Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 to advise the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. In 1968, the commission was given oversight of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the General Synod of 2003 added the instruction that the commission “offer a historical perspective, either orally or in writing, on matters being presented to the General Synod” \(\text{MGS 2003, R-41, p. 159}\) and further assigns the commission to “actively promote research on, interest in, and reflection on, the history and traditions of the Reformed Church in America,” to “inform the Reformed Church in America of the relevance of the denomination’s history and traditions to its program, and regularly review denominational resources that present the church’s history,” and to “provide a ‘history center’ by regularly reporting on the activities of the Reformed Church in America’s educational institutions as these relate to the history and traditions of the denomination” \(\text{BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5 [2017 edition, pp. 111–112]}\). This is our fifty-second report to a General Synod.

The General Synod Council and its staff do their work and serve the synods, classes, and congregations informed by the Transformed & Transforming goals approved by the 2013 General Synod. This commission works to help the church look at those 15-year goals in the larger context of our history:

- The transformation begun 20 years ago when we installed the first woman professor of theology,
- The transformation begun 25 years ago when the General Synod heard the report of its first woman president,
- The transformation begun 30 years ago when we ordained the first woman of color,
- The transformation begun 40 years ago when we expanded our polity’s definition of “persons,”
- The transformation begun and continued 50 years ago when we renewed our liturgies,
- The transformation begun a century ago when Ida Scudder opened Vellore Woman’s Medical College,
- The transformation begun 135 years ago when the Women’s Board of Foreign Missions established \textit{The Mission Gleaner} to “keep the women of the Church at home informed of the progress of the work on the field,”
- The transformation begun 170 years ago when a group of immigrant churches in western Michigan formed a classis,
- The transformation begun 205 years ago when Elias Van Bunschooten set an example for stewardship that has educated hundreds of pastors and missionaries since then, and
- The transformation begun 390 years ago when Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam and formed the first Reformed congregation in North America—a multiethnic, multilingual congregation open to everyone.

Countless other transformations have occurred both before and since. The people of God have always emphasized the importance of memory, both individual and collective, to see God’s faithfulness and allow us to learn from the good and bad of the past as we seek to be faithful to God’s calling in the future. This commission reflects on the past, reacts to the present, and provides for the future, offering the whole church a perspective that is not just a historical perspective but a perspective informed by historical insight to create a common understanding on which transformation can be built.
To do this work, the commission met in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on October 12–13, 2017 (concurrently with the other commissions and the General Synod Council), and in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on February 12, 2018, as well as communicating regularly via email.

Chronicles of Transformation

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America is celebrating the half-century mark this year. The first half of this year should see the publication of four new volumes:

- *A Commentary on the Minutes of the Classis of Holland, 1848–1876: A detailed record of the Persons and Issues, Civil and Religious, in the Dutch Colony of Holland, Michigan* by Earl Wm. Kennedy;
- *In Peril on the Sea: The Forgotten Story of the William & Mary Shipwreck* by Kenneth A. Schaaf;
- *A Constant State of Emergency: Paul DeKruif, Microbe Hunter and Health Activist* by Jan Peter Verhave; and
- *Timothy Christian Schools* by Robert Swierenga.

Several books are also in process toward publication, including *An Enduring Hope: A Sesquicentennial History of Hope College*, edited by Jacob Nyenhuis; *Liber F: Register of Marriages from 1783 to 1905 in the Collegiate Churches of New York* by Francis Sypher; a revised edition of *Constitutional Theology* by Allan Janssen; *Another Look at the Canons of Dort* by Eugene Heideman; and a supplement to the *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America* by Russell Gasero. Beyond these projects that have been approved by the commission, your commission is looking forward to a story about John Otte, medical missionary to China, by Linda Walvoord DeVelder; a look at some of the correspondence of Horace Underwood by James Jinhong Kim (our first potential book on the mission to Korea that started at New Brunswick Theological Seminary); and a story about the Global Grace Café at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, New Jersey, by Elizabeth Estes.

This fiftieth year has been a time of transition for the Historical Series. The world of publishing has changed dramatically since this project began, and it continues to change. At the end of December, the Historical Series staff found out that William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, our publisher since the beginning, was downsizing, changing the nature of its operations, and would no longer be carrying “consignment” publications such as the Historical Series. In January, books from the Series that were housed in Eerdmans’ warehouse were moved into the RCA Archives’ underground storage in Grand Rapids, along with books moved out of the basement of Western Seminary’s library due to their current construction project. In February, your commission received, with thanksgiving to God for his service, Donald Bruggink’s letter of intent to retire as general editor of the Historical Series.

