Report of the President
Lee DeYoung

A Time of Transition

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, the apostle Paul writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction.”

In verses 10-11, Paul adds, “On [the Lord] we have set our hope … as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

These past two years have been a time of major transition for the RCA. Last June, Tom De Vries concluded his service as our fifth general secretary to become the new president of the Willow Creek Association.

Just 33 days later, we were shaken by the sudden passing of Tony Campbell, the RCA’s associate general secretary and director of mission engagement. And as the search for the next general secretary was proceeding, we entered into a yearlong denomination-wide discussion about covenant and the RCA’s future.

Sometimes as I pondered weighty concerns like these, I’d struggle to imagine how such challenges might be resolved. Doing so seemed clearly beyond my control. Yet, to my surprise, as the list of concerns kept growing longer, I felt a sense of peaceful serenity. My initial reaction to that was, “What a crazy response to such a litany of challenges!” But a still, small voice calmly countered with the awareness that the Lord was truly present—that many throughout our denomination and around the world were fervently praying! When God calls, God always provides. What a privilege it’s been for me to experience this call and (amid so much uncertainty affecting the RCA) to see God provide!

So, from the bottom of my heart, I am here today to thank God and so many across the RCA who have been persistently praying for the Lord’s guidance and provision. That includes Jonathan Brownson and John Ornee, who have labored diligently to organize this year’s prayer coverage before and during General Synod. I’m indebted to the congregations and assemblies I’ve visited this past year who have laid hands on me and interceded on my behalf and for the RCA.

I am so grateful for the sacrificial support and understanding of my family. I’m especially grateful to my wife, Sheri, for her forbearance during the more than a hundred nights I’ve been away from home this past year in my travels. I’m thankful for the cooperation of my Words of Hope colleagues and board, who have graciously afforded me the needed time for my RCA responsibilities. I appreciate the support and understanding of my pastor, Mark Kleinhetsel, who happens to be a classis delegate to this General Synod, and to my home congregation, Hager Park Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

I thank God for the fellowship and close friendship of my predecessor as president, Dan Gillett, and my successor as vice president, James Nakakihara. Each has been a source of inspiration, valued counsel, prayer support, and constant encouragement. And it’s been inspiring to serve alongside our gifted staff, who have persevered together through so much!

God has richly blessed the RCA through interim general secretary Don Poest’s pastoral
devotion to our staff and others during times of personal anxiety and loss. Thank you so much, Don, for setting aside a year of your retirement to faithfully respond to this call on your life!

Context

The experiences of these past two years have deepened my appreciation for the thoughtful design of the RCA’s governance. As described in the Book of Church Order (BCO), “The president of the General Synod performs a listening function, seeking to discern the concerns and aspirations of our churches and ascertain the gifts and needs of the world through the RCA mission program.”

Each year’s General Synod selects one of its regular delegates to embark on a three-year journey of intentional observation and discernment—to systematically deepen and enlarge his or her awareness of the breadth and diversity of this 390-year-old denomination. Each new officer brings his or her unique life experience to this prescribed listening function, which culminates in the annual report you’re hearing now.

This year’s report comes from an elder who has been an active member of the same western Michigan congregation since 1982. (I know, that dates back before some of you were even born!) Uniquely, much of my life experience centers around 33 years of full-time service as the primary international liaison for Words of Hope—an RCA-rooted ministry that helps indigenous global partners use media to extend the impact of their regional gospel outreach ministries.

In that capacity, I’ve been privileged to cultivate ongoing working relationships with indigenous Christian leaders in various parts of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Some of my closest friendships and professional relationships are with evangelical pastors, ministry founders, and elected leaders of indigenous denominations from Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, independent, and Pentecostal traditions. Three of my global colleagues are here with us today: Rev. Mai-aiki Kadade, president of the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger; Dr. Ajoy Kumar Lama, South Asia director of Words of Hope and the CRC’s Back to God Ministries International; and a third who, for security reasons, should not appear publicly on camera.

In the months following the 2016 General Synod, I visited six of our regional synods as vice president, and I’ve visited all eight regional synods during this past year as president. I served on the general secretary search committee and participated in events with members of our Hispanic Council, our African American Black Council, and our Native American/First Nations congregations.

