REPORT OF THE JOINT CRC/RCA ADVISORY COMMITTEES

All synod delegates (voting and corresponding) were assigned to advisory committees along with delegates from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC). These committees each discussed one of four topics related to the RCA’s and CRC’s work together: congregational renewal, interfaith engagement, and two scenarios (Collaboration and New Creation) from a video shown to Synod 2017 delegates presenting potential scenarios for the trajectory of the RCA and CRC’s working relationship. Following are the reports from the advisory committees for each of the four topics discussed.

TOPIC 1: COLLABORATION

For the first time ever, on the morning of June 9, 2018, all of the delegates of the RCA and CRC synods were divided into 29 committees to meet for three hours of discussion.

During synod registration, delegates selected one of four topics to discuss: Collaboration, New Creation, Congregational Renewal, and Interfaith Engagement.

Three functions guided each committee:

1. Understanding—reflect on the topic to see how it could affect the life of the church.
2. Community—create space in order to listen closely to each other and to the leading of the Holy Spirit through the presence, voice, and Word of God.
3. Teamwork—work together and create a report from the feedback and ideas on the topic.

On Sunday afternoon, 17 advisory committee moderators gathered to review all of the data and reports generated by each committee in order to produce a statement on each of the four topics.

This report is a snapshot of the statements of the five advisory committees that discussed collaboration.

At last year’s synods, a video was presented that gave several possible new ways in which our two denominations might work together in the future. One proposal was about “collaboration.”

Future collaboration is envisioned as a jointly developed and owned “centralized service center” in which responsibility, authority, accountability, and resources can be shared.

The idea is to collaborate as deeply as our theological convictions and synodical structures allow. This will likely require realigning some of our denominational staff and structures to support the shared mission.

The video proposed particular types of collaboration. It was suggested we include church multiplication, church renewal, congregational leadership, joint synod meetings, and minimized duplication of services.

We discussed this proposal in our advisory committees on Saturday. The framework for our conversations was that of the creative tension model. This model is well known to leaders who have journeyed through the Ridder Church Renewal process, and contains three component parts:
• Current Reality asks, “What does it look like now? What is true now?”
• God’s Emerging Future is defined as the best outcome that the Holy Spirit and God’s Word and the community of believers are striving for.
• Default Future is defined as what will happen when we don’t move into the desired future.

The reports of the advisory committees indicated that delegates perceive the Current Reality of collaboration to be good but limited mainly to the denominational level, with less work occurring at the grassroots level. Many delegates indicated that their congregations were unaware of the cooperation already happening between our denominations.

The Default Future was perceived as “If we don’t change, the default, at best, will be status quo.” Many of the images the groups produced represented decline or death of the two separate denominations, including a poignant image of the grim reaper. There was a sense that no change, or failing to work together, would lead to further decline and possible death.

God’s Emerging Future was perceived as being united in Christ, working together for kingdom expansion, and building God’s kingdom. God calls the church to unity, and collaboration is a way of working toward a common mission. The groups seemed to envision our emerging future as collaboration across all regions and classes and especially at the grassroots level.

Some groups affirmed the focus areas for collaboration suggested in the video proposal, which included church renewal, church multiplication, and congregational leadership. Though all the advisory committees on this topic suggested that collaboration must also take place at the local level. Several groups suggested holding our classis meetings concurrently and one group even suggested considering how we might cooperate in theological education more fully.

Other common themes included learning about and honoring our differences, histories, traditions, and strengths. This calls for getting to know each other better at the local level by meeting and worshiping together to build trust, fellowship, and community. One group suggested that a pathway toward collaboration could begin with reconciliation and repentance of our common schism.

The collaboration proposal also invites us to lean toward increasing frequency of joint synods. However, each group desired more local and regional meeting opportunities for partnering in local ministries. Future collaboration should be at the grassroots level alongside of denominational structures in order to gain congregational buy-in.

These results will occur only when all of us enter into these conversations and relationships with great humility and a willingness to confess past divisions, having hearts open to the unity to which the Holy Spirit is calling us.

Some fears that were expressed had to do with loss of staff positions because of duplicated services. There were also concerns about unknown accountability, feedback, and metrics through collaborative initiatives, as well as apprehensions about a loss of congregational and denominational identity.