**H 18-1**

That the following resolution be spread across the minutes of this General Synod:

WHEREAS the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America published its first volume, *Ecumenism in the Reformed Church*, in 1968, and has since published 97 other volumes to help both the church and the academy engage the story of our history and mission, and
WHEREAS the resources and expertise of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company were vital to the early success and growth of the Series, and

WHEREAS the Rev. Dr. Donald J. Bruggink has faithfully stewarded the growth of this Series and its revolving fund since its inception, and

WHEREAS both Dr. Bruggink and Eerdmans Publishing are now retiring from a half-century of voluntary labors,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 212th General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the 7th through 12th days of June, 2018, hereby offers thanksgiving to God for Donald J. Bruggink and the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, and lifts up heartfelt prayers for this ministry they have nurtured and their future endeavors; and further,

That the synod rise, in body or spirit, to join in a prayer of thanksgiving. (ADOPTED)

Donald Bruggink was named general editor emeritus by your commission. There will be a time of celebration at this synod for everyone to thank him and representatives from Eerdmans and to celebrate the launch of this work into the next 50 years.

The Commission on History has been keenly aware of the importance of this time of transition and has taken steps to insure the continued growth and success of the Historical Series. Already in October, before news of the change in our relationship with Eerdmans, this commission had been discussing a strategic plan to move forward in what was sure to be a time of change. Working with the RCA Archives and Communication and Production Services, this commission has approved a plan that will continue the series under Reformed Church Press and will allow us to explore more electronic and on-demand publishing, utilizing online platforms such as Amazon and Patreon. James Hart Brumm, director of the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and soon-to-be past moderator of this commission, has been serving as associate general editor and will take up the responsibilities of general editor of the Historical Series on July 1. Andrew Klumpp, currently a Ph.D. candidate at Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University and a member of the commission, has been appointed associate general editor. Matthew van Maastricht, pastor of Altamont Reformed Church in New York and an adjunct faculty member at Western Theological Seminary, continues as editor of the Congregational History Series.

**Remembering Our Transformations**

In addition to the Historical Series, your commission works with the RCA archivist, Russell Gasero, providing review and support of his work through the Archives Advisory Committee (formed of commission members) and through his regular reporting to the commission on the ongoing work of the Archives. He serves as production editor for the Historical Series and helps your commission to take note of various important anniversaries in the life of the denomination in ways that can illuminate our present ministries. This past year, the assistance of the Archives has been invaluable during work with the Commission for Women and the General Synod Council to plan a time of celebration and thanksgiving for the gifts and ministries of women in the Reformed Church at this synod.
This coming November marks the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the great Synod of Dordt (in the spirit of ecumenism, the Christian Reformed Church spelling has been adopted). Your commission has been working with the Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and representatives from New Brunswick, Western, and Calvin seminaries on an observance of this anniversary, which should come as a series of lectures and programs at all three schools during the 2018–2019 academic year—the synod ended in May of 1619. This continues the cooperative work with the CRC that was begun with select volumes in the Historical Series; *Timothy Christian Schools* will be another CRC-related story in the series.

In addition to many other anniversaries, this year marks 40 years since the RCA first hired a professional archivist to look after the denomination’s collection. His offices are housed in Sage Library at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) where a significant portion of the RCA Archives has been located since the library opened. The multicultural environment of the New York metropolitan area helps the Archives be not just a Dutch-American history resource but a well of information for all of the cultural expressions that now make up the RCA. Over the years, in addition to keeping the General Synod informed of aspects of our history and providing resources to congregations, classes, synods, and researchers, archivist Russell Gasero and the Archives have saved the denomination hundreds of thousands of dollars through careful records management. With more than 400 years of manuscripts, it is through careful stewardship that the right paper can be found at the right time.

In October of 2015, responding to the limits of archival finances and the changing, growing needs of the Archives as a resource for the church and the world, and seeking to affirm and strengthen the historic ties between seminary and archives, the trustees of NBTS pledged an annual grant of up to $10,000, to be matched by the General Synod Council (GSC), for each of ten years to expand the work of the archives, in partnership with the seminary and its Reformed Church Center, and give it a more stable and secure base into the future. This commission is grateful that the seminary, under its new president, Micah McCreary, is continuing to honor that commitment.

