Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

The RCA: Thriving, Missional, Multiracial

Members of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) are Karla Camacho (secretary), Rick DeBruyne (moderator), June Denny, Rafael Garcia (vice moderator), Kelvin Spooner, and Kyunghoon Suh. Unfortunately, the commission had to function this year with two vacancies, one African American and one Asian. The commission is hoping to get up to full strength this year. Alina Coipel serves as the GSC staff member to the commission.

The commission met via video/phone conference on July 18, 2018; September 12, 2018; October 3, 2018; and February 23, 2019. It also met October 18–20, 2018, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and January 30–31, 2019, in Phoenix, Arizona.

CORE thanks Betty Shuster, a member of GSC, for attending our winter meeting.

CORE and Transformed & Transforming

CORE’s area of responsibility is the Reformed Church in America (RCA) commitment to “a multicultural future freed from racism.” This commitment was initiated as part of Our Call, the denominational strategic goal from 2003 to 2013, and integrated into Transformed & Transforming, the denomination’s strategic goal for 2013 to 2028. It is clearly stated in the opening paragraph of the Transformed & Transforming document (emphasis added):

Being led by the Holy Spirit, serving with each other, embracing our diverse world and striving for a multicultural future freed from racism, and working with all the partners that God provides, as we move toward a fifth century of mission and ministry, the Reformed Church in America commits to focus its efforts for the next fifteen years on the following three interconnected strategic priorities …

The RCA commitment to “a multicultural future freed from racism” is also implicit in the bullet points of each of the three strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming:

1) Cultivating Transformation in Christ
   • Loving all people.
2) Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow
   • Cultivating diverse and healthy leaders within the total membership of the body of Christ, so that churches can thrive.
3) Engaging in Christ’s Kingdom Mission
   • Contextualizing ministry and church in new and expanded ways.
   • Serving as agents of renewal through putting our faith in action.
   • Promoting justice, compassion, and reconciliation.
   • Equipping existing churches to move outward in ministry.
   • Embracing our mission to the world and sharing the good news of the gospel with everyone.
   • Multiplying missional communities and new churches that put the love of Christ into action.
Official Responsibilities of CORE

The *Book of Church Order* names the responsibilities of the commission in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 7b (2018 edition, p. 115):

1. The commission shall advise the church on policies and initiatives that address issues of institutional racism and the commitment of the Reformed Church in America to become a fully multicultural and multiethnic denomination.
2. The commission shall serve as an advocate for transformation of the Reformed Church in America in regard to its multiracial and multiethnic life.
3. The commission shall recommend policies, objectives, guidelines, and strategies to assist the Reformed Church in America in its effort through all of its agencies, commissions, institutions, and other affiliated bodies to become a fully multiracial and multiethnic church.
4. The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the Reformed Church in America’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

Toward a Multicultural Future Freed From Racism

One of CORE’s official responsibilities is to monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives.

CORE affirms the direction and progress that has been made in the RCA toward being a thriving, missional, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church. The commission is encouraged that

- the oldest Protestant denomination with a continuing existence in North America is the first to have selected a Hispanic general secretary who was raised in Nicaragua, immigrated to Canada, and is now a citizen of the United States.
- diversity, intersectionality, and cross-sectionality are core values in selecting Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders and their guiding coalitions.
- there’s intention about raising more diverse racial-ethnic and multicultural leaders and starting and strengthening racial-ethnic and multicultural churches.
- the RCA has racial-ethnic councils and a Commission on Race and Ethnicity that work with and advocate for a multiracial future freed from racism.