Overall, the experience of the groups seems to have been very positive. There was a high level of engagement and excitement. People were very open to conversation and sharing. There was consensus throughout the generated reports from each committee.
One individual expressed that he was touched that his committee’s report was able to so completely and accurately capture the thinking, ideas, and experiences of the group.

One group stated, “We dream to do these things together as a unique mosaic that celebrates differences and distinctions while working toward oneness.”

The general desire from the committees was to encourage and promote the denominations to work toward deeper and more numerous collaborations locally and globally.

Appendix

Topic 1: Collaboration

Summary used in committees that met about topic #1 from the video shown at the CRC and RCA synods in 2017 (https://vimeo.com/219702901)

Advisory Committee Topic #1, Collaboration
(Described as “Scenario 2” in the video, at 12:20)

Imagine that by the year 2027, the RCA and CRC could celebrate a new collaboration between our two historic denominations.

This would require us to begin now (2018), with a common goal: to more intentionally and frequently collaborate with one another in key areas so that we become increasingly excellent in how we function and deliver ministry services. **We envision a jointly developed and owned “centralized service center” where responsibility, authority, accountability, and resources could be shared.** Cross-denominational coaching processes would be developed to help RCA and CRC congregations discern their ministry needs and then to discover and access the shared initiatives and services to meet those needs.

This plan would require us to evaluate everything each denomination does so that the centralized service center could focus on mutual high-impact leverage points. Additionally, we would need to develop a new set of metrics to determine whether this new partnership is actually better-resourcing congregations and multiplying our impact in the kingdom of God (compared to the previous model in which our two denominations worked separately).

Three priority services that might be identified as having the potential for increased effectiveness by using a collaborative model are:

1. **Church Multiplication** (e.g., a new, single process for planting RCA and CRC churches),
2. **Church Renewal** (e.g., new collaborative learning opportunities and collaborative approaches to community development and transformation),
3. **Congregational Leadership** (e.g., various types of cross denominational learning/equipping events and processes).

After our two denominations have experienced the benefits of collaborating in this way, it is possible that by the year 2022 we might identify additional shared priorities such as:

1. **Twice-yearly experiences** for bi-national, regional, international and service center staff of both denominations to engage in worship, dialogue, discernment and empowerment.
2. Synods increasingly being held at the same location, fostering more opportunities for formal and informal fellowship, equipping, and community building running concurrent to activities related to denominational business.

3. Both denominations making a commitment to avoid duplication of services.

The goal of this plan is that through a new “centralized service area,” the RCA and CRC could commit to mutual discernment, increasingly shared resources and initiatives, careful change management, and trust building… which would create a new common culture where collaboration could flourish and enrich our impact in the kingdom of God.

Feedback on “Collaboration” model from the delegates of General Synod 2017

The groups were asked to identify what they affirmed about this option. The top responses were:

- 38% (40) More efficiency / cost savings / better stewardship / less duplication
- 23% (25) Ease of sharing resources / greater access to resources from both denominations / builds on strengths of each denomination
- 12% (13) We are already doing this
- 11% (12) Benefits of scale are realized quickly / can do more together than apart / increased opportunities together especially in areas of advocacy
- 10% (11) Moving from business together to ministry together / allows for deeper partnerships / has greater impact
- 6% (7) Would be an example of Christian unity to others

The top challenges that were identified were:

- 33% (34) mentioned the current cultural differences between the two denominations and the difficulty in resolving those, and in working together when those exist
- 28% (29) talked about the difficulty in management when neither denomination “owns” the ministry. Who would make decisions? Who would set the vision? To whom would they be accountable? Would a power struggle ensue with one denomination feeling like they were run over by the other?
- 16% (17) mentioned the loss of identity, tradition, and autonomy that would result from changing ministries into collaborative ones
- 11% (12) cited the staff and program cuts that would result and the difficulty in figuring out what to do with educational institutions
- 11% (11) mentioned that getting buy-in from local congregations for this kind of change would be difficult. Would this potentially result in the loss of members and congregations?