Because of the limits on available resources for operations, the GSC has been unable to match these annual grants, so this commission has annually provided the matching funds from the Historical Series Revolving Fund. In just two years, this money has made possible these projects:

- New equipment has been added, allowing for the scanning of large documents, slides, and video and audio tapes.
- Staff has been added to aid in the digitization projects.
- With new staff and equipment, documents from the Amsterdam Correspondence—some of the earliest records of the RCA—have been scanned for a major retranslation project; records from the Regional Synod of Canada, recently moved to New Brunswick, have been digitized so that they may be kept in long-term storage, relieving space issues—more than 80 boxes of material were processed within two months; and a pilot project has begun to provide low-cost digitization of significant records to local congregations.
- Some of the costs of transferring records to underground storage have been underwritten.
- New displays in Sage Library have enhanced programs for both NBTS and the denomination and have helped publicize the Historical Series.

All of this has helped transform the scope of what the Archives can do, making our history
more accessible to everyone as a tool for building our future. The Commission on History has voted to work with the RCA Development Office and the Archives to help secure a plan for long-term funding beyond the ten-year scope of the grant.

Your commission acknowledged the significant extra demand this puts on the Historical Series Revolving Fund and also the significant commitment this represents on the part of NBTS. While there are virtues in thrift, however, this is an opportunity that has long-term benefits for the whole church, and your commission renews its call for the whole church, as represented by the GSC, to find ways to join in responding to this challenge.

Deliberate, Wise Transformations

Part of this commission’s meeting time this year was spent discussing a proposal to have all commission reports at General Synod be done in a two- to three-minute video format unless there are recommendations being made to the synod. While the Commission on History recognizes the need for change and innovation, it has also raised several concerns.

- Producing brief video reports requires time, and there has been no offer to increase commission budgets to allow for extra meeting time.
- Between 200 and 400 person hours go into the work that produces the typical Commission on History report; can that be adequately represented in a short video?
- While the intent is to have every delegate read and comprehend all the reports before arriving at General Synod, we must all remember—especially as we approach a Dordt anniversary—that RCA members believe in total depravity. At least some delegates won’t do this.
- If some reports—those with recommendations—are presented orally, while others are presented on video, it could appear that some commissions are more important than others.
- Synods have, historically, been understood to be deliberative assemblies where office-bearers walking together have wrestled with issues, spent time in discussion and prayer together, and sought to discern God’s will. Video presentations often dampen discussion and deliberation, fundamentally changing the work of the synod.

Your commission recognizes that change is also a key element of history—these stories are stories of transformation. Certainly there is a way to incorporate the best possibilities of video presentation with the character and strengths of what the synod is formed and called to be. Just as there was discussion among commission moderators over the past several months, the Commission on History looks forward to meaningful conversation among the commissions and the GSC in the months ahead.

Being Informed by Past Transformations

As General Synods continue to struggle with issues of gender identity and sexuality in the life of the RCA, the debate and discernment continues to touch on different areas of our self-understanding. At the 2017 General Synod, delegates entered into discussions that touch on how the RCA looks at the Standards and their place in the Forms of Declaration and the role of ecumenism in the life of the RCA. As such discussions are likely to continue into this and future synods, your commission offers the following two papers to the synod and the church.
“HISTORIC AND FAITHFUL WITNESSES”: REFLECTING ON THE STANDARDS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN USED IN THE FORMS OF DECLARATION AND THE CHURCH

Since the 2017 General Synod passed R 17-29—“To affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109 categorically states [sic] that God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity, and that faithful adherence to the RCA’s Standards, therefore, entails the affirmation that marriage is between one man and one woman”—there have been concerns expressed about what this means for ministers and General Synod professors. Bearers of these two offices, as well as licensed candidates for ministry under care of classes, are unique in the RCA for being required to subscribe to a Form of Declaration that states: “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.”

The primary question seems to be whether, given this wording of the forms, the interpretation affirmed by the 2017 Synod can be used to discipline candidates, ministers, and General Synod professors. What exactly is meant by “historic and faithful” in the Forms of Declaration? A brief historic examination of this wording and its use by the Reformed Church in America seems to be in order.

