REPORT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN BLACK COUNCIL

To the General Synod Council (GSC) of the Reformed Church in America, greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please receive the following as our report to GSC for the year of 2018.

Included in this report are the following:

- Annual Fall Gathering
- Mission Statement
- Connecting with GSC

Annual Fall Gathering

Our annual fall gathering was held October 5–6, 2018, at the Crowne Plaza Newark Airport Hotel in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Our gathering this year was purposeful and productive.

The Holy Spirit was hard at work as we gathered to do the work of the Lord on behalf of the AABC churches within our midst. The following are some of the highlights from that gathering.

The reelection of our chairperson along with our previously elected officers:

Chairperson: Jeffery A. Hough (Muskegon, Michigan)
Vice chairperson: Wanzette (Ann) Bilbrew (Chicago, Illinois)
Secretary: Hellen Harvey (Oakland, California)
Immediate past chairperson: James Steward (New York, New York)

The AABC elected to include the regional conveners in the role of officers. This includes:

Regina Reid (Midwest Region)
Dwayne Jackson (Eastern Region)

During our Friday evening session, we were greeted by Eddy Alemán, RCA general secretary, who laid out his vision for the RCA, which included:

- Transformed & Transforming
- Jill Ver Steeg and the work she will do as the chief ministry officer
- Randy Weener and the work he will do as director of Church Multiplication
- Looking to plant 1,000 churches
- Renewed focus on global mission
- Looking to hire a coordinator for prayer
- Cultural training for staff
- Vision 2020 Team

We spoke with Eddy about concerns of the RCA’s future, considering all of the conversations around the possibility of a split and the impact it will have upon the AABC churches.

We also discussed with him the theological and practical effects on spiritual revitalization of people and communities by deeply decaying buildings used for worship and ministry. Together, we understood that 1) a theology of place for the kingdom of God is important, and 2) old church structures strongly “suck up” dollars, creativity, and resolve from meaningful revitalization (personal and community) to just dealing with further decay in buildings.
Eddy encouraged the council and its coordinator to follow up with the Church Growth Fund and others, which we have. However, we are concerned that those resources are insufficient to reverse the negative and restraining impacts decayed church buildings have on pastors’ and congregations’ abilities to revitalize people and communities.

Though this issue has been brought to GSC and General Synod previously, there have been no effective or sustainable results. Also, the strategy of moving the focus beyond the AABC to the denomination as a whole has not proven successful in solving this.

*The AABC, therefore, recommends that GSC (not General Synod) convene a six-month task force that begins in April or May 2019 and focuses within the greater New York City area, where most of the AABC’s decaying church buildings are, to identify*

1. a new strategy to raise additional funds for church-building repair and renovation, and
2. an equitable distribution system for those funds.

*On the task force can be GSC representatives, AABC representatives, the AABC coordinator, and invited representatives of the Regional Synod of New York and the classes with churches in New York City.*

We then asked Eddy, “How can the AABC come alongside of you to support you?” His response was:

- Show up
- Be present
- Pray for me

We agreed to this request and closed this conversation with prayer and the laying on of hands.

The fall gathering was once again attended by more than a dozen clergy. Clergy met together for a luncheon on Saturday. They shared stories and encouraged one another. While the clergy were meeting in one room, laypersons gathered in another room, sharing their stories. Each group expressed great appreciation for the gathering, acknowledged the need, and expressed the desire to continue to meet.

We reviewed and discussed the key areas of Transformed & Transforming, which are:

- Discipleship
- Leadership
- Mission

This led to a conversation on how we as a council and individual churches can live into them.

We received a presentation by Derrick Jones, supervisor of RCA mission in Africa, who gave us an overview of his work in Africa and how we may come alongside him to support the amazing way he is touching lives through his call. Looking ahead, we are examining the possibility of joining with him on a mission trip and supporting him financially with a Partnership in Mission (PIM) share funded through AABC congregations and church events.
Mission Statement

Following our conversation on how we as churches can effectively and proactively live into Transformed & Transforming, we introduced and adopted the following new mission statement:

The AABC celebrates God’s love by empowering, educating, and encouraging its members to partner with their communities and the RCA to develop ministries and policies for:

- Church growth
- Leadership development
- Social and racial justice
- Economic development

“What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

This statement captures the essence of who we are as people of God and how we will live into our call.

