I would like to thank all of you, present and abroad, who have supported my wife, Lisa, and me throughout these past two years. To say that serving in this capacity has been an unbelievable honor is an understatement. To say that these have been interesting times is also an understatement. Like many things in life, this experience wasn’t what I thought it would be, but in retrospect, this season has been uniquely God-inspired. We have been blessed beyond measure indeed.

I want to express special thanks to Lee DeYoung, EJ de Waard, Eddy Alemán, Don Poest, Russ Paarlberg, Nancy Van Heerde, the General Synod Council, the many people who stepped up and helped put this General Synod together, and the RCA staff, especially Liz Brand, Jillisa Teitsma, and Juel Grevenstuk. Thanks also to Steve Struikmans, Scott Treadway, and my home church, Rancho Community Reformed Church, for their support and love.

I want to specifically acknowledge the grace you all have extended me throughout this tenure. Past presidents have, as they should, made themselves available to the broader denomination with personal visits and communications. Unfortunately, I was not able to do the same on the scale to which you have grown accustomed. In a word, thanks for putting up with me these past two years. For those with whom I have had contact, thank you so much for expressing your hospitality and Christian love.

I mentioned last year that my great uncle, Sadao Munemori, was the first Japanese-American to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. “Go for broke” was the motto of his 442nd regimental combat team, the most decorated unit of its size in U.S. military history. It means “to wager everything you have and go for it.” April 5 is national “Go for Broke” day. What we didn’t know was that April 5 was chosen to commemorate the day my great uncle died. I wondered if that was a sign that I should “go for broke” here today? Should I lay it all down? What good would it do? Well, I’m not sure this is necessarily going for broke, but I hope to land somewhere in between “equal-opportunity offender” and wise and faithful servant of the Lord Most High, hopefully closer to the latter. Of course, ultimately, a report, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Having attended many General Synods, I have been looking forward to this year especially because it was intended to be a bit different. I know it was difficult for you all not to scratch that overture itch! Yet, by and large, you did it, and on behalf of the General Synod Council and the Vision 2020 Team, I thank you. Though, I dare say the situation may resemble a pressure cooker more than a group of resting bunnies.
Like you, I read the report from the Vision 2020 Team and saw the complexities of the alternatives set before us. The idea that we’ll make a decision in a year is unsettling to many. All three scenarios outlined by the team envision some type of alignment and discernment by classes and/or congregations. In dealing with the divisions confronting us, few congregations seem likely to find that all of their members see things exactly the same way.

This is a time of testing for our denomination and our churches. I haven’t met many people who like tests, but I think we can all agree that we should do our best to pass.

A side note: in meeting with the clerks, Larry Schuyler asked a very profound question, and that was, “How do we know? What are the metrics? How do we know that we’re passing?” That’s the kind of question we really need to ask. What are the metrics? How do we know that what we are doing is pleasing to the Lord? We all can go to some biblical passages for that. But that is one of the profound questions that we need to ask and that we need to have some consensus about.

And passing, I believe, will require a lot of thinking, praying, and soul-searching.

Speaking of “thinking,” I’ve been pondering that perhaps part of our trouble is that we do not realize how great is the divide that separates us. And for us, there’s a built-in mechanism which guarantees that there will be no bridging that divide if one side doesn’t acquiesce.

Let me explain further.

With regard to human sexuality, there are at least two different hermeneutics at play. The result is at least two distinct beliefs. What is sin to one is not sin to another. However, the additional ingredient for division and strife is the admonition that it is the duty of elders to correct those who are not preaching and living the Scriptures in God’s intended way. In Titus 1:9, for example, Paul is speaking about the role of an elder and states an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [the elder] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”

Just how wide and long and high and deep are these hermeneutically derived beliefs? From what I have witnessed, I would say to the very core. It doesn’t matter which side of the chasm a person is on. The duty is the same. Though this refuting or correcting might take different forms, isn’t it refuting and correcting nonetheless?

If this one area of conflict we find ourselves divided over is grounds enough for contention, the fact that there are a host of issues and beliefs that garner disagreement makes for a very tough past, present, and future. I sense that the results of these differences are not simply additive but exponentially disruptive in the way they grind against members of opposing positions.