The phrase “historic and faithful” has only been part of the declarations since 1972. The change came in response to overtures from the classes of Queens and Bergen, which expressed concerns over the forms and what they said about the place of sixteenth-century doctrinal statements in a late-twentieth-century context. Queens Classis stated its reasoning as follows:

Christianity is an [sic] historical religion, rooted in the long history of God’s mighty acts, culminating in His mightiest act in Christ Jesus, and we affirm with joy the part the Reformed Church has played in the long history of God’s dealing with His people.

However, as God’s covenant people we are a pilgrim people, called as was Abram to go from our father’s house to a land that God will show us, confident that when we arrive, God will be there ahead of us.

This requirement that we be a pilgrim people means that we be open always to the activity of the Holy Spirit as He may require us to re-think and re-state our theological position, and we must therefore hold with honor, but hold with open minds, the theological statements which served our fathers so well 400 years ago, ready if the Spirit requires, to re-state these pronouncements. We do not reject our history but rather affirm our openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit in our own day.

The Classis of Bergen took a somewhat different reasoning:

1. The Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates, the Form of Declaration for Ministers and the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology all contain statements which imply that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America are equated with the Word of God. Statements include “We believe the gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as truly set forth in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America,” (the Form of Declaration for Licensed Candidates and the Form of Declaration for Ministers) and
“We believe that these Standards agree with the Word of God ...” (the Form of Declaration for Professors of Theology). While some might place the Standards on the same level as the Scriptures, it is not right to force a person who believes that the Scriptures are the normative witness to the Word of God to assent to this statement.

2. What may have been a witness to the Word of God in one particular Historical setting may not be a witness to the Word of God in a new historical setting. For example: in order to combat the abuse made of the use of images in the churches, the Heidelberg Catechism poses the following question and gives the following answer: “But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity? (question 98) Answer—No ...” Because of a particular political situation, the Belgic Confession of Faith makes the following statement in regard to church-state relations: “and their (magistrates) office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.” (Article XXXVI) The entirety of the Canons of the Synod of Dort is based upon a philosophical presupposition of Determinism which led to such statements as “... Some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves ...” (Article XV) Are such statements still a witness to the Word of God in today’s life-situation?

3. While we should acknowledge that the Standards of the Reformed Church in America did speak to a certain group of people at a certain time in a particular historical setting, we do not have to hold that they speak to men today in the same way. If statements in the Declarations prove to be stumbling blocks to brethren who cannot assent to them because of conscience and the Word of God, these stumbling blocks must be removed! The matter was referred to the Commission on Theology, whose report to the 1971 General Synod did a masterful job of exploring the historical understanding of the place of the Standards in the life of the church.

The Purpose of Standards: The Reformed Church is an evangelical confessional church in the historic sense. This means that we are one of those branches of Protestantism which has distinguished itself from the Roman Church (and from some other Protestant bodies) by subscribing to an evangelical statement (or statements) of faith as the basis for our unity. The intent of such standards of unity has varied greatly among the confessional churches and in our own tradition as well. Subscription to a standard may be understood as a witness of that body to its understanding of the faith without any controversial or polemical intent. In the time of the Reformation and the century following, however, such standards were nearly always intended as a means of distinguishing the body which accepted them from other Christian bodies which held other viewpoints. As such, these standards were also symbols of disunity within the Body of Christ, professing to distinguish the true church from the false church.

This polemical intent inevitably led to a second purpose and use of standards: discipline. Since they were understood to embody the right doctrine (orthodoxy), they could also be used to distinguish heresy and consequently become the basis
for excluding from the body those who did not conform. The history of the
Reformed Churches reveals numerous such uses and some still favor such use
today.

The main stream of Reformed tradition, however, has not understood the
standards in this way. We have not claimed an exclusive corner on the truth. We
have not viewed those outside our tradition as apostate, but considered other
traditions as viable expressions of the Faith and other communions as fellow
members of the Body of Christ. We have tended to look upon our standards
as faithful witnesses to the Word of God to which we give our hearty consent,
without making them binding upon our consciences as of divine authority.

Relationship to Scripture: The above leads naturally to a consideration of the
relationship between the standards and the Scriptures. We hardly need to remind
ourselves that the battle cry of the Reformation was *sola Scriptura!* (Scripture
only) In reaction to the encroachments of Roman tradition upon the Christian
conscience, the reformers took their stand upon Scripture as the sole authority—
the rule (measuring stick) of faith and life. We still give loud assent to this
principle today as the *raison d’être* of the churches of the Reformation. Yet in
the heat of battle in the centuries following the Reformation, Protestants found
themselves invoking their standards in as final a way as any Romanist and with
an authority which equalled or even surpassed that of the Scriptures.