We all departed the fall gathering knowing we had been in the presence of the Holy Spirit. We had followed the leading of the Spirit and knew our meeting was not in vain. We were energized by our fellowship together and the unity of purpose that pervaded the gathering. Laypeople and clergy met together to be about their Father’s business. We left encouraged as we sought to capture our vision and fulfill our purpose. We prayed together, listened together, ate together, laughed together, praised together, and learned together; together we were uplifted by the Holy Spirit. Much had happened that could have caused this fall gathering to be unfruitful, but God showed himself faithful and brought us together, and we departed savoring the fruits of our labor. (In short, we were fulfilling our RCA mission statement: a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.)

Connecting with GSC

The General Synod bylaws in the Book of Church Order, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b (2018 edition, p. 107) state:

The General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.

In response to this, the AABC made the following recommendation at the March 2018 meeting of the GSC:

That GSC form a task force to meet (virtually, whenever possible) over a period of no more than 12 months in order to make recommendations to the GSC that promote more effective communication and relationships between the GSC and its racial/ethnic councils. The task force should include leaders from each council, including Native American representation, the three racial/ethnic coordinators, three to five GSC members, and at least two organizational
development experts who are not on GSC or a council. The task force should conclude its work and report back to GSC by February 28, 2019.

The GSC met by videoconference on April 16, 2018, engaged in initial discussion around this recommendation, and voted “To discuss the recommendation from the AABC and the broader topic of communication between the GSC and other bodies at the GSC’s October 2018 meeting” (GSC 18-21). Its reasons for engaging this discussion in October were that:

GSC recognizes the importance of the questions about communication raised by the AABC in its report, and questions about communication also seem to extend beyond the councils to other bodies such as the commissions. GSC feels the need to engage in a fuller discussion at its October meeting. Providing that General Synod 2018 approves the GSC’s recommendation of Eddy Alemán to serve as the RCA’s general secretary, he will be in place as general secretary by October, and GSC would like the general secretary to be part of this discussion.

To date, it appears no action has been taken. The executive committee of the AABC would like to formally request an update and response on the status of this recommendation from the moderator of GSC.

The AABC recommends that GSC reschedule and complete as quickly as possible its work on this 2018 recommendation.

In line with the letter of the BCO bylaw mentioned above, the AABC also wishes to lift up the following. We recognize the issue of sexual orientation to be an important one to the church. We are not commenting about that issue here. Rather, the AABC highlights many critically important issues facing our people, our communities, and our congregations that serve, attempting to be the hands and feet of Jesus himself in their ministry efforts. These issues include:

• Addictions to opioid, alcohol, and other substances
• Access to quality education
• Access to quality health care
• Food deserts in many of our communities
• Degradation to God’s environments and our physical and emotional health because of public waste management policies and intentional placements of refuse dumps
• The lack of awareness of what happens to our families in the near-term, the long-term, and generationally because of mass incarceration

We believe that we must address these issues and results with fruitful, God-honoring interventions. Though we have been somewhat quiet on these dynamics with the wider denomination, we must point out that these factors produce a trauma that traditional discipleship, leadership, and mission thinking and acting do not recognize or engage in a redemptive enough manner.

Therefore, the AABC recommends that the GSC direct the general secretary to form a year-long learning/acting process that

1) educates Transformed & Transforming staff about the trauma-producing dynamics that affect many under-resourced communities, churches, and people,
2) assesses the preparedness of our current discipleship, leadership, and
mission strategies to truly be redemptively transformative in these environments, and

3) incorporates, through adoption or development, discipleship, leadership, and mission strategies that can equip AABC and other congregations to be the hands and feet of Jesus in life conditions such as those raised above.

Clearly, this process must include selected Transformed & Transforming staff members, persons from various assemblies and congregations, AABC members and coordinator, and external-to-the-RCA experts who can assist our learning/acting processes.

Conclusion

The 2018 year was uplifting and eventful for the AABC. With the developing of our new mission statement and the finalizing of our revised bylaws, we have found renewed energy in following Christ into the mission field. We met together with the Holy Spirit at our fall gathering. As we move into 2019, we are determined to continue to be led by God’s Spirit.

We are grateful for the appointment of Earl James as our coordinator, and together, we are looking to accomplish great things. Those of us who attended Sankofa journeys in the past understand that a sankofa bird is one that forges ahead while keeping an eye on what is behind. We as the AABC are on a journey that forges us ahead, propelled by our past.