TOPIC 2: NEW CREATION

This report focuses on the idea of creating an entirely new denomination. Before we begin our report, let us say we are thankful to the denominational staff of both the CRC and RCA for their tremendous leadership and dedication in this process. Thank you for helping us have these exciting conversations!

Five advisory groups met to discuss Topic 2: New Creation. Our process involved watching a clip from a video that was shown to our two denominations in 2017. The video clip described a proposal for the creation of one new denomination out of two.
Our basic question was this: Is it a good idea, and what would it look like for the CRC and RCA to start a completely new denomination? The advisory groups interacted well and enjoyed a strong collegial spirit. We discovered that each denomination brought unique ideas and perspectives, and the groups gathered steam and excitement as we discussed possibilities. There was an overwhelming sense of appreciation and encouragement for one another, and participants expressed genuine gratitude for the time to work and dream together.

When looking honestly at our current reality as denominations, we saw a mixed bag. On the negative side, we saw tension, lethargy, and downward trends in many areas of the church. We saw that our current reality and our default future point to predictable decline.

But, on the positive side, there is much to celebrate! There are growing and thriving congregations, there is increased collaboration between our denominations, and there is kingdom growth. There is hope and joy in both the CRC and the RCA.

As the groups talked and shared and imagined a bold and courageous restructuring, some common themes emerged:

First, our future must be rooted in an unflinching commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This theological priority must shape our future even as we struggle to reconcile our divergent understandings of the gospel’s implications.

Second, unity, collaboration, and cooperation were the values named and celebrated in each of the groups. We desire unity in Christ with collaboration and cooperation around the church’s mission to make disciples. We imagined how prayer, grace, humility, and intentional Christocentrism can help us on this road.

Third, we looked at a proposal that included three affinity synods, leaving the option for a church to decide which synod they wanted to belong to. While some found hope in the idea of affinity synods, a strong majority found them problematic, and all had questions about whether affinity synods would really bring us together or if they would just divide us further.

Fourth, we imagined a denominational structure that exists to train, equip, and resource local congregations for mission. We imagined this structure to be deeply collaborative, with wiser use of resources and decreased bureaucracy.

Fifth, we envisioned a denomination in which people at all levels felt invested, engaged, and excited. There was some fear about a “top-down” approach, which might only replicate current experience. Groups were excited about the idea of a new denomination that wasn’t viewed as a chore or as a duty, but one in which they felt they belonged.

Regarding how we might actually move forward with this, the groups generated many ideas.

Here is a representative sampling:

1. Be brave! Let’s go all in! Let’s boldly name this idea of one denomination as a future reality. Once we do that, let’s come together as denominations to figure out our path forward.

2. Let’s make sure, whatever we do, that our change is centered on resourcing and blessing our local congregations. Let’s keep the Great Commission as the impetus for any change we make.
3. Let’s collaborate more and do more together. The more we can work together, the more it will make sense for us to one day create one new denomination.
4. Let’s increase our communication on all levels: congregations, pastors, classes, synods, and other institutions.
5. Let’s make this process a grounded and pastoral process. We have to approach this not just from an institutional standpoint; we need to remember the real, live people in our churches.

Overall, as we discussed the exciting idea of the RCA and CRC coming together and forming one new denomination, our groups all agreed that we want a unified future. We believe God is a God of reconciliation, and God is at work in both of our denominations. We don’t know yet what that looks like or how all the details will come together, but we affirm and celebrate God’s movement toward unity.

Appendix

Topic 2: New Creation

Summary that was used in the committees that met about topic #2 from the video shown at the CRC and RCA synods in 2017 (https://vimeo.com/219702901)

Advisory Committee Topic #2, New Creation
(described as “Scenario 3” in the video, at 16:00)

Imagine that by the year 2027, the RCA and CRC could celebrate the formation of a new denomination out of two historic denominations. This would not only bring the heritage of the two denominations together into one new denomination but result in a new model for denominationalism.

This plan would require us to begin now (2018), with the realization that current denominational structures often do not meet twenty-first century realities. The weight of tradition and culture in the RCA and CRC might not allow for the level of transition, change, and transformation needed for our denominations to continue to respond to the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond. This necessitates rethinking the future of denominations in the reformed tradition in North America.