Thus we see an ambivalence in our own tradition. On the one hand, we affirm
the supreme and sole authority of Scripture. On the other hand, we have at
times made the standards equally binding upon the Christian conscience. This
ambivalence is enshrined in the Government of the R.C.A. … This still does not
answer the basic question, however: What is the proper place of the standards
in the life of the church? How do they unite us with one another and separate us
from other Christians?

The commission went on to argue that the extreme positions—either that the Standards
were irrelevant historical curiosities or that they were the final determination of orthodoxy
for all time—must be rejected and advocated for a middle way based on the following
principles:

1. *The Standards must always be subordinate and subservient to Scripture.*
   “Scripture alone can be the measure of our faith and life as Christians. … This
   means no statement of faith, however faithful to the Scriptures, can be placed on
   a par with the Word of God.”

2. *The Standards are historical documents.* “As such, they are the products of their
times and the circumstances which produced them … we must take note that the
century which produced them was different from our time in some significant
ways. … We are called upon to bear the good news in contexts that would be
utterly foreign to the 17th century Christian.”

3. *A Standard must have usefulness in the church.* “It must be an effective teaching
aid within the church, and an effective witness to the world of the meaning of
the Christian faith in our day.”

The commission concluded—and the synod affirmed by accepting their report and the
recommendation to add the “historic and faithful” clause to the Forms of Declaration—
that the Standards were faithful to Scripture as witnesses to the Word of God, but that
they were “three among many witnesses to the faith … understood as defining what is the
Reformed tradition and what our fathers understood to be a faithful statement…” and that they are “limited in their applicability to our day by the difference between the historical circumstances in which they arose and those in which we live.”

The understanding that led to calling our Standards “historic and faithful witnesses” clearly includes the idea that we cannot expect them to comprehend or respond to modern scientific and/or sociological situations. We also cannot bind those who read and sign the forms to be binding themselves to some strict adherence to sixteenth-century—or even late twentieth-century—concepts of sociology, science, or even theology. Nor are they meant to be disciplinary tools. Ministers, professors, and candidates are promising to engage the Standards—acknowledging their limitations—as they wrestle with the Scriptures, listening for the Word of God.

ECUMENISM IN THE RCA

Four centuries ago, the Synod of Dort gathered in an attempt to extinguish the smoldering theological debate between Arminian Remonstrants and orthodox Calvinists, and in doing so, they welcomed ecumenical delegations from throughout Protestant Europe. At this pivotal moment in the development of both the theology and polity of the Dutch Reformed Church, representatives from the Church of England as well as churches in the Palatinate, Hesse, Switzerland, Geneva, Bremen, Emden, and France took part in the process of theological discernment. Even in its nativity, the Dutch Reformed Church did not go it alone.

In the 400 years that have passed since the Synod of Dort, the Dutch Church and specifically its daughter church, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), has continued to wrestle with how to embrace calls for Christian unity, doctrinal purity, and denominational uniqueness. This paper provides an overview of the RCA’s long history of ecumenical engagement and its efforts to balance an inclination toward ecumenical collaboration with a bent toward denominational independence.

Ecumenism during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The history of the RCA’s ecumenical engagement begins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the colonial churches often focused their energies on survival, especially after the British conquest of New Amsterdam in 1664, they also entertained calls to unify with other Reformed churches in the British colonies in North America. In fact, the Dutch churches nearly united with their Scottish Presbyterian and German Reformed counterparts in 1743 but were stymied by an inability to resolve the language differences between the three communions.

At the same time, firebrand Theodorus Frelinghuysen exhibited an ecumenical disposition when he crossed denominational lines to partner with Presbyterian preachers like the revivalist Tennent family. Despite dust-ups with his congregation and the Classis of Amsterdam, Frelinghuysen’s flair eventually caught on with his Presbyterian neighbors and would go on to influence the most well-known evangelist of the Great Awakening,
Calvinist Methodist George Whitefield. While not solely responsible for this intercolonial and interdenominational religious awakening, Frelinghuysen’s ecumenical ministry encouraged local collaboration and fostered a burst in evangelism.

