REFERRALS FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2017

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. This falls within the current Transformed & Transforming initiatives and will be run by General Synod staff, specifically under the direction of the Global Mission team.

2. RCA missionaries and mission personnel have already developed and will continue to develop job descriptions and ministry opportunities across the globe.

3. It is requested that RCA churches and classes help recruit young adults for these opportunities.

4. RCA churches and classes are invited to think creatively about ways of sending, funding, and supporting the change of this corporate norm for the sake of the kingdom.

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

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

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

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

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

To report progress to the 2018 General Synod.

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

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

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

REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2016

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

REPORT OF THE PASTORAL FORMATION COORDINATING COMMITTEE
As a response to the recommendations of the Call, Care, and Standards Collaboration Group, the 2016 General Synod adopted R 16-29:

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

1. In consultation with the professorate, coordinate regular review of the standards and propose needed revisions to the General Synod. In conjunction with this process, coordinate the evaluation of overall effectiveness of the certification processes in assisting candidates to meet the standards established by the RCA.

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

3. Provide a forum for collaboration among the seminaries and the MFCA regarding ministerial formation as it relates to RCA church order and the mission of the church.

4. Assist the GSC in conducting a triennial review of the overall assessment for theological education, considering both the total amount and its division, in light of RCA church order and the mission of the church.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. One additional member designated by each theological agent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

…in consultation with the General Synod professors (professorate).

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

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

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

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

The PFOB exists to….

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

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

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

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

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

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

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

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

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

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

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

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment.

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

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

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

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

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

VOTED: To adopt the amendment.

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