For each denomination to continue with vitality, vibrancy and efficacy, a new model of denominationalism might be needed, along with a rethinking of substance, structure, strategy and style.

Rather than seeking to adjust how the RCA and CRC function individually, the RCA and CRC could begin to formally explore the possibility of coming together to launch a new denomination based on twenty-first century realities and bringing a respectful closure that honors historic contributions and heritage to both the RCA and CRC. The goal would be to discern and develop a new denomination that could carry with it the strengths, substance, and heritage of the RCA and CRC with structure and style designed for relevance to twenty-first century denominational life.

Together, we would need to commit several years to exploring new, emerging synergistic models in business, education, and denominationalism. This exploration might be led by a cross-denominational group of thought leaders who embrace both tradition and innovation. They could focus on models that both preserve the core substance of our theology and mission, and make space for radical structural change to equip an increased number and diversity of churches with greater specialization.
The question before us is: “If we were to form a new reformed denomination in North America relevant to the movement in God’s Church of the twenty-first century, what would it look like?” This new denomination must be built on shared beliefs and convictions, be innovative yet rooted in RCA and CRC traditions, and able to equip the local churches to engage in God’s transformative mission.

Logistically, by about the year 2025, we would need to form a multi-year plan to centralize services, agencies, and institutions. We might also need to consider the formation of a diverse synodical structure. One proposal is for three distinct affinity synods to be formed to represent the spectrum of theology and practice within our congregations and regions. Each synod could embrace the challenge of identifying ministry priorities and equipping congregations within their synod for mission. Within each synod, church renewal would be engaged, new churches would be started, and leaders would be equipped. Processes would be developed to help congregations identify which synod to align with.

Realizing people may be unclear about what is happening to their denomination, both the RCA and the CRC would need to provide pastoral processes to deal with the emotional response created by this change. Early on, metrics would also need to be developed to assure that the benefits of transitioning were greater than the perceived losses that would be experienced.

**Feedback on “New Creation” model from the delegates of General Synod 2017**

The groups were asked to identify what they affirmed about this option. The top responses were:

- 29% (30) mentioned that this approach would be a great example of Christian unity, follows Biblical directives to seek unity, and is well adapted to the postdenominational era in which we live
- 22% (23) focused on the fact that working together would maximize our impact and give us a greater voice and greater witness in the world.
- 20% (21) focused on increased efficiency and financial savings that would result from streamlining our administration and ministries and eliminating duplication
- 19% (20) mentioned that this would provide a fresh start or clean slate for the future; it would break old habits and eliminate tradition for traditions sake
- 13% (14) mentioned that this would enable us to take steps of reconciliation and manage the theological/cultural differences that are currently hurting our denominations
- 12% (11) mentioned that it this scenario is the most exciting to think about, it provides the opportunity for something new, freedom to experiment, and to be innovative

The top challenges were:

- 24% (26) mentioned current cultural and theological differences that would make it difficult to find unity
- 20% (21) mentioned resistance from congregations and individuals that would lead to an overall loss of churches and members
- 18% (19) said it was just too impractical and complex; how can you create a shared vision and come to agreement
- 17% (18) questioned the affinity synods. Is this just a way of providing a place for liberal, moderate and conservatives to have their own church? Would it lead to a future split and the fracturing into three new denominations?
• 13% (14) worried about the overall loss of identity
• 9% (10) said it would be too expensive financially and emotionally and that this would create a loss of focus on gospel ministry

TOPIC 3: CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL

Eleven advisory committees engaged topic #3, congregational renewal. The purpose of our advisory committees was “to help shape the vision and work of the Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal [RPCR] between the RCA and CRCNA.” Our groups imagined what it could look like for both denominations to have access to a resource capability that would encourage the ministry of the local church.

Our committees engaged this topic by:

• Sharing stories from our ministry settings.
• Reading a summary document prepared by those who already participated in listening groups around this topic.
• Drawing such a resource capability.
• Compiling a list of key success factors that would be critical for the launching and implementation of this capability.