After the American Revolution, the RCA successfully separated itself from the church in the Netherlands, yet even as it began to exercise its independence, the church entered into new ecumenical partnerships. During the period of the early republic, this was most evident in the church’s missionary efforts. For example, in 1796, less than a decade after severing ties with the Reformed church in the Netherlands, the RCA lent its support to the New York Missionary Society. This early missionary society focused on ministry to the Native Americans, and John Livingston—the father of the RCA—even served the organization as one of its earliest officers.

The New York Missionary Society marked the beginning of the RCA’s engagement with ecumenical missionary efforts. In 1810, the RCA partnered with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which operated as an ecumenical missionary organization during the first half of the nineteenth century. Influential and pioneering Dutch Reformed missionary John Scudder stands out as just one example of some of the prominent RCA missionaries who received their initial support from the ABCFM. Despite its engagement with the ABCFM, in 1832, the RCA founded its own Board of Foreign Missions, which initially worked in conjunction with the ABCFM before ending the partnership in 1857.

Regardless of the RCA’s disassociation with the ABCFM, seven years later the denomination was heralded for its “pioneering leadership in missionary ecumenism.” This was largely due to the efforts of a host of RCA missionaries who worked in tandem with other Protestant missionaries throughout the globe, particularly in China, India, and the Middle East.

The ecumenical mission in Amoy, China, offers an illuminating example of the ecumenical nature of the RCA’s robust missionary apparatus. Throughout the 1850s, a fruitful partnership existed between missionaries from the RCA and English Presbyterian missionaries in Amoy. An organic union grew between these two missionary groups, and together they founded a small network of Chinese churches. The biggest conflict that arose for the mission in its early years came about due to pressures from the General Synod to tamp down the ecumenical nature of the mission and force sole affiliation with the RCA. A heated scuffle lasted from 1857 to 1863. The missionaries resisted, but the General Synod was insistent. Eventually, after threatening to resign, the missionaries won the day, and the General Synod adopted a more cooperative posture toward ecumenical missions.

While the hullabaloo about the Amoy mission presents a striking example of the tensions that came along with ecumenical mission work, its ecumenical character was not unique. In 1872, the RCA’s Japanese mission followed Amoy’s example and united with the English Presbyterians. Similarly, nineteenth-century missionary work in India, led by the Scudder family, and in the Middle East, led by men like Samuel Zwemer, nurtured ecumenical partnerships. In the twentieth century, the RCA’s missionary work in Africa would exhibit the same ecumenical impulses.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the RCA’s most prominent and successful ecumenical endeavors centered on its commitment to missionary activity. Through both institutional affiliations with groups like the ABCFM and also local, ecumenical collaboration between individuals, ecumenism in the RCA became associated with spreading the gospel and an extensive missionary network.
Twentieth-Century Institutional Affiliations

Throughout the twentieth century, the RCA explored membership in a number of larger ecumenical bodies, and these conversations incited a bevy of debate and disagreement within the denomination. The earliest—and least controversial—of these broader church affiliations brought together various Reformed churches throughout the world. Founded as the Reformed Churches throughout the World holding a Presbyterian System in 1875, the group now known as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) functioned as a space for theological discussion and fellowship. The RCA joined this communion as a founding member and has continued to engage in this forum for global Reformed theological discussion.

The RCA's membership in other national and global associations proved to be far more contentious than its participation in the WCRC. For instance, in 1908, the RCA became a founding member of the Federal Council of Churches, which would become the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1950. Similarly, the RCA was also a charter member of the World Council of Churches, which was established in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II. Both groups brought together diverse communions not only for theological discussion but also for cooperative action through relief efforts, publications, and other joint endeavors.

Despite initial enthusiasm about these ecumenical bodies, opposition to the RCA's membership in both of these bodies arose shortly after the denomination joined them. The first objections arose in 1930. Since then, fears about the formation of a unified church or significant doctrinal differences have flared intermittently and led to attempts to withdraw the RCA from both bodies. In fact, the General Synod of 1969 saw the denomination nearly withdraw from the NCC, and similar debates took place throughout the 1980s. Nevertheless, the RCA remains a member of both of these larger organizations.