As I see it, this is the reality in which we find ourselves. I, of course, welcome disagreement on my assessment.

So where do we go from here? I’m voting for clarity; that is, we work to clarify what it is we believe in and what we are fighting for. If my assumption is correct and we do not know just how different we are, then finding out is not unreasonable. It may not bring us together—in fact it may push us apart—but at least we will have more knowledge about our differences instead of ignorance. This also helps us to defend what we believe. After
all, we should be able to provide a defense for the hope that we have, with gentleness and respect. We will know more of the truth; as our Savior said, “the truth will set you free.”

And so, I pray that during this season and beyond, we take the opportunity to clarify where we stand and acknowledge the benefits and the costs of our beliefs, and most importantly, verbalize how we think this all relates to the Great Commission. How do our beliefs relate to going out into the world and making disciples for Jesus, teaching them to obey his commandments? That, I believe, is the important filter which we should all agree upon using. If what we do is not moving the kingdom of God forward, then I believe we need to have a different kind of discussion, a very frank one, that, to me, falls under Matthew 12:30: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (NIV). Because our disagreements are dividing this church, don’t you think we should be as sure as we can that we are fighting for the right cause? It would be a different story if we were another type of organization, such as the Kiwanis club or a political party, but we are part of Christ’s church, his body. And therefore, ultimately, we are concerned with the message of the gospel. Read Revelation 2-3 for how serious Jesus takes this matter.

I also ask that when you do interact, “...if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete” by interacting in a kind manner, worthy of a follower of Christ (Philippians 2:1-2, NIV).

As an elder, I would like to recognize my fellow elders who do what you do, not as a profession, but as volunteers. We truly are blessed, are we not? We have been given the opportunity to serve in this manner, and, in some ways, we get the best of both worlds. At least, that is true for me, and, I think, for many of you as well. I pray that the consistories we serve on are models of Christian love. I implore those same consistories to which you belong to be supportive of your pastors. Again, another side note: I have been at General Synods talking to pastors about how they’re treated by their consistories, their elders, and it’s not a good conversation. So, take that for what you can take it for. If your consistory is one fraught with contention, I would ask you endeavor to work out your issues as Paul implored the ministries he worked with, to consider others better than themselves, and to strive together for the gospel.

To the ministers present, thank you for your service and sacrifice. I know many of you could be doing any number of other professions and doing them well. Instead, you heeded the call and have devoted yourselves to work that does not bring earthly riches but those that would bring about God’s kingdom. It’s a difficult but hopefully rewarding calling for you, and my fellow elders and I are thankful for you.

As many of you know, one of this office’s privileges is to participate in some international travel. My desire was to visit Japan. My wife, Lisa, and I lived there for about five years during the 1980s, and when I left to return to the U.S., I did so with some regret because I felt a certain calling to stay and work for the kingdom in Japan. Now, I had the chance to return under different circumstances, circumstances that you blessed us with in representing the RCA.

In preparation, I read through Dr. Gordon Laman’s Pioneers to Partners book and met him here in Holland. Our RCA missionaries, the Kist-Okazakis, the Brownells, and the Jansens communicated and worked to set up visits for me, including ones with the UCCJ, the United Church of Christ in Japan, one of the Christian denominations historically associated with the RCA.
The highlight of the trip was visiting the Ferris Girls’ School in Yokohama. It was humbling to be received with so much respect solely due to the RCA history. The school was founded in 1870 by RCA missionary Mary E. Kidder and apparently was the first school for women in Japan. We all should be proud of that.

One of our missionaries stated that the RCA is not just any denomination. We were and are a group of Christians who care about others and who continue to support and spread the gospel in some of the hardest places around the world. As I alluded to earlier, past presidents have highlighted the success and profundity of missions because, for all of our other family problems, we never forget about missions. The missionaries too are praying that we don’t forget about this important work, and I plead with all of you that whatever the denomination’s decision is next year, we will continue to support what the Lord has so blessed the RCA with: a rich mission heritage over the centuries. We can’t take this lightly. Please weigh that thought out in striving for your goals.