Group experience

All groups expressed joy in working together as two denominations and engaging with this topic collaboratively. There was a clear sense of excitement as we shared stories from our individual contexts and expressed a need for shared ministerial resources. Multiple groups said they were able to come to a quick consensus concerning process values. Alongside this excitement, there was a named skepticism that such a resource may not be accessible or useful, or that such a capability might negate the uniqueness of a specific church. There is a sense of urgency in our groups that such a resource is necessary, evidenced not only in our conversation, but by the significant number of participants in this topic.

Values: concerning theology and process

Throughout their conversation, groups articulated both the values of this resource capability and a strong desire to see it align with our Christian faith and Reformed identity. This includes:

• A strong biblical foundation.
• Strengthening ministries of both word and deed.
• Attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, which includes grieving our losses as God leads us through transformational change.
• Every congregation is a unique, called community.
• Relationships among churches, ministries, and denominations must be rooted in trust and built on mutuality and love.

The following observations emerged as being essential to this collaborative effort:

• Respect: Specific contexts matter, and the autonomy of our individual ministries must be honored by this process.
• Listening: Creating space for internal dialogue that inspires ownership of our current reality and a desire to flourish. The desire for coaching was addressed in the majority of group reports.
• Assessment: Tools that provide honest internal and external evaluations.
• Sharing: A space to contribute ideas, collaborate, and learn from one another, which includes engaging existing resources.
• Accessibility: A multilingual information database that is simply designed for participation and collaboration.
• High tech, high touch: Available online, and deeply rooted in human relationships.
• Congregational responsibility: Action and implementation of church renewal is the responsibility of the local church, with support from partners.

Additional observations

• While no report presented a specific outline for this resource capability, there is a consensus that such a process should be clear and available to any congregation who chooses to use it.
• Our advisory groups wanted this resource capability to reflect the experience we had together in our conversation: one of authentic listening, collaboration, vulnerable storytelling, and a common love for serving God through ministry.

Conclusion

We observed that those who participated in this conversation around congregational renewal expressed a deep need for a resource that would allow churches within the RCA and CRC to share their learning, ask questions without fear of losing contextual identity, and network with other ministry leaders whom they might otherwise not know.

Appendix

Topic 3: Congregational Renewal

Summary that was used in the committees that met about topic #3

Summary of what was learned through the 12 listening sessions held across Canada and the U.S.

1. Most RCA and CRC churches desire revitalization and many will require a new approach to achieving their goals.
2. Many vital, mission-shaped congregations have undergone revitalization processes; they have used external catalysts and coaches to supplement the work of pastoral and congregational leadership; and they are eager to equip and assist other congregations.
4. Many vital, mission-shaped congregations have developed prayerful discernment processes through which they listen to God and their local contexts and then identify and implement next steps.
5. Current needs of other CRC and RCA congregations are not currently being met well due in part to lack of knowledge about what is available, lack of readiness for change, or inadequate processes for prayerful discernment.
6. Current efforts, while good, do not adequately address the vital needs of all congregations—helping them identify the right resource at the right time with the right implementation support.
7. Present processes usually focus on specific solutions or resources and because they are not universally holistic, do not draw on the best of both denominations
8. Both denominations would benefit from collaboratively developed and commonly shared approaches to prayerful discernment leading to congregational renewal and missional engagement.
9. There is an opportunity to develop a new approach or capacity—a partnership for church renewal—which complements and enhances existing denominational
work in both denominations and that creates better alignment with congregational needs.

10. Congregations and pastors in vital, mission-shaped churches are eager to participate at tables of conversation and collaboration--both with congregations that are similar to them and with congregations that would like to learn from and with them.

11. Denominational and regionally deployed staff are ready to collaborate more fully in order to better serve congregations.