While the RCA embraced the ecumenical efforts of the NCC and WCC, it stalwartly resisted joining the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which arose in the mid-twentieth century in order to explore the possibility of union between a diverse group of denominations, ranging from Presbyterians to Methodists and Congregationalists. The RCA never became an official member of this organization but did maintain observer status. It ultimately rejected participation due to suspicions about the organization's aims and a firm commitment to the uniqueness of the Dutch Reformed tradition.

At the close of the twentieth century, rather than pursue organic union between denominations, the RCA, along with many other denominations, worked to recognize full communion between distinct denominations. In particular, at the behest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the RCA explored the possibility of greater cooperation between Reformed and Lutheran churches in the United States. These efforts led to the Formula of Agreement, which was signed by members of the RCA, Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) with the ELCA in 1998. This agreement accomplished two primary goals. First, it rescinded four centuries of anathemas that had existed between Reformed and Lutheran communions, dating back to the Reformation era. Second, it acknowledged mutual recognition of sacraments and ministers between each of these four denominations. This has led to the opportunity for Lutheran and Reformed ministers to serve in one another’s churches, a development that was paralleled with the unification of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Netherlands into The Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

Much like other ecumenical efforts throughout the twentieth century, the Formula of
Agreement provoked disagreement within the RCA. This opposition initially focused on the UCC's open stance toward LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage—a position that both the PC(USA) and ELCA would also eventually take. Yet, the Formula of Agreement provided for “mutual admonishment” between denominations, which has led to many of those who oppose the position of the other members of the Formula of Agreement to exercise this clause to admonish views that conflict with the RCA's own position on these particular social issues.

**Twentieth-Century Unification Efforts**

The RCA exhibited considerable handwringing about its membership in larger ecumenical bodies throughout the twentieth century, but even more heated disagreement arose regarding unification with other Reformed denominations. The RCA was not immune from the ecumenical fervor that led to a spate of mergers during the twentieth century, but ultimately, despite numerous appeals to join other like-minded traditions, the RCA chose to remain independent.

In 1945, the RCA explored a union with the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPC), a small Presbyterian denomination located in Ohio and Pennsylvania. These efforts failed. Many members of the RCA, particularly in the Midwestern classes, feared the loss of denominational identity and the familial feeling they associated with the RCA. Others suggested that just because two traditions had much in common did not mean that they needed to merge with one another. Christian unity could exist spiritually while structurally remaining separate. In the end, the General Synod voted in favor of the union, but only 19 classes approved of it, far short of the 34 required by the commission overseeing the union.

Ecumenism was still in the air in the early 1960s. The General Synod of 1962 received eighteen overtures about union—eight for the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), eight for the UPC, one for the UCC, and one for the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The RCA chose to explore a proposed merger with the PCUS—the southern Presbyterian Church.

When the General Synod voted to move ahead with a committee to explore the union in 1965, opposition was already on the rise. Objectors feared a loss of denominational uniqueness and the dilution of Reformed doctrine. What is more, in 1966, PCUS joined the COCU, a perennial lightning rod for controversy in the RCA. Despite this move by the PCUS, the General Synod of 1968 approved the merger. Nevertheless, the classes rejected it, with all of the classes east of Detroit voting in favor and all those west of it voting against, for a final vote of 23 for union and 22 against, well shy of the two-thirds approval required.

Since the first efforts to unite the church with other Reformed traditions during the colonial era, the RCA has entertained 12 attempts to unite with another denomination. All have failed. Yet, in each case, serious talks have taken place. This willingness to explore the possibility of union exhibits the RCA's underlying ecumenical commitment. Throughout these efforts, there have been both cultural and theological reasons for resisting mergers that reflect a fear of losing the distinctly Dutch Reformed theological tradition, most evident in our creeds and confessions. There was also a fear that these mergers might lead to a slippery slope of mergers first with larger Presbyterian bodies and eventually even larger bodies like the COCU.
A Special Relationship to the Christian Reformed Church

While many proposed mergers between the RCA and other Reformed traditions took place throughout the twentieth century, one denomination was conspicuously absent but must be a part of any discussion of the RCA’s relationship with other denominations: the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Prior to the two major secessions that led to the establishment of the CRC, the RCA was not a stranger to internal division. Some of the most rancorous debates dated back to colonial disputes between Coetus and Conferentie, which began in the 1730s. Unlike those early divisions, which eventually healed, the nineteenth-century divisions between the RCA and the CRC remain; however, in many ways the CRC has become the RCA’s closest partner.