I’ve represented the RCA at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s “Reformation 500” commemoration in Washington, D.C., the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, and the third international gathering of the Global Christian Forum in Bogotá, Colombia.

I’m grateful for the opportunity to have visited RCA global missionaries Tom and Aïchatou Johnson and Jeremy and Susan Beebout in Niamey, Niger (West Africa), and David and Char Alexander in Tainan, Taiwan.

In my past two years as a General Synod officer, opportunities have arisen to optimize my regular international travel for Words of Hope with RCA-related destinations. These have included visits to Albania, Armenia, Bhutan, Brazil, Colombia, India, Kosovo, Nepal, the
Netherlands, Niger, South Sudan, Taiwan, Togo, Turkey, and Uganda.

In most of these locations, I’ve sought to evaluate how churches are faring in their varied global contexts and look for similarities and contrasts with the Christian environment here in North America. Before sharing a few observations from a 30,000-foot, big-picture, global perspective, I’d like to note three major global trends that are impacting the future of the global church, including the Reformed Church in America.

Three Global Trends

1. **More Christians are alive today than ever before.** Exponential growth has occurred in the “Global South” (not Europe and North America). While the Christian population percentage in North America and Europe has declined since 1970, the church has been flourishing in parts of Africa, South America, and Asia. Africa’s growth accelerated dramatically around 1970—shortly after countries gained independence from European colonial powers. Church governance became indigenous, and the stigma of Christianity as a religion imposed by foreign occupiers began to subside. As with the Samaritan woman at the well, localized witnessing boosted response.

   As depicted by this data chart from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity in Hamilton, Massachusetts, in 1970, 57 percent of the world’s Christians lived in the Global North; 43 percent were from the South. Today, the Global South is home to 66 percent of the world’s Christians, compared to 34 percent from the Global North. This is a huge historical shift.

   Earlier this year, Africa surpassed South America as the continent with the largest Christian population:

   - 630 million - Africa
   - 601 million - Latin America
   - 571 million - Europe
   - 388 million - Asia
   - 277 million - North America
   - 29 million - Oceania

2. **Global migration:** The scale of today’s people movements from one continent to another is unprecedented in history. Today, 191 million people are living in a different country from where they were born. By 2025, falling birth rates in the developed world will lead to a net population deficit in some countries. That will be offset by the migration of millions of people (with or without documents) from poorer parts of the world. The United States is home to the largest number of them by far: 38.4 million—20.2 percent of the world’s total. Canada ranks sixth on that list, with 6.1 million of the world’s immigrants—3.2 percent of the world’s total. Immigrant and refugee communities are emerging and growing throughout North America. Many are in the same communities where RCA churches are. They represent a great ministry need and outreach opportunity for our congregations.

3. **Rural to urban:** Since 2005, for the first time in history, the world’s urban population has surpassed the rural. In 1800, 3 percent of the global population
was urban. By 2100, that percentage is expected to swell to 90 percent. This will enormously impact Christian ministry. The kind of rural settings in which many of us were raised are no longer normative. This realization must influence the church’s training, strategic planning, and ministry focus in the years to come.

As we consider the RCA’s future, what insights might we glean from these global trends? Beyond traditions and trappings, which are in part culturally derived characteristics, part of the church’s purpose is to serve as heaven’s embassy to a fallen world—a link between an eternal and immutable God and specific communities and cultures that are ever changing.

The church functions like an electrical cord, solidly plugged into the ultimate power source—God’s unchanging truth—and acting as a conduit of God’s power to ever-changing communities around us. To do that, the church must be firmly planted and connected on both ends. God’s power (attained by prayer and diligent study of God’s Word) is actually transmitted when the church is effectively interacting with people outside its walls. Individual believers and congregations need to regularly connect with God and one another and also establish contact with surrounding communities.

As with normal breathing, we must regularly gather together (inhale) and then scatter out to the world around us (exhale). A pattern of doing only one function while neglecting the other is less than healthy.

**Outreach in a Post-Christian, Post-Denominational Environment**

Globally, many of the places where the church is currently growing are in settings where Christianity seems relatively “new”—not the traditional norm for that culture. Here in the Global North, Christianity is dismissed by some as a fading remnant of our culture’s past. Secularists increasingly view the church as part of the problem, not a fresh solution. Individualism, affluent comfort, and an increasingly secular worldview leaves many feeling self-sufficient and not sensing any pressing need for an unseen God. As Puritan minister Cotton Mather famously noted in his *Ecclesiastical History of New England* in 1702, “Religion begat Prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”

Today, 316 years later, many say that our North American culture is increasingly post-Christian and, among many committed believers, post-denominational.

