REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

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

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

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

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

Change in Leadership

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

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

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

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

Annual Fall Gathering

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Proposed RCA Anti-Racism Policy

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

Connecting with GSC

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transformed & Transforming

The mission statement of the Reformed Church in America states:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humbly submitted,

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

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

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

Annual Consultation

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

Engage in Christ’s Kingdom Mission

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

**Equip Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow**

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

**Cultivate Transformation in Christ**

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,

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

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR HISPANIC MINISTRIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respectfully submitted,

The executive committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SYNOD COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATION

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

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

Supporting Transformed & Transforming

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

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

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

Responding to Disasters

Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Wildfires. 2017 was a particularly devastating year. The communication team shared frequent news updates on disasters, including how they impacted RCA churches, communities, and mission partners; reported how RCA Global