The two primary moments of secession took place in 1857 and 1882. The first division reflected tensions in the Midwestern immigrant community about the Classis of Holland’s affiliation with the RCA in 1850. The division that occurred in 1882 also originated in the Midwest; however, it focused on disagreements between the immigrants and the American church about the role of freemasons within the church. For decades, these disagreements had flared at General Synod. The latter secession strained the relationship with the mother church of many of the immigrants, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland, which meant many new immigrants chose to join the CRC rather than the RCA.

Over the past half century, the RCA’s relationship to the CRC has warmed significantly. At the request of the CRC, more open dialogues began in the late 1960s. The CRC harbored anxieties about the RCA’s ecumenical memberships in the NCC and WCC and a perceived lack of enforcing doctrinal purity by the RCA. These talks in the 1960s eventually waned and ultimately ended without any result.

More recently, a renewed partnership has arisen between these our two denominations. This is most evident in joint publications, shared missions, and simultaneous annual meetings. In 1999, Maple Avenue Ministries in Holland, Michigan, became the first congregation to hold dual membership in both the CRC and RCA. More recently, the dual denominational membership of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, marked a significant symbol of ecumenical partnership and healing between these traditions due to its role as Albertus Van Raalte’s church and as the site of the particularly acrimonious secession of 1882. The RCA has continued to grow closer to the CRC into the twenty-first century, signaling a promising future of ecumenical engagement.

Local Ecumenism in the Past Half Century

The history of the RCA’s involvement with ecumenical movements tends to focus on denominational affiliations, initiatives, and efforts; however, ecumenism in the RCA also includes pastors like Frelinghuysen and Livingston and the host of missionaries who served throughout the globe. These individuals suggest that an essential element to the history of ecumenism in the RCA is the role of local churches engaging in ecumenical partnerships in order to serve their communities.

A brief historical case study illuminates how a local church, even in a small town in the Midwest, exhibits the RCA’s ecumenical commitments. Over the past half century, Sanborn First Reformed Church (FRC) in Sanborn, Iowa—a town of 1,300 residents with eight churches—has embraced ecumenism as a means of fulfilling their call to ministry. For more than three decades, the church has hosted the only vacation Bible school that
attracts children from all of the other churches in town. FRC participates in community-wide luncheons during Lent that draw members from both the town’s Protestant and Catholic churches and takes a leadership role in the coordination of community worship services. What is more, for over a decade, it jointly hired a youth pastor with a United Methodist Church in the next community in order to offer robust youth programming to its children. In this rural community, for the past 50 years, FRC has provided a model for ecumenical leadership.

Sanborn FRC is not unique in its classis, synod, or the RCA. A history of collaborative ecumenical engagement exists in churches ranging from Highland Park, New Jersey, to Paramount, California, to Grand Rapids, Michigan. From volunteers from New York churches serving during Billy Graham’s crusades in 1957 to ecumenical children’s programs in rural Iowa, RCA churches have a history of adapting the tradition’s ecumenism to their needs and context. A shared commitment to the Gospel and a desire to serve local communities remind us that the history of ecumenism in the RCA is not solely one of failed mergers and spats about association memberships. It is a story of a people striving to fulfill their call to mission.

H 18-3
To commend the paper “Ecumenism in the RCA” to all consistories and classes, and to invite them to enter into discussions over the paper, encouraging them to send responses to the questions below to rgasero@rca.org no later than February 1, 2019.

1. What does it mean that ecumenism has been such a key element to our identity in the past?
2. How does and should this understanding shape the future ministry of the RCA?
3. How is your congregation engaging in ecumenical relationships in your community? (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
James Hart Brumm, moderator

4. *MGS 1970*, 83–85. The Bergen overture also let the Synod know that these two classes had taken steps to alter or amend the forms.
5. The Standards here refer to the Heidelberg Catechism and its Compendium, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The Belhar Confession was not added to the Standards until 2009.
19 Harmelink, Ecumenism, 25.
20 Bruggink and Baker, 198.
21 Bruggink and Baker, 200.
23 Bruggink and Baker, 204.
28 Bruggink and Baker, 205.
29 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
30 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
31 Japinga, *Loyalty and Loss*, 47.
38 Bruggink and Baker, 199.
43 Bruins and Swierenga, 131.
44 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
45 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
46 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”
48 Harmelink, “Ecumenism.”