The opportunity that was discerned:

1. How the Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal (RPCR) can best serve CRC and RCA congregations.

   a. Congregational discernment
      i. Congregational agency. It is the responsibility of the congregation to engage in prayerful discernment and then to identify and implement the processes or resources that are right for them.
      ii. CRC and RCA regional and denominational staff are responsible to assist congregations as they prayerfully self-evaluate and discern their current reality. so they can connect to the right resources/consultants
      iii. Congregations possess an understanding of current health and life-stage and, with assistance can make decisions based on what they know
      iv. Many congregations need assistance in understanding their current context and discerning how God is calling them to serve in that context

   b. Convening, collaborating, and coaching for the sake of learning that leads to action
      i. Pastor and congregational leaders are eager to participate in “tables of conversation and collaboration” that lead to shared learning and action.
      ii. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can catalyze innovation and renewal by stimulating gatherings of leaders from CRC and RCA congregations with common interests, church settings for dialogue and learning.
      iii. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can serve both denominations by creating tables of conversation and collaboration for regionally deployed and denominational staff members of the CRC and the RCA.
      iv. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal can serve by creating networks of learning for CRC and RCA rural churches and urban churches.
      v. The Reformed Partnership for Congregational Renewal must align congregational health and life-stage with appropriate resources (what) and scope of assistance (how) for each congregation.

   c. Based on the listening sessions, the activities to be performed by the reformed partnership for congregational renewal include:
      i. Mutually developing and employing prayerful congregational self-assessment
      ii. Convening tables of conversation leading to intentional collaboration
      iii. Collaboratively enhancing existing, and developing new church renewal resources.
iv. Stimulating missional imagination and courageous experimentation  
v. Shaping a common vocabulary that is widely employed  
vi. Curating resources appropriate to a wide variety of congregational contexts and sizes

**TOPIC 4: INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT**

On Saturday morning, June 9, 2018, five joint advisory committees of the RCA and CRC met to discuss the current reality of interfaith engagement and to imagine future collaborative efforts. “Interfaith engagement” includes all intentional efforts to get to know people of different faiths, to understand them, be hospitable to them, and to show the love of Christ to them.

These are the common themes that were heard in their reports. The groups discovered that as we approach interfaith engagement, there are differences in our understandings of terms like “witness,” “evangelism,” “conversion,” and “coexistence.” Even as we struggle to seek clarity on these theological differences, we affirm our shared foundation of Scripture and Reformed creeds and confessions.

Those who participated expressed their joy in working together, wrestling with the topic, expressing various opinions, and the worthwhile nature of, and time spent, in this work together.

Each group recognized that in the globalized context of today, there is an urgent need for interfaith engagement. Therefore, as Reformed Christians who are called to love God and love our neighbors, we offer the following reflections from the interfaith advisory groups.

We confess that our human sinfulness defaults to fear and suspicion of the “other.” Our fear has kept us captive to ignorance, isolation, and seclusion throughout our society. Yet we are assured of our calling as witnesses for Christ in the world. Therefore, we affirm the biblical mandate to “seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent you” (Jeremiah 29:7) and to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). We acknowledge that interfaith engagement prioritizes this work toward the common good of all humanity: eradicating hunger, ending war, preserving the environment, making education more available, and much more.

Therefore, in a spirit of reconciliation and unity between the RCA and CRC, we encourage the two denominations to move forward in their partnership on interfaith engagement. Some possibilities imagined by the groups include the following:

1. Provide training and learning experiences, such as field trips to religious centers in our communities, especially for the pastors and leaders in the denominations to equip them for congregational conversations.
2. Provide and promote learning trips for congregations and youth in scriptural reasoning, interfaith engagement, etc.
3. Provide combined funding to make resources available to local congregations.
4. Encourage congregations and individuals to share space, work together, and celebrate events with other religious groups in their communities.
5. Seek to go beyond simply teaching in order to provide opportunities and experiences.
6. Develop a theology and practice of missions as being a guest.
7. Develop ways of creating space for doubt, questions, and fear that will result from interfaith engagement.
Trusting the work of the Holy Spirit, we encourage everyone to be intentional in reaching out to our neighbors, and to build relationships across our cultural and religious divides. May we build these interfaith relationships with an atmosphere of mutual respect and humility as we seek to understand, listen to learn, and share and receive hospitality.

Addendum

Here are some questions that emerged in different advisory groups:

- How do we help people be faithful to Jesus while endeavoring to understand people of other religions?
- How do we work with non-Bible-based faiths?
- Are we willing to accept other faiths and let God sort things out?
- What can we learn from others?
- How can we help churches understand their communal histories with all their sins and seek forgiveness with those we have offended?
- How does the political situation globally influence our discussion?
- What causes separation?
- Who makes the final decision?
- How can we continue to build relationships? (RCA/CRC and beyond)
- Where do we go from here?