When we look at what is happening to the western world in terms of the church, we have to be disappointed. The numbers don’t look all that good. However, even though we are disappointed by what we see in places around the world, the Spirit is indeed moving, and many people are receiving Christ. It begs the question, what is happening here? We are living in what is being called a postmodern world. If that philosophy is anything, it is not supportive of the God of the Bible or the Christian faith. One Google reference states that postmodernism “has at its heart a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies.” I’d argue there isn’t a grander ideology than that of the existence and purposes of the God we espouse. Contending with the competing philosophies is nothing new; Paul in Athens is one early example. I think we had better investigate this current philosophy more, so we, like Paul, can prepare our own Mars Hill sermons.

On another note, last year we celebrated 40 years of women’s ordination. In my two years, I’ve noticed something else that we should be seriously celebrating, and that is the incredible kingdom-building love, work, and sacrifice of the women in our churches and homes. While we are apt to pay homage to those rising in the ranks and holding offices, there are countless women who, for no other reason than loving and serving the Lord Jesus, do what they do and put up with what they put up with. I am asking all of you, that when you return to your churches, to likewise honor and express your thankfulness and love to the women who serve the Lord among you. They deserve it and are real expressions of grace.

I also want to acknowledge the work you are doing in your churches for those with special needs. And some of you already know I’m a special education teacher, so I get to deal with those kids every day. We can always do more, as my brother Terry DeYoung would have it, so I encourage you to keep up the good work.

I would like now to take a little time to consider how we might show the world what Christ and his followers can accomplish with issues relating to race. Just a little ethos here. I work with a demographic that includes broken families, fatherless children, lots of drug and alcohol abuse, gang affiliation, crime, incarceration, emotional instability, homelessness, and low income. The demographics are 65 percent Hispanic, 11 percent black, 13 percent white, 7 percent Asian, and 3 percent Native American. That doesn’t make me an expert, but I do have to find solutions to help my students. I have to say that my “go-to” plan is to rely on my Christianity in dealing with them.

I think it makes sense to use all of the tools we normally use as Christians to solve the problems that confront us. Let the world use their methods, and let us use ours. Can you
imagine throwing that all important super-tool called forgiveness at the issue of race relations? I would argue that forgiveness is in the top two methods Christ and the apostles command us to use. And even the number one tool, love, teaches us “to keep no records of wrong.” It seems to work just about everywhere else we try it. It is God’s wisdom, not human. We won’t be receiving any awards from the world, but forgiveness is what we should do best. Don’t you agree?

In order to help solve problems, we need a lot of help. Just as Paul praised the Philippian church for their support, we require the action of many churches to help those in need. It has been my contention that part of the problem in raising support is that we tend to use the world’s language and not so much our native language “Christianese.” My personal opinion is that terms such as “systemic racism” and “white privilege” don’t seem to motivate folks that would otherwise love to help. When I hear a student say “you never help me” or “it’s your fault I’m failing,” I actually don’t feel like helping them. Isn’t it a fair question to ask how the messages we are using are being received? Could we perhaps compromise by translating the academic vocabulary into words that will be received more successfully?

As for me, I think people who don’t like me dislike me because of my worldviews, my arrogance, and who I am, not what I am racially. This is not to say that racism and bigotry do not exist, but I’m saying that you all have treated my wife and me with so much love, you have me thinking that this Christianity thing really works! That’s my testimony. Hallelujah!

I’d also like to offer a helpful hint for ministry. As you may know, I am part of a very large RCA church. One of the ways God has blessed us came through the vision and practice of our founding pastor, Steve Struikmans, and is still being carried on by our incredible pastor, Scott Treadway. What I am referring to is releasing the power of the laity. If someone had an idea, the consistory would say, “That’s a great idea. Why don’t you do that?” By this strategy, we have implemented many of our best ministries and grown the church because people who like to do things are attracted to it. That has fueled our growth, and it also keeps staff costs down.

I am an example of this model. In the mid 1990s, I approached the church as a new attender offering what was then a newfangled idea: a church website. They just let me do it. I suppose you might say that that volunteer job ultimately ended up as the one I am doing right now. So, if you are not empowering the lay people at your church, I suggest you try it out.

And now, what you have all been waiting for: the presidential proposals.