The number of independent congregations is growing. At the same time, over the past two decades, North American evangelicalism has seen the rise of interdenominational partnerships (or networks, alliances, etc.). The aims and theological perspectives of these voluntary movements vary. But in this communications-rich digital age, the websites, publications, blogs, and conference gatherings of organizations like The Gospel Coalition on the right and publications like *Sojourners* on the left are influencing many who feel affinity with their core values. Christian outreach in the twenty-first century is increasingly focused on relational movements, with diminishing commitment to organizational structures.

**Coping with Our Division**

Within the RCA, some notable affinity groups have arisen during this same period of time. In 2005, following the trial of General Synod professor Norman Kansfield, a non-profit organization was incorporated in the state of New York under the name “Room for All,” with the mission “to support, educate, and advocate for the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the RCA.”
Early last year, a group of RCA pastors established the “Gospel Alliance.” Its stated purpose is “to engage leaders and communities with the transforming message of the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make more and stronger disciples.” Alliance distinctives assert that Jesus has declared that human sexuality should be expressed solely in a monogamous, lifelong covenant in which one man and one woman “join body, mind, and soul.” Hundreds of RCA ministers and others have publicly affirmed one or the other of these organizations, reflecting our denomination’s deep theological and hermeneutical disagreement over matters relating to human sexuality.

In light of our yearlong denomination-wide discussion about covenant and the RCA’s future, I felt the Lord’s leading to convene a two-day meeting between representatives of Room for All and the Gospel Alliance. By God’s grace, such a meeting did take place in Holland, Michigan, on March 14–15, 2018. Bob Bouwer, Scott Treadway, and Charlie Contreras represented the Gospel Alliance. Tricia Sheffield, Lynn Japinga, Chad Tanaka Pack, and Marilyn Paarlberg participated on behalf of Room for All. Don Poest and I were there as observers. Facilitated by Jim Herrington of The Leader’s Journey, discussion focused around two questions:

1. How might the RCA move forward as a denomination together?
2. How might the RCA move forward as a denomination apart?

Afterward, a joint letter was written. Some of you have already seen it. Its full text is appended as an attachment to this report. Here are a few selected excerpts:

Our time together was productive, creative, and respectful. We listened carefully to each other. We were vulnerable. We were forgiving. We moved forward in our discussion slowly together, even when we could not agree.

We disagree about the interpretation of Scripture and the Standards of the RCA. We disagree about the most effective form of governance for our classes and regional ministries. We are tired of arguing. We are tired of hurting each other. If we continue to behave in mutually destructive ways around our disagreements, the Reformed Church in America will perish.

During our discussions, we learned some of our misconceptions about each other. Although we have different understandings of human sexuality, we share many views:

- We love the RCA and seek its flourishing.
- We believe in the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the RCA.
- We seek to live into our calling to teach and preach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the Church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God.
- We are called to love and support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ). [That’s only a partial list.]

On whatever path the RCA moves forward, it will undergo change. Change will involve loss. Loss will involve grief. We pledge to join with the people of the RCA in confession, grief, and loss. We also pledge to continually proclaim the good news in Christ: By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are forgiven to go forth and live in peace. As leaders of the Church, we will move forward not as enemies but as
friends. Not as opponents but as siblings in Christ. Together, we pray for wisdom and humility, relying on the Spirit to lead us in love.

As you’ve heard in this morning’s interim general secretary’s report, Don Poest has proposed the formation of a vision group to find a way forward for the RCA in the spirit of that meeting. As we deliberate on that proposal as well as other recommendations and overtures before this General Synod, I pray that the spirit of our interactions here might align with facilitator Jim Herrington’s reaction to the Gospel Alliance and Room for All meeting:

There is so much polarization in the country and in the Christian culture. It was inspiring to see people able to define themselves while also compassionately and intentionally staying connected to others who define themselves differently. If we could multiply that experience over and over across the country, things would change. I was inspired by all of you.