Appendix

Handout that was used in the committees that met about topic #4

Key Questions Concerning Interfaith Engagement

Adopted from “Frequently Asked Questions,” by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) of the CRCNA (https://www.crcna.org/eirc/interfaith-mandate-engagement/frequently-asked-questions)

1. What is interfaith engagement (engaging people of different faiths)? How is interfaith engagement different from ecumenical relations?

Interfaith engagement includes all intentional efforts to get to know people of different faiths, understand them, be hospitable to them, and show the love of Christ to them. It differs from Christian ecumenical relations which are attempts by different Christian traditions and denominations to understand each other and work together. In interfaith engagement we seek out our neighbors; in ecumenical work we seek out our brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. Why is it important for Reformed Christians to engage people of different faiths?

We are human before we are Christian and share with all human beings the dignity of being image bearers of God. Christians have a twofold calling: 1. We are to bear witness to the gospel and call all people to be reconciled to God in Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). 2. We are to “seek the peace and welfare of the city (and neighborhood, and nation) in which we live” (Jeremiah 29:7). We cannot do either faithfully without honest engagement, especially today when people of different faiths live right next door.
3. How does the Bible inform our engagement with people of different faiths?

The Bible teaches (Leviticus 19:33):

- God the Creator is present to all people (Psalm 19; Psalm 104; Romans 1, 2; Acts 14, 17)
- All people respond to God’s revelation in creation (Romans 1, 2; Acts 14, 17)
- God’s people must resist all idolatry and false religion (Exodus 20: 3-4; 1 Peter 2:9-12)
- God’s people are to show compassion, mercy, and justice to the “aliens” among them (Leviticus 19:33)
- God’s people are called to concern and prayer for the welfare of all people (Jeremiah 29:7; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

4. What is the relationship between evangelism and interfaith engagement?

Evangelism is the “announcing” or “preaching” or otherwise making publically known the “good news of Jesus Christ.” God’s Word incarnate in Jesus Christ has gone out and will not return to the Lord until it has accomplished the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:1-13). Those who receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord live in community around the world across time. In some places in the world, Christians are a majority and in others places, Christians are a minority. Wherever Christians live, they live a new life in Jesus Christ, knowing they are saved eternally and knowing here in this world by the Holy Spirit they are being sanctified, that is, renewed, reformed, and transfigured in how they live in love with God and with their neighbors. Our lives in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, find evangelical expression in all that we feel, think, say, and do. This is the witness to which Jesus calls us and for which he has commissioned us (Matthew 28:18-20).

Interfaith engagement is an opportunity to learn about who others are, what their faith is, how their religious practice manifests and deepens their faith. In other words, interfaith engagement enables us to know others better and as we know them better, we are able, as we care for one another, to come together and work side by side by side towards common goals: eradicating hunger, ending war, sharing natural resources, making education available more fully and more completely, preserving the environment, and much more.

Called to give witness to Jesus Christ in all that we feel, think, say and do, we are always evangelizing, announcing the good news of Jesus Christ, in every moment of our lives, including interfaith engagement. There are many ways of doing this.

How does one evangelize in interfaith engagement? Perhaps the best way is to follow Jesus’ example: by the Holy Spirit, expressing love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) as we get to know, love, and live with our neighbors of different faith. If by the Spirit, we truly live the fruits of the Spirit, our neighbors in various ways will be drawn to the light that we have not hidden under a bushel (Matthew 5:15).

5. Do we have to ignore our differences when we participate in interfaith engagement? Must we only focus on those things upon which we agree?

If we live by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, by God’s grace the fruits of the Spirit will find expression in all our relations, including interfaith engagement. As in any relationship, we begin by discovering what we share in common. In time, as we get to know each other better by working side by side to solve shared challenges in our communities, trust grows and we are able to share deeper differences, especially as these
differences have bearing upon our work for the shared good of the community. As we discover these differences and work through them in interfaith engagement, it is important to lean on God (his Word, his salvation in Christ, his loving faithfulness) and remain humble before God and others, for “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).