stillwell Trust, 230
Stouten, Dann, 67
Stralow, James, necrology for, 195
St. Thomas Theological College, Karachi, Pakistan, 73
Stubbs, David, 340
Su, David, 184
Suh, Kyunghoon, 74, 301
Supplement A, changes in church status/name, 367–69
Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant, 174
Swart, Bob and Morrie, 216
Swart, Caleb and Joanna, 216, 217
Swart, Richard and Donna, 216, 217
Swierenga, Robert, 277
Swinton, John, 338
Switzler, Al, 240
Sypher, Francis, 277
Sythavongsa, Chanthala, 74

T
Taitt, Cora, 91; as teller, 14
Tanner, Beth, 329
Tarbous, Laura, 296, 300
Taylor, Faye, 329
Teitsma, Jillisa, appointment as treasurer, 41
Telemus Capital, 56
Tellers, appointment of, 14
Ten Brink, Arvin, 232
TenClay, JJ, 81
Tennett, Stephen, 93
Termott, Ken, 329
Testa, Liz, 14, 177
*The Arabian Mission’s Story*, 218
INDEX

“The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” 95
The Leader’s Journey, 28
The Mission Gleaner, 276
The New Catechism, 142
Theological Education Agency. See Ministerial Formation Certification Agency.
Theological education, eight standards for, 88–90
Theological Education. See Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency, New Brunswick
Theological Seminary, Pastoral Formation Oversight Board, and Western
Theological Education.
Theology, Commission on, acknowledgments, 314; assemblies, composition of, 312–13;
assembly, ecclesiastical, nature of, 309–12; makeup of, 40; nature of office and
assembly, 305–14; office and assembly overview, 305–6; office, conclusion
about, 313; office, current view of, 306; ongoing work, 314; referral regarding
a theology of office at assemblies, 305; report of, 305–15; two visions of
ecclesiastical office, 307–9
“The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World,” 250–51
Theonugraha, David, 74
Thoms, Wells, 92
Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches, 2017 results, 60; coaching, 174; Congregational
Vitality Pathways, 174–75; Ezra Project, 175; five-year goals, 175; maximizing
first-call potential, 174; new five-year goals, 176–77; pastors and congregations
in transition, 174; progress on, 175, 176; report on, 173–77; Ridder: Churches
Learning Change, 174; year five goals, 175
Timothy Christian Schools, 277, 279
Transfer of congregation between two regional synods (Ov), 115
Transformational processes, guiding coalition for, 161–62
Transformational processes. See Discipleship.
Transformed & Transforming, 20, 42; alignment of resources with, 58; and
communication work, 76–79; and Hispanic Ministries, Council for, 74–76; and
mission placement of young adults, 81; and RCA Today, 77; and the commission
on history, 276; and the General Synod Council, 38; and the Pacific and Asian
American Council, 72–74; and the work of the African American Black Council,
71; campaign for, 67; leadership reports, 168–81; discipleship reports, 161–67;
priorities and initiative areas, 54, 58. See specific initiative areas for reports, e.g.
Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches, and Discipleship.
Treadway, Scott, 28, 37
Treasurer, appointment of, 41
Tveit, Olav Fykse, 246
U
Ulmer, Dean, 184
Underwood, Horace G., 277, 329
UNUM, 229
V
Vamvas, Patricia (Pacia), 184
van Arsdale, Jan Walter, necrology for, 187
Van Beek, Troy, 67
Van Brunt Trust, 231
Van Bunschooten, Elias, 276
Vander Molen, Steven, 184, 339
Vander Wal, Lisa, and World Communion of Reformed Churches, 247
VanDis, Clare, as teller, 14
Van Dusseldorp, Bruce, 184
Van Engen, Charles, 93
Van Ess, John and Dorothy, 93
VanHoozer, Kevin, 338
Van Lant, David, 184
van Maastricht, Matthew, 278
Van Nest Talmage, John, 328
Van Slambrourck, Jack, 295
VantagePoint3 learning communities, 163
Van Voorst, Robert, 340
Van Wagenen, Jared, IV, necrology for, 190–91
Vasquez, Lauralyn, 48
Vellenga, Ellen, 243
Vellore Woman’s Medical College, 276
Verhave, Jan Peter, 277
Verhoog, John, 232
Vermeer, Evan, 48, 49, 99
Vermeulen, Jason D., Certificate of Fitness for, 327
Vermeulen, Jason, reduction in 24-month requirement for, 327
Ver Steeg, Jill, 161, 244
Videos: Brazil Amazon Outreach, 31; Forgiveness in Niger, 32; Randy Weener - Small Church Forum, 32; Randy Weener - Three Churches in One, 33; Yakuv Gurung - Nepalese Church Planter, 34
Vink, Tim, 206
Violence Policy Center, 239
Vis, Marlin, 232
Vogelaar, Harold, 93
Volunteer Engagement, 2017 results, 61; five-year goals, 209; four areas of focus, 208; new five-year goals, 209; progress on, 208, 209; report on, 207–9; year five goals, 208
Voskuil, Dennis, 338
Vrooman, Robert, 184