Whatever polity actions or theological declarations we might enact this week and in the future, it’s my conviction that every RCA congregation should (whether affirming or theologically traditional in their biblical convictions about human sexuality) prayerfully strive to be faithful and welcoming witnesses to Christ’s redeeming love to everyone in their surrounding communities, including LGBTQ persons. Since the church has long been perceived by many as hostile and rejecting, LGBTQ persons must first experience our love before they’re apt to believe anything we might say about biblical truth.

**Call to Mission**

In Acts 1, just before he ascended, Jesus called his followers to be witnesses to Jerusalem and to all Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth—guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Fulfilling that mandate is far beyond the human capacity of any single congregation, any one denomination, any single nation! It requires prayerful collaboration with like-minded believers of many traditions and nationalities.

The RCA has modeled that collaborative approach on a global scale throughout its history. That’s much more than a historical footnote. Just a few weeks ago, the king of Bahrain invited the RCA’s director of development and facilitation, Ken Neevel, to a special reception in his palace. Ken is a descendant of pioneering RCA missionary Samuel Zwemer. On April 30, 2018, at the royal palace in Bahrain, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa hailed long-standing ties between Bahrain and the United States of America. The king said,

Today we celebrate the deep and special bond between our nations. The evidence of that friendship is all around us and there can be no greater symbol of our friendship than the American Mission Hospital. Over a century ago an intrepid young American named Samuel Zwemer traveled from New Jersey to Arabia with a noble mission in his heart. The medical dispensary he opened here in Manama became a hospital that has saved countless lives. Here in Bahrain we have a hospital founded by a Christian mission, alongside mosques and churches, synagogues and temples. Together we share the dream of a world where we can all live alongside each other in peace and prosperity.

In response to the king’s speech, U.S. ambassador Justin Siberell added,

As your Majesty has frequently observed, our friendship [between Bahrain and the
United States] began with the arrival of a group of remarkable and selfless individuals who founded the American Mission. The first of those great Americans was Samuel Zwemer, who set up a medical dispensary in Manama which grew into the American Mission Hospital.

His wife, Amy, was a nurse who cared for patients and opened a school for girls in the back room of their apartment above the medical dispensary. That school lives on today as Al Raja School, still one of Bahrain’s finest schools. Amy and Samuel Zwemer’s only two children, daughters Ruth and Katherina died within days of one another in 1904 during a cholera epidemic. Both are buried in the cemetery in old Manama. The Zwemers literally gave all they had to their life of service in Bahrain.

With us today is Mr. Ken Neevel, the great nephew of Samuel and Amy Zwemer, who traveled to be here from the State of Michigan. He continues to be involved with the Reformed Church in America, the organization with whom the Zwemers were associated. Thank you for coming back to Bahrain for today’s event, Ken.

Ambassador Siberell went on to commend the king for his White House meeting with President Trump last November and expressed appreciation for Bahrain’s strategic engagement with the United States Armed Forces. But the focus of both speeches by the ambassador and the king highlighted the ongoing legacy of RCA missionaries Samuel and Amy Zwemer that continues to richly bless the people of that Persian Gulf kingdom, with enduring impact on crucial geopolitical dynamics in today’s world. In celebrating that legacy, Bahrain’s king specifically invited the RCA’s current director of development and facilitation, Ken Neevel, to travel from Michigan to join him at his royal palace!

As our general secretary emeritus, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, quipped to me last December following an informal meeting with some local Formula of Agreement church leaders in Santa Fe, New Mexico, “When it comes to denominational impact on the global stage, the RCA has always punched far above its weight.” A month later, the nominee to become our next general secretary, Eddy Alemán, told our search committee,

The RCA is a denomination with a great past. We have been engaged in serious and continuous ministry for almost 400 years in the USA, Canada, and many parts of the world! The RCA is a denomination with a difficult present as we’re presently struggling with the question of human sexuality. The RCA is a denomination with a wonderful future. The promises of God are true and real for us, and he will take us through this difficult time as he has done in the past.

I believe that obedience to God’s call for this next chapter of the Reformed Church in America’s ministry requires us to intensify our twenty-first century witness to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. New missional paradigms are emerging. Our traditional views of church multiplication and global mission should no longer be confined to separate ministry “silos.” Consultation between North American and global church planting efforts can provide synergy for these related outreach endeavors.

For example, one of RCA Global Mission’s new strategic impact areas is Brazil’s Amazon basin. For more than 110 years, the Presbyterian Church of Manaus (IPManaus) has proclaimed the gospel to people living in the capital city of Brazil’s Amazonas state and along the Amazon River. They’ve accomplished this through medical boats, missionary training, and church planting. IPManaus operates two boats as well-equipped outpatient clinics and uses seven for evangelism and pastoral visits.
There are 7,693 riverside villages along the Amazon and its 1,000+ tributaries. Deep in the rainforest, many of these are only accessible by boat or plane. IPManaus employs physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, and other professionals to deliver free medical care to thousands of isolated people. And, alongside that compassionate service, the church systematically trains and assigns a church planter to visit or reside in many of those villages. In March, it was my privilege, along with RCA staff members Randy Weener and Luis Ruiz and church planter Pat Dirkse, to visit Brazil and observe this unique outreach firsthand:

**VIDEO 1: Brazil Amazon Outreach**

IPManaus missions pastor Djard Cadais de Moraes: “We have two medical boats visiting some villages along the Amazon River. So we’re providing medical care, dental care, and social care. While we are taking care of people, we are planting divine seed in their hearts. We spend all day long providing these treatments, but at the very end of that day, in the beginning of the night, [we] have a meeting. In that meeting we preach the gospel, sharing God’s love, and people open their hearts. And nowadays, in Manaus, we have 9,000 membership. And these people invest in mission and we have a chance twice a month [to] do a mission trip inside of the hinterlands—the rural areas along the Amazon River—planting churches. And we have up to 100 rural churches inside of the Amazon valley. Pray for our vision to planting 100 churches [by] 2025. So I hope that God [will] bless the RCA so you can keep walking together to [make] new history on [the] Amazon.”

What an amazing ministry model! Pastors Djard and Jose Jiao and their team from IPManaus are here with us during General Synod. Thanks for all you’re doing and for taking the time to visit us here. We look forward to hearing more from you during tomorrow evening’s Global Mission report.

Because I believe that future interactions between the RCA’s North American church planters, their Brazilian counterparts, and others elsewhere would be mutually beneficial for all concerned, boosting kingdom impact, I submit to you the following:

**Proposal 2**

To urge the general secretary to explore possibilities for establishing a global church planters’ leadership collaborative to facilitate ongoing interactions between North American church planters and counterparts in selected countries where the RCA is engaged with indigenous global mission partners. The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

This could entail collaboration between RCA Church Multiplication and Global Mission personnel. The initial collaborative could include gathering at least one facilitator/leader with at least three planters from at least two nations.

RCA Global Mission’s outreach today features a total of 89 full-time missionary personnel. Some serve alongside denominational partners such as the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger (EERN). The EERN is the largest Protestant denomination in Niger—a West African country located in the Sahara Desert. While Niger is overwhelmingly Muslim, according to data from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Niger ranked third among the world’s countries with the fastest-growing Protestant populations from 2005–2015. Its annual Protestant growth rate was 7.14 percent per year. On two days in January of 2015, an extremist group of political operatives incited protests that led to the systematic burning and looting of 80 Christian churches throughout the country. Everyone was stunned! But within hours, the graciously forgiving response of church leaders and
members amazed their neighbors and the world:

**VIDEO 2: Forgiveness in Niger**

EERN secretary for global partnerships Issaka Moussa: “My church is one of the 80 churches, plus some properties like houses, that have been burned. All things in the compound have been burned or stolen by demonstrators. It was really a shocking time for me, yeah. We quickly gathered the National Board. And the first thing we receive from the Lord is the peace. We decided to forgive quickly, to tell them that, no, we understand what happened and the church forgives. All the churches came together and say, ‘Hey, let’s not fear again. Fear is behind us. Instead of condemning this, let’s see it as an opportunity for the church to go fast, go fast through the Great Commission application.’ We asked the radio stations to increase programs that are preaching the gospel of the Lord in this country. And we say, ‘Don’t stop worship on Sundays.’ And that brought our Muslim brothers closer to us, asking for forgiveness and even showing compassion. Many of them called us. They were weeping, saying they never thought this could happen. Some started to bring back what they have stolen. Some even offered to help rebuild the burned properties. Our target now is to establish 52 new churches in the big towns of Niger. And our strategy is to start with the radio programs. And then our pastors are following up to take care of the people who are listening and eventually help them on a discipleship program. These riots made the church think that it’s now time to rebuild the churches, but also time to rebuild our relationship with our neighbors so that they would know us better. Among Christians, what happened is a kind of revival. Many are accepting the Christ and understanding what is his message for the world.”

