Report of the Interim General Secretary

Donald Poest

I must begin this morning by expressing my gratitude for the privilege of this past year. It has been a chapter in my life that I never expected, but one for which I will always be grateful. Your encouragement and affirmations, and especially your prayers, have sustained me in wonderful ways.

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

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

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

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

Reality As I See It

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Unity does not equal uniformity.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Saying Thanks**

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

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

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

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

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

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