Note: At its March 2019 meeting, the GSC directed the general secretary “to explore ways to pursue the intent of the recommendations found in the 2019 African American Black Council report and report back to GSC in June 2019” (GSC 19-18).
REPORT OF THE COUNCIL FOR PACIFIC AND ASIAN AMERICAN MINISTRIES

The *Book of Church Order* (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2018 edition, p. 107) states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically.”

Annual Consultation

In 2018, the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM) had its 39th annual consultation from September 4 to 6 at Peace Reformed Church in Eagan, Minnesota. We were invited by Pastor Chan Sythavongsa and his Laotian congregation at Peace Reformed Church. The members of the Laotian congregation, which consists of first- and second-generation Laotian immigrants, graciously welcomed all participants of the annual consultation by serving food, providing local transportation, and participating in the worship service.

This year, CPAAM chose the theme of “Integrity” for the annual consultation. We chose the book *Integrity: the Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality* by Henry Cloud and selected some chapters and topics for the members to discuss. Translated copies of the book were sent to the participating Chinese and Korean members, and English copies were mailed to English-speaking members. Everyone was required to read at least some of the chapters before they arrived. To make this book-oriented discussion more effective, the CPAAM executive committee members had a three-day, two-night retreat in June. Small group discussions were divided into three groups: English group, Korean group, and Chinese/Taiwanese group. Overall, groups were deeply engaged with the topic of “integrity” at both personal and ministerial levels.

In this annual consultation, we provided interpreting services (with portable FM radio devices) for those who needed English-Korean interpretation. We did this in order to break the language barrier and to attract more Korean-language-speaking members to CPAAM.

At the closing worship service, we asked four women pastors and leaders to lead the Holy Communion as an appreciation of these women’s efforts and contributions to CPAAM as well as the RCA.

Engage in Christ’s Kingdom Mission

Our new general secretary, Eddy Alemán, was the keynote speaker at the consultation meeting. He discussed his role as the general secretary to cast vision and to implement the mission and ministry of the denomination. He also spoke about the work and goals of the Vision 2020 Team that was created to research and identify the various results of the three possible options for the future of the RCA: staying together, radical reconstituting and reorganization, or separating gracefully. Consultation participants were very glad to meet with Eddy Alemán, and they engaged in conversation through fellowship time during meals and through listening to his vision and ministry goals.

Equip Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow

In August 2018, we had our 33rd Jesus Retreat, which is the annual youth retreat of RCA churches in New York and New Jersey. About two months before the Jesus Retreat, we had a Servant Staff training retreat in May.
One hundred and twenty young people gathered at Spruce Lake Retreat in Pennsylvania and successfully completed the retreat. Most of the participants came from youth groups of Korean churches, and we still need to develop ways of inviting non-Korean and non-RCA youth groups in the New York and New Jersey areas.

Cultivate Transformation in Christ

At the January 2019 executive committee meeting in San Francisco, we had a Zoom conference call with Terry DeYoung, the RCA coordinator for Disability Concerns. He explained the general purpose of Disability Concerns in the RCA, including topics like how to meet the real needs of people with disabilities beyond offering accessibility ramps and bathrooms, how to solve the problem of being more inclusive with those people, and how to utilize the gifts and experiences of people with disabilities in the life of the church. Terry wanted to learn how disabilities are addressed in the Asian communities and churches.

After the Zoom call meeting, a discussion followed on how and when we could present these topics to our CPAAM members. We concluded that we need more time to know Terry and his ministry better, and then dialogue with him about how to present Disability Concerns in a way that will be understandable and relevant to Asian pastors’ experiences and expectations.

Relationship with Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE)

In order to ensure that there is effective and productive communication between CORE and CPAAM, it was mutually decided and affirmed that a member of the CPAAM executive committee would be appointed to serve on CORE. CPAAM appreciates CORE’s purpose to make the RCA multiracial and free from racism, so we want to have the CPAAM voice heard at CORE meetings, and CPAAM needs to know how we can support and advocate initiatives from CORE.

Conclusion

Many different Asian countries are under the CPAAM umbrella. Our languages, traditions, histories, and cultures are very different. However, we have in common our calling from God. God called all of us to be together in Eagan, Minnesota, in 2018. We are all members of CPAAM because God called us to be there. Although we are different in many ways, we still ask the same questions. This year, regardless of our differences, we agreed that we all desire to grow into people, ministers, and leaders of integrity to carry out God’s kingdom work.

Respectfully submitted,
Members of the CPAAM executive committee:
Kyunghoon Suh (chairperson), Daniel Kim, Stephen Kim, Shi Yang Lin, Lynn Min, Grace Rohrer, and Gerri Yoshida
The Book of Church Order states that “the General Synod Council shall have racial/ethnic councils which express the collective vision and voice of racial and ethnic congregants and congregations as they develop ministries and advocate for policies of racial and ethnic inclusion, economic, social, and racial justice, both within the Reformed Church in America and ecumenically” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 3, Section 2b; 2018 edition, p. 107). To that end, the Council for Hispanic Ministries shall continue to express the collective vision and voice of our constituents as well as advocate for the rights of our people, all while ensuring that we speak up and work together on positive strategies to resolve issues that separate us all as God’s people.

The Council for Hispanic Ministries held its 44th annual meeting in Chicago, Illinois, on August 23–25, 2018. The focus for our assembly was “The Development and Health of Our Churches,” as well as continuing to work on our vision of seeing 50 Hispanic churches planted by 2022 and working with Church Multiplication and Hispanic Ministries to do so. We had a great meeting of worship, celebration, and fellowship.

The executive committee and the coordinator of Hispanic Ministries are presently working in several areas:

1. We continue with the training of church planters and are working with various RCA classes and regional synods. We have 23 church plants in progress in the U.S. and Canada, and we continue to lift them up in prayer, while also preparing for new plants in New York, Florida, and Georgia in 2019. Praise God for that! God is raising a great group of church planters, and many RCA churches, classes, and regional synods are embracing the vision and partnering with the council to plant all of these churches in many different cities in the U.S. and Canada.

2. In January, we met in New York with Hispanic pastors for two days to brainstorm goals to walk in the vision of the council, and these pastors now have a vision of planting five of the 50 Hispanic church plants. Pastor Osvaldo Hernandez will plant the first church, as he already has a group of 16 people gathering as a potential new congregation in the Bronx, New York.

3. The council is currently working with the Classis of Illiana-Florida in the Florida area. At the January gathering, there was great vision for Hispanic church planting. The Holy Spirit was present and helped Hispanic pastors and churches get on board with the RCA’s vision of planting 1,000 churches. In addition, African American pastors and leaders from Georgia who attended were inspired by the RCA and the Hispanic churches in the Florida area.

4. General secretary Eddy Alemán, Global Mission director JP Sundararajan, and coordinator for Hispanic Ministries Andres Serrano traveled to the Dominican Republic to connect with Brígido Cabrera and the executive committee of Iglesia Reformada Dominicana (IRD). The meeting was an uplifting of faith and a time of reconnection for IRD and the Reformed Church in America. The general secretary spoke about the vision and mission of the RCA and the commitment from both the RCA and IRD as part of the agreement previously set and signed by former general secretary Wes Granberg-Michaelson in 2009. This reconnection will bring about the training and development of leaders with a focus on Hispanic ministries, not just for the Dominican Republic, but for the U.S. as well.
5. The fourth annual RCA Hispanic Church Planting Summit took place in Orlando, Florida, on March 4–5, 2019. The meeting was a great success. This year, the summit helped to gather more than 130 leaders, the largest for this event to date. The group included church planters, parent church leaders, next generation Hispanic leaders, and classis and regional synod leaders. The focus was in looking toward the future and empowering emerging leaders under the theme of “Passing the Torch.”

6. We continue our support for the 34 Hispanic leaders who are going through the certificate program at Western Theological Seminary and are looking to start another cohort for the Hispanic leaders in the Florida area. The program prepares these leaders through their process of becoming commissioned pastors, with the credits being viable to continue and pursue an M.Div. at Western Theological Seminary, and eventually become fully ordained ministers of Word and sacrament.

7. Fourteen Hispanic church planters are going through Church Multiplication Network’s training process for church planters. In April, another group of eight church planters began this process. Groups meet once a month to go through 12 modules that will equip them to be successful church planters in their communities.

Concluding Comments

We are thankful for the work the new general secretary (both in his current role and in his previous role as the director of strategic leadership development), the coordinator for leadership development, the office of Church Multiplication, the coordinator for Hispanic Ministries, and the General Synod Council have done for the Hispanic people of the Reformed Church in America and beyond. We know and understand that there is a long way to go to where we want to be, but we are going in the right direction. We believe that Transformed & Transforming is giving us focus for ministry effectiveness. With much love and many prayers, we submit this report to you and pray for God’s blessings and for the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be with us as we continue this journey of transformation to live and love like Jesus.

Respectfully submitted,
The executive committee of the Council for Hispanic Ministries