Having said that, CORE has concerns:

1. CORE is charged to monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives. However, currently there are no written objectives. CORE has been asking for these for at least the last three years. Thankfully, the commission has been in conversation with our general secretary, and he is willing to work on this. In keeping with the request of the Vision 2020 Team and in light of conversations with the general secretary, CORE is not making a formal recommendation on this but strongly suggests that staff and the General Synod Council (GSC) work together on formulating objectives, share them with CORE as soon as possible, and share them with the church at next year’s General Synod.
2. Further, CORE was surprised to discover that GSC has not had an ends policy on the RCA’s commitment to a multicultural future freed from racism since 2013. Although the 2013 General Synod affirmed that the emphasis on a multicultural future freed from racism needed to be continued and included in Transformed & Transforming, GSC has not formulated an ends policy, nor
asked the general secretary for a reporting on this important commitment of the church. Again, in conversation with the general secretary, he agreed to look into this and is willing to work with GSC to develop an ends policy. In light of that and the Vision 2020 Team request, CORE is not making a formal recommendation but strongly suggests that the general secretary and GSC move this forward.

3. While charged with monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the RCA’s progress in achieving its multiracial and multiethnic objectives, CORE is severely limited in its ability to do so by budget and expertise. In terms of the deeper dynamics of race and racism, the commissioners have experience but little expertise in this field, and there is no room in the budget to get a consultant or any help with this. Even if the commission were able to engage someone with expertise in racism and data-driven evaluation, there is no room in the budget to develop and implement such a process. In essence, the commission has been given a very important task but few resources to accomplish it. This concern has been raised with staff on more than one occasion.

4. CORE is concerned that there is neither a specific initiative nor a staff coordinator for the RCA’s commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism. The argument has been made that this is embedded in each of the three strategic priorities and in each initiative. The commission understands this and that diversity, intersectionality, and cross-sectionality are core values within Transformed & Transforming. However, the same has been said for youth, women, and disability concerns. Yet there are identified initiatives and dedicated staff for these and none for a multiracial future freed from racism. The commission recently became aware—and was surprised to find—that the original Transformed & Transforming staffing structure contained a coordinator of multiracial initiatives, but the position was eliminated. The commission is exploring why and what that means in terms of the denomination’s actual commitment to pressing forward toward a multiracial future freed from racism.

5. CORE is concerned that the strides made at the denominational level are not being matched in the other assemblies. CORE intends to explore how the Transformed & Transforming initiatives and delivery systems might be engaged to help with this.

Collaboration and Communication between CORE and the Racial-Ethnic Councils

CORE and the three racial-ethnic councils are working together toward a more collaborative relationship. In the RCA structure, CORE relates and reports to General Synod. The racial-ethnic councils relate and report to the General Synod Council. There is no formal relationship between the commission and the councils. Both, however, often deal with the same or similar issues. While there is a commissioner on CORE named by each of the racial-ethnic councils, there has been little connection or communication between them. In order to begin improving that situation, the general secretary invited the moderator of CORE and the racial-ethnic council presidents and staff coordinators to meet with him in Phoenix on Monday, January 21, 2019. It was a mutually beneficial meeting. Ten action items were identified and are being worked on. CORE is also looking for other ways it can be proactive and build on this good beginning.

Native American/Indian Ministries (NAIM)

CORE is concerned for RCA Native American/Indian Ministries. Internally, the commission has made a commitment that there should be at least one commissioner on CORE who is Native American or First Nation, is actively involved in NAIM, and has
the ability to act as a liaison between the ministries and the commission. For the last three years, NAIM has invited CORE to send a commissioner to its annual gathering. For the last two years, the moderator and his wife have participated. This has been extremely helpful to build a relationship and for CORE to learn about and understand better our Native American and First Nations members and their churches.

CORE is aware of and monitoring a concern raised by NAIM that decisions are being made about their future without them being engaged in the process. Due to scheduling issues, the general secretary has not been able to have a face-to-face meeting with them, but he is planning a video conference meeting to engage their concerns. That should have occurred by the time of this report’s publication.

**African American Black Council**

At the 2017 General Synod, the African American Black Council (AABC) presented an excellent report on racism that contained nine recommendations to the GSC, four of which the AABC asked the GSC to bring to the General Synod on its behalf (2017 Minutes of the General Synod, pp. 64–71). It reflected very serious thought and work.

At its meeting on June 8, 2017, the GSC received the AABC report and affirmed the council’s work around antiracism and the importance of that work, but decided not to bring the recommendations to the 2017 General Synod. GSC decided instead to appoint a small task force of GSC members to work directly with the AABC over the next year to more fully develop these recommendations and bring them to General Synod 2018. The 2018 Minutes of the General Synod, however, reflect nothing on this. In conversation with the GSC moderator and general secretary, CORE has learned that this matter had been delegated and a report was to be forthcoming at the March GSC meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting will occur after this report is due for publication. CORE is disappointed that this has not been attended to more closely by GSC and will continue to monitor its progress.

**Five-Fold Test**

The Five-Fold Test was developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church. It has been instrumental in that denomination’s efforts to become more multiracial and to eliminate racism. The 2014 General Synod tasked CORE with monitoring pilot efforts to implement the test in the RCA for five years, through the 2019 General Synod. Due to inertia in exploring the use of the test in the RCA, the 2018 General Synod approved terminating that effort.

The assessment money raised for piloting the Five-Fold Test was set aside in 2018, and CORE was tasked with coming up with ways to use the money for the purpose of furthering the use of the Five-Fold Test in the RCA. CORE continues to explore this. Providentially, Kelvin Spooner’s brother, Harold, is with the Evangelical Christian Church and has been involved in the development of the Five-Fold Test. CORE is planning to use some of the available funds to consult with Harold. Women’s Transformation and Leadership has also expressed interest in using the Five-Fold Test and collaborating with CORE on further developing and implementing this tool.

**Consistorial Report Form Questions**

At CORE’s request, the following questions were added to the annual Consistorial Report Form (CRF) in 2017: “How does your congregation reflect the racial and cultural context in which you conduct your ministry? What are you doing to build bridges that develop
and deepen mutual ministry that is multiracial and multicultural?” CORE received the responses from the 2017 CRF on October 17. The commission is working to collate them by similarity and analyze them in terms of the RCA commitment to a multiracial future freed from racism.

Conclusion

In many ways, the work of CORE has been difficult these past two years. The commission is functioning at less than full strength and with limited resources. The current conversation on human sexuality is foremost in everyone’s mind, resulting in other things, including race and ethnicity, not getting the attention they might otherwise. The elimination of the multiracial initiatives staff position from Transformed & Transforming, the lack of responsiveness to and elimination of the Five-Fold Task Force, the lack of a 2018 report from GSC on the 2017 recommendations from the AABC, and changes being made that impact the life of Native American/Indian Ministries without involving them in decisions about their destiny are disappointing, and it is hard not to question the will of the church in the whole matter of race and ethnicity.

As noted early in this report, there are encouraging signs. Eddy Alemán has been installed as general secretary. Church Multiplication has specific goals to plant more racial-ethnic and multiethnic churches. Kelvin Spooner has been a great addition to the commission. Kelvin’s brother’s connection with the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Five-Fold Test is providential. The meeting with the general secretary and the racial-ethnic council presidents and staff coordinators was fantastic and fruitful. Integrating intersectionality and cross-sectionality into Transformed & Transforming is promising. Many of the responses from the 2017 Consistorial Report Forms are refreshingly honest. They reveal a desire on the part of many congregations to effectively reach and reflect their neighborhoods. The interest Women’s Transformation and Leadership has in the Five-Fold Test may open an avenue for greater use. CORE can only hope and pray that these things lead toward becoming a Revelation 7:9 church.

The commission thanks Kyunghoon Suh for his service and looks forward to continuing our work together as he completes his term on the commission and takes up his responsibility as the newly appointed president of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM). The commission also thanks Alina Coipel for her ongoing service as our staff person. Alina is invaluable to CORE. She goes far above and beyond her assigned responsibilities. Her commitment clearly comes out of her passion for the work of CORE and her desire to see the RCA become fully multiracial, multiethnic, and freed from racism. Thank you, Kyunghoon and Alina.

Respectfully submitted,
Rick DeBruyne, moderator