Around the world, the church of Jesus Christ faces many challenges. Some are persistent and expected. But others, like Niger’s unprecedented wave of church burnings in 2015, cannot be foreseen. I praise God for the EERN’s marvelous example of spontaneous grace amid extreme pressure. May their bold, visionary response to such attacks and the divine blessings that have continued to multiply ever since be an inspiration to us all. President Kadade, the RCA is so grateful for the EERN’s partnership. Thank you.

**Small Churches**

Back here in North America, prayerful focus on one of the RCA’s most pervasive concerns can open doors to new opportunities. Sustaining small churches with fewer than 100 in worship is a challenge for most of our classes. Here in my home classis, where we’re meeting this week, Great Lakes City Classis leader Randy Weener has organized a leadership collaborative among pastors of small churches:

**VIDEO 3: Randy Weener - Small Church Forum**

Randy Weener: “About two years ago, we started a forum, gathering small church pastors in the Great Lakes City Classis. And one of the first things that I discovered as I talked with these pastors was a sense of defeat and inferiority because they didn’t measure up to the larger congregations that often get the visibility. After we began to look at, what are the uniquenesses of a small church that a larger or medium size church can’t provide, they began to, to gain a little bit of their own self-esteem [in] their unique ability to reach and attract people that other sizes cannot. It’s been really a joy over these number of months now to watch them not only feel better about who they are in God’s kingdom, but to begin to imagine what can they uniquely do because of their size, not in spite of their size. And we are starting to see them be creative and be visionary.”
REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

“Yesterday we were talking to a small church pastor who has about 35 people who gather on Sunday morning. They have a budget of $77,000 dollars. He was feeling insecure, inferior, that his numbers were not bigger. So in comparison, we pulled up the report of another church within his own classis that has 1,800 members and over a $2 million dollar budget. And we looked at that chart, and we looked at the larger congregation, which is 55 times larger than his, and they had seven adult baptisms in the previous year. Then we asked this small church pastor, ‘How many adult baptisms did you have last year?’ And he said, ‘Five.’ Here’s a congregation 55 times larger, which only had two more adult baptisms than he had. He is not an insignificant piece of God’s kingdom, nor is any other small church because of their ability to reach people who are especially attracted to that smaller community of intimacy and deep relationships. All of us have our preferences. Some of us prefer the small hardware store or we go to the small college, and we go to the small church because we want to be there.

“The median size church in North America is 75. That means that half of the churches in our continent are gathering with less than 75 people on any given Sunday. Small church is not the exception; small church is the norm. It does not matter whether we are small or large; it matters that we are thriving at whatever size that God created us to be. And no matter what our size is, we have a unique calling, a unique ministry, a unique people group that God has called us to. So we need to get over this inferiority complex as small churches that we are not measuring up to the large congregations, the ones that get presence on the stage, that write the books, that hold the conferences. Small churches just don’t get as much publicity or visibility as the large, but they have always been a part of the fabric of God’s kingdom. It’s the way the church started and for the first two or three centuries, it was the one way in which the gospel spread across to the ends of the earth. It’s the way it’s happening in China, in India, in Africa, in South America today as well. Not only is it a part of our past; it is a part of our future as well.”

Congregations can be missionally vital but remain relatively small due to various local factors. Sometimes the closing of an older, declining congregation can lead to the later flourishing of 12 multiple micro-targeted church plants. Randy Weener describes one such example located just five miles from this arena:

VIDEO 4: Randy Weener - Three Churches in One
Randy Weener: “[I’m] standing here on the entrance way to what three, four years ago was New Life Reformed Church. As that congregation aged and declined, it ultimately closed about three or four years ago. And in its place now are three congregations, each small. One is a Nepalese community church, which addresses some of the residents who have landed here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Another is The Branch, which is an English-speaking, Anglo congregation reaching the surrounding neighborhood of Alger Park. And the third is Comunidad Cristiana de Grand Rapids, a Hispanic congregation.