W
Wagoner, Roy, necrology for, 197
Walden, Islay, 329
Waldensian Church in Italy, partner with, 81
Walter, Gary, 99
War, and the RCA, 234–35
Waterstone, Matt, 48
We Are Speaking, 177, 179
We Are Speaking statement, affirmation of, 316
Weener, Randy, 14, 31, 32, 206
Western Theological Seminary, 142nd commencement, 338; and disability ministry, 337; and Girod Fellowship, 337; and Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, 326; and student debt, 336; approval of restated bylaws and articles of incorporation, 355; Bast Preaching Festival, 337; enrollment, 335–36; faculty accomplishments, 339–40; Western Theological Seminary, finances, 335; graduate program for Christian educators, 336; Hispanic ministries program launched, 336; identity statement, 335; Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry, 337; mission statement, 335; Osterhaven Lecture Series on Theology, 337–38; Our New Day capital campaign, 335; petitions approved, 340–41; prosperity gospel and the dying, 338; Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House, 338; report of, 335–55; review and change of bylaws and articles of incorporation, 341–55; theological education in underserved markets, 336; transitions, 338–39; trustee appointments, 340; vision statement, 335

Westman, Betsy Lynn, Certificate of Fitness for, 327
West Michigan Restorative Justice Coalition, 234

*Westminster Catechism*, 142
Whitefield, George, 285
White privilege, monitoring recommendations on, 302
Wiessner, Charles, 184
Wigboldy, Kyle, 339
William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 277; resolution for, 278
Williams, Irma, 179
Williams, Rowan, 340
Wilterdink, Bruce, 184
Winkler, James E., 248
Winner, Lauren, 340
Wisner, Mary, 184

“Wittenberg Witness,” 253, 254
Witvliet, John, 256

Women, Commission for, affirmation of We Are Speaking statement, 316; harassment policy and procedures urged for GSC and classes, 317; report of, 316–17; sexual harassment and violence, 316–17

Women’s Board of Foreign Missions, 276
Women’s Sankofa, 177


Words of Hope, 25; report of, 219–20; synod offering for, 11
World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 247
World Communion of Reformed Churches, 247, 286
World Council of Churches, 246
World Evangelical Alliance, 247

*World RELG*, 340

Worship, at General Synod, 11–13; closing and installation of general secretary, 366; participants in synod, 11–12; survey, joint CRC/RCA, 255

*Worship the Lord*, 133; Korean translation of, 78
Wu, Shuo-Min (Imos), 300
Wyma, Barbara, 218
Wyma, David, 218
Y
Yamada, Frank M., 331
Yoder, Margaret, 329
Yoshida, Gerri, 74
Younas, Lubna, 73
Young, John, 314
Young, Keith, 14

Z
Zomer, Rick, 165
Zwemer, Amy, 30
Zwemer, Samuel, 29, 93, 285
Zylman-TenHave, Lannette, 338
2018 Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod