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 18-1
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:

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<th>Book of Church Order Amendments</th>
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<td>1. Fuller Integration of Commissioned Pastor into Polity of the RCA</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>(MGS 2017, R 17-41, pp. 257-263)</em></td>
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<td><em>(BCO Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 1 and 2 (2017 edition, pp. 11-19)</em></td>
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<td><em>(BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Articles 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 15, 17 (2017 edition, pp. 29-35, 52-60)</em></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
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.

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**2017–2018**

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#### 2017–2018

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### Orange City, Iowa

#### 2017–2018

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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:

![chart showing income sources]

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:

![Pie chart showing how each dollar of General Synod assessment is used]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Expense</th>
<th>Per Dollar</th>
<th>Per Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformed &amp; Transforming</td>
<td>$0.33</td>
<td>$17.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work of General Synod</td>
<td>$0.29</td>
<td>$15.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry Support Services</td>
<td>$0.23</td>
<td>$12.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological Education</td>
<td>$0.11</td>
<td>$5.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOBS Assistance Fund</td>
<td>$0.04</td>
<td>$2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>$53.75</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

![Pie chart showing 2018 GSC budgeted income by type]

- **Assessments**: 48%
- **Contributions and Grants**: 36%
- **Investment Income**: 6%
- **Other Income**: 6%
- **Services Provided to Related Entities**: 4%

**2018 GSC Budgeted Income**
Total $13.7 million
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>2019</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amounts brought from GSC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Synod Council</td>
<td></td>
<td>$45.64</td>
<td>$46.10</td>
<td>$0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOBS</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological education</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$53.61</td>
<td>$54.22</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amounts added during Synod 2017:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task force on Formula of Agreement</td>
<td>R 17-44</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$53.75</td>
<td>$554.22</td>
<td>$0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</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:
To approve from the unspent reserves from the year 2017 to fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, and a joint interreligious committee with the CRCNA. (ADOPTED)

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 get 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….
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 nominated* 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](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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. Both denominations would benefit from collaboratively developed and commonly shared approaches to prayerful discernment leading to congregational renewal and missional engagement.
9. 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 publicly 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 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).