“These are three small churches, each with their niche, who are able to reach into the community around us that a larger church might not be able to do. And together in partnership, they can make ends meet as they, as they work together to reach their respective people groups. But by working together also, it’s a great picture of the church coming together multicantly to serve in some common worship and ministry experiences that they are doing together.”

Even small churches can be instrumental in planting new congregations. One of the three
recently established small congregations Randy just described is already acting upon its vision for church multiplication. Yakuv Gurung is the planting pastor of the Nepali-speaking congregation mentioned in the video clip you’ve just seen:

**VIDEO 5: Yakuv Gurung - Nepalese Church Planter**

Yakuv Gurung: “We want to see Reformed churches be planted among the Nepali-speaking people group here in United States, and beyond United States. We have planted our church here in Grand Rapids, and we have helped to plant a church in Lansing, Michigan. We also have been planning to plant a church in Ohio. And currently we also have been planting church back in Nepal. Our goal is to plant 50 churches in next five years in Nepal.”

Despite his Nepali-speaking congregation’s relatively small size, its ambitious church multiplication vision appears to be contagious. The Branch (the Anglo congregation that shares their building) recently pledged financial support toward the church-planting initiative in Nepal.

Because sustaining small churches is a widespread challenge for most RCA classes, I submit the following proposal:

**Proposal 3**

To urge the general secretary to help facilitate the launch of small church leadership collaboratives in at least three different RCA regional synods. Each leadership collaborative would seek to foster ongoing interactions among leaders of small churches (averaging fewer than 100 in worship). The general secretary shall provide a progress report to the 2019 General Synod.

Initial planning could include consultation with leader(s) of existing initiatives, including the Small Churches Forum in the Great Lakes City Classis. The primary emphasis could be on small churches with potential to remain vital. The initial effort could include a summit for representatives of multiple classes and/or regions. Participants could be trained to work with churches in their own areas. Regional summits could be considered to reduce travel costs.

**Conclusion**

In closing, our ultimate hope is wonderfully expressed in the answer to the Heidelberg Catechism’s first question: “That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” God doesn’t need any particular denomination (including the RCA) to accomplish his eternal purpose. But by his grace, he offers us not only eternal life, but also the precious opportunity to align our lives and witness with what the Spirit is already doing around the world. Our calling is to obedience: to radically follow Christ in mission together.

A hopeful sign of God’s continuing provision for the RCA during this past year was the experience of our general secretary search committee: 12 RCA members, representing each of our regional synods and ethnic councils, six men and six women, six ministers and six laypeople. After the first round of interviews, we unanimously sensed God’s clear leading to recommend Eddy Alemán to become our next general secretary. In light of the RCA’s growing diversity and divisions, such spontaneous unanimity seemed astonishing!

Eddy differs from his predecessors in some notable ways. For one thing, as a native of Nicaragua, he’s the first general secretary whose mother tongue was neither English nor
Dutch! (He understands six modern languages, plus biblical Greek and Hebrew.) He’s served since 2014 as the RCA’s director of strategic leadership development and Hispanic ministries. Eddy was instrumental in the planting of two congregations in Ontario and seventeen in California.

Ten of those church plants resulted from his five-year service at Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount, California. That church began in 1925 in what was then an agricultural area that later became the city of Paramount. Their worship services finally changed from Dutch to English in the 1940s. By the 1970s, the surrounding farmland had become suburban housing as the Los Angeles metro area expanded. Instead of closing or following the migration of its Dutch founders, Emmanuel Reformed responded to God’s call by becoming a “mission outpost” to its rapidly changing surroundings. Under the pastoral leadership of Harold Korver and later his sons, God blessed Emmanuel’s outreach, and it continues to thrive.

As author Tod Bolsinger observes in his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, ministry in the future will significantly differ from the past. What worked before might not be effective today. Christianity is no longer the dominant worldview for many North Americans. The days ahead will require new skills for those who are called to lead. Bolsinger notes that leaders from places where Christianity was never the dominant worldview have already experienced the adaptability needed to navigate through circumstances which seem “completely off the map” for many of us.

That describes Eddy Alemán’s life experience to a T. I thank God for preparing Eddy to lead us through such a time as this.

The RCA’s legacy is historic. God continues to bless. May we be people of faith, hope, and love as we seek to serve our Lord in the days ahead.

To God be the glory!