I have spent most of my life as an analyst who solves problems with procedures and technology. I have been applying this strategy to every job I have ever held. You can imagine how frustrating it is to not be able to “fix” the issues we face, but I sincerely believe that this proposal, lived out, could have a profound effect within and beyond our church walls.

Over the past two years, I have been thinking about a positive way we could, among other things, answer questions such as:

- How can we help churches that can’t afford a pastor?
- Do we recognize and appreciate the history of the RCA? Does that appreciation extend to helping our sisters and brothers repair and maintain their historic buildings?
• How do we share the wisdom of God that is so very practical?
• Do we continue to let the world lie about us and what we do, or do we show people the truth?
• How can the church blossom with the new realities of how people actually live and learn today?
• How can we also freely share our knowledge among ourselves, answering questions posed to professors, ministers, lay leaders, and the congregations we serve?
• Could a retiree in Pella tutor a seventh grader in Queens?

There is a way, and the technological infrastructure is already in place. You know it as the Internet.

My proposal is to create a public channel, independent of the denomination, that gathers existing and newly created video and audio content from across the RCA. In order to facilitate this, a team of volunteers will be formed to categorize, upload, and maintain a database that will track information related to the content. The team will also be tasked with creating how-to videos so that we can take advantage of the wealth of resources and talent throughout the denomination.

To address the question of why an independent channel, the main factor is cost. Every entry that has to be touched by staff takes staff time, and therefore accrues a price. A second consideration is speed of publication. As to content oversight, the volunteer team will exercise some control, but part of this initiative should be the freedom to express ourselves. As I explained to one of the clerks who asked if it was going to divide us, “We’re already at that place, so I don’t think we have to worry about that too much.” A disclaimer that the views expressed in each video are not necessarily those of the RCA would be included. Viewer discretion would be advised.

The possibilities for this channel are endless, and it is a way for young and old to move the kingdom forward. For example, for years I have dreamed of having a team of believers who can communicate with the people who comment on what they have seen and heard. Can you imagine a live broadcast answering those questions in real time? That is a mission field just waiting to be developed. And you want a bunch of nonbelievers cussing you out and typing comments! That’s what you want. We want that. With content provided and people watching, this interaction will occur as it naturally does all over the Internet.

Another future goal will be to establish virtual churches. Let church go to the people. Then, if possible, bring them to your church. We have to give people very valid reasons to change their Sunday morning lifestyles. But even if they don’t, community exists online. It’s a way of life for many, and we should tap into that.

This denomination has talent, and this channel will promote it. We already have hours of possible content from those churches who currently publish sermons. But we’ll need specialized content for short attention spans. Imagine the first person to acknowledge the Lord Jesus after watching your five-minute testimony. That would be something, wouldn’t it?

I look forward to giving an RCA Calvin award for the “Most Reformed Video Gone Viral.”

P-1
To create a volunteer-driven RCA media channel, hosted on commercial sites such as YouTube and Facebook, the purpose of which is to make content created
by RCA entities publicly available for the advancement of the cause of Christ. And further, to form a committee of interested volunteers to drive and maintain this project at no cost to the denomination.

I have to tell you I am excited about the possibilities of what you and your church members will be able to create. This has the potential to lead us into a new and exciting chapter in the history of the church. Let’s go for broke on this.

My other proposal is this:

P-2
To instruct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on History and the professorate, to prepare or recommend a study on postmodernism and its history, beliefs, and relationship to Christianity as a resource for churches to understand the world we live in and to help devise ways to reach people for Christ who are living under this prevailing philosophy, for report to General Synod 2021.

Since we live in a postmodern world, it seems to make sense that we understand it better. The clarity it will bring will help us to refine our own belief systems.

In closing, regarding this remarkable journey, I can’t help but think of Charles Dickens’s novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, ending as it does with the Christ-like sacrifice of Carton to save Darnay. The book opens this way: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

I want you to know that given the similarities and despite any differences we might have, there is a real, special love and respect for you in my heart. As you do your “far, far better thing,” may the Lord, our God and Savior, bless each and every one of you. Thank you.

*Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference, Proposals 1 and 2 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business for consideration. See p. 130 for the resulting recommendations, ONB 19-4 and ONB 19-5.*