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, Proposal 2 and Proposal 3 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See p. 153 for the resulting recommendations, OV 18-24 and OV 18-25.

ADDENDUM: JOINT LETTER FROM THE GOSPEL ALLIANCE AND ROOM FOR ALL

We, the undersigned, are members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and Jesus is its only head. We are leaders of the Gospel Alliance and Room for All. The two organizations are not assemblies, agencies, or commissions of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). In our roles as leaders of the two organizations, we do not have authority to effect constitutional changes in the denomination. We have come together, guided by the Holy Spirit, to discern how the RCA might move forward as a denomination.

We gathered in person for two days of discussion, fellowship, and prayer. With us were the President of General Synod, Lee DeYoung, and the Interim General Secretary, Don Poest. We explored answers to two questions:

How might the RCA move forward as a denomination together?

How might the RCA move forward as a denomination apart?
Our time together was productive, creative, and respectful. We listened carefully to each other. We were vulnerable. We were forgiving. We moved forward in our discussion slowly together, even when we could not agree.

During our discussions, we named and lamented some of the hurts and wounds that have been inflicted in denominational discussions about human sexuality. Some people have been hurt intentionally. Many people have been wounded when harm was not intended. We confessed how we personally have hurt others. We are still learning how we have and may continue to wound others.

For many years, siblings in Christ in the RCA have acted in wrongful ways around our disagreements. Some of our disagreements are fundamental to our faith. We disagree about the interpretation of Scripture and the Standards of the RCA. We disagree about the most effective form of governance for our classes and regional ministries. We are tired of arguing. We are tired of hurting each other. If we continue to behave in mutually destructive ways around our disagreements, the Reformed Church in America will perish.

We seek healing from the hurts we have inflicted on each other.

We seek movement forward together.

We seek the freedom to serve, unburdened by our disagreements.

We seek clarity of a shared vision for our denomination.

We seek new life for the Church and its people.

During our discussions, we learned some of our misconceptions about each other. Although we have different understandings of human sexuality, we share many views:

We love the RCA and seek its flourishing.
We believe in the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and as expressed in the Standards of the RCA.
We accept the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life.
We accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.
We seek to live into our calling to teach and preach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the Church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God.
We are called to love and support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ).
While all things are possible through God, we do not believe that prayer or conversion therapy can change one’s sexual orientation or gender identity.
We believe that the healthiest way to express human sexuality is through a committed, mutually loving relationship between two people.
We have much to learn about human sexuality. We do not have all the answers. We want to listen and learn from each other.
We are committed to move forward as one denomination.

We imagined moving forward using the existing governmental framework as set forth in the Book of Church Order. Some of us felt strongly that the denomination must adopt a position on whether or not to fully include LGBTQ people in the life of the church. This approach would therefore require changes to our Constitution. It would also imply a
“conscience clause” to allow Classes of different views to consider LGBTQ candidates for ordination, and to allow Consistories of different views to consider authorizing same-sex marriages. Many of us felt that establishing a “conscience clause” was not an acceptable way to move forward together.

We also imagined and sensed energy, though not consensus, around a restructuring of the denomination that accommodates our diverse understandings of the Bible, theology and polity. While we did not explore details of such a restructuring, we imagined the RCA becoming a home for two or more assemblies (or synods, conferences, or groupings) of classes. Each assembly would be rooted in Reformed history, theology, liturgy, and the Standards, but going forward could be responsible for its own polity, theology, and liturgy. These assemblies could gather together every few years for fellowship, learning, and celebration of our ministries. Many of the institutions of the RCA could remain and provide shared services to the two or more assemblies of the RCA, including the seminaries, the Board of Benefits Services, RCA Missions, RCA offices and staff.

On whatever path the RCA moves forward, it will undergo change. Change will involve loss. Loss will involve grief. We pledge to join with the people of the RCA in confession, grief, and loss. We also pledge to continually proclaim the good news in Christ: By the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are forgiven to go forth and live in peace. As leaders of the Church, we will move forward not as enemies but as friends. Not as opponents but as siblings in Christ. Together, we pray for wisdom and humility, relying on the Spirit to lead us in love.

Bob Bouwer   Tricia Sheffield
Charlie Contreras  Chad Tanaka Pack
Marilyn Paarlberg  Scott Treadway

Attended, but does not support this idea of denominational restructuring: Lynn Japinga