Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), per the Book of Church Order (Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5 [2018 edition, pp. 67–68]). In response to the full sweep of Scripture toward the unity of believers, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (MGS 1974, R-6, pp. 201–202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (MGS 1975, R-4, pp. 101–102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA as defined by the Book of Church Order (BCO) in this way:

1. The commission shall initiate and supervise action with respect to the Reformed Church in America’s membership in or affiliation with ecumenical bodies.
2. It shall engage in interchurch conversations and appoint ecumenical delegates to other church bodies.
3. It shall inform the church of current ecumenical developments and advise the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3b [2018 edition, p. 112]).

The commission also seeks to educate the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in “An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America,” adopted by General Synod in 1996 (MGS 1996, R-1, p. 197). General Synod may also refer ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

RCA Ecumenical Involvement: An Overview

The RCA holds a historical commitment to active involvement in ecumenical conversation and cooperation with churches throughout North America and around the world. It is both a charter member and active supporter of historic ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches and a driving force behind bold and needed new ecumenical initiatives like the Global Christian Forum and Christian Churches Together. In this work, the RCA is variously represented by staff and by ministers, elders, and members—elected or appointed, paid or volunteer—who have committed both their gifts and their time to promote a greater witness to the unity Christians have in Christ as they share in the witness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ with believers from around the corner or around the world. Throughout the year, and especially following participation in ecumenical events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

This ecumenical work the commission does on behalf of the RCA is anchored in and shaped by the direction of the whole of the RCA. In this complex and changing time for the church, in which so many, locally and globally, are trying to figure out how best to witness to the gospel of Christ, and in which we in the RCA are seeking to invest our whole selves into the work of Transformed & Transforming, we believe deeply in our clearly stated commitment of “working with all the partners that God provides,” as the RCA has spoken to the world in its framing of Transformed & Transforming. The commission is committed to advancing the work and ministry of the RCA through this commitment of partnership; moreover, the commission believes the witness and influence of the RCA can similarly be transforming the world at this point in history.
This commission assumes the task of synthesizing this material into its own comprehensive report, which it presents each year to General Synod. The first portion of the report of the commission provides an overview and summary of the RCA’s formal ecumenical work worldwide through conciliar groups and its impact on the ministry and witness not only of these groups, but also on the work and witness of the RCA. In the second part of this report, the commission presents reasons for celebration, lament, and profession at this moment in the church’s history, as the church continues to struggle with its response to Jesus’s prayer “that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

**World Council of Churches**

The largest and oldest organized expression of the modern worldwide ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC) “is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ” ([https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us](https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us)).

The WCC gathers its community from 345 churches in 110 countries representing over 500 million Christians worldwide. Member churches (or denominations) consist primarily of those from the historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox Church, including most of the world’s Orthodox churches; scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed churches; as well as many United and Independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC’s founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Major parts of world Christianity, including churches from Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, however, have little or no relationship to the WCC. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC but participates in various theological dialogues and cooperates in some other ways.

The WCC’s highest legislative body, its assembly, meets approximately every seven years; it gathered most recently in Busan, South Korea, in October 2013, under the theme “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace.” The Central Committee is the continuing body that implements WCC policies enacted at the assemblies, reviews and approves programs, establishes the budget, secures financial support, and generally oversees the work of the WCC between assemblies. Eddy Alemán serves on the Central Committee, continuing the unbroken line of RCA general secretaries serving the WCC in this capacity.

The work of the WCC is not simply programmatic or related to formal initiatives. At times, it is to provide a Christian witness in ways that perhaps no other group in the world can do. “Together toward Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” is one example. This comprehensive study seeks both to affirm and challenge the church’s biblical and Trinitarian commitment to mission and evangelism—even as it sets our efforts in the rapidly changing contemporary context—the relevance of marginalized peoples to mission, and the larger purposes of mission and evangelism in God’s own mission of love to the world. It is available directly from the WCC and could be an excellent study resource for congregations.

Olav Fykse Tveit, an ordained pastor in the Church of Norway, is general secretary of the WCC. For more information on the work and mission of the WCC, go to [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org).
World Communion of Reformed Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Reformed Ecumenical Council merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. The RCA was a charter member of the former WARC and enthusiastically worked to support the coming together of these two ecumenical bodies into one. This renewed fellowship of Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, Waldensian, United, and Uniting churches is a network of 230 Protestant churches in 108 countries with a combined estimated membership of 100 million people.

The 26th General Council of the WCRC took place in June 2017 in Leipzig, Germany, with the theme “Living God, Renew and Transform Us.” The council dealt with issues of justice, church unity, and world renewal. More than 1,000 delegates, observers, staff, and invited guests gathered in Leipzig, making it the largest international ecclesial event in Germany during the Reformation Jubilee (commemorating 500 years since Martin Luther ignited the Reformation). The RCA delegation to the council consisted of Lisa Vander Wal, Monica Schaap Pierce, and two young adult leaders: Carlos Corro and Stacey Duensing. During the General Council, the WCRC associated with the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” a document forged between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation 20 years ago this year, which has since also been affirmed by the World Methodist Council. Additionally, the council celebrated the signing of the “Wittenberg Witness,” a document crafted between the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation that expresses a commitment to Christian unity as Reformed and Lutheran Christians live and work together to further a common Christian witness to a broken and troubled world.

The WCRC is “called to communion and committed to justice.” Through robust engagement with the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit, the WCRC is always being transformed as it strives for the full and just participation of all. In its diversity, the WCRC seeks to be a living expression of “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As a global koīnōnia, the communion is marked by discerning, confessing, witnessing, and being reformed together. With all the partners God provides, the WCRC works for the transformation of the whole world, so that all humanity and the whole of creation might live life in its fullness (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10).

The WCRC may be best known worldwide for the Accra Confession, a groundbreaking statement issued at the General Council held in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, declaring that Christians are called by biblical teachings to be advocates of social, economic, and ecological justice. The text of the Accra Confession can be found at www.wcrc.ch/accra.

The RCA’s Lisa Vander Wal was chair of the General Council Planning Committee. During the General Council, she was elected to serve as vice president of the WCRC. The commission wishes to publicly commend her for the important leadership she is providing to the worldwide church through her multifaceted work with the WCRC.

For more information on the WCRC and its work, go to www.wcrc.ch.

Global Christian Forum

The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is a prominent example of a new form of worldwide ecumenical dialogue and influence, drawing for the first time world leaders from Evangelical, historic Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, and African-Instituted churches into a new place of relational, rather than structural, fellowship. Begun quietly
In the 1990s, with RCA involvement from the very beginning, it is responding to the rapid shift in global Christianity marked by new vitality and growth in the churches in the global south, often in Pentecostal and Evangelical expressions that have no links to broader ecumenical bodies. From the start, the WCC, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and others have been supportive of the GCF’s work.

In 2018, Casely Essamuah was installed as the newest secretary of the GCF. An ordained minister in the Methodist Church, Ghana, he describes himself as “evangelical and ecumenical.” Coming originally from Africa and now ministering in North America, he views himself as a “bridge-builder” between the churches in the global north and global south.

In February 2019, the GCF’s international committee, its governing board, met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Its chief purpose was to plan activities for the next three to five years, based on the ideas that emerged from the GCF’s Third Global Gathering (held in Bogota, Colombia, in April 2018, and attended by Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Lee DeYoung, and young adult delegate Stacey Duensing). The committee initiated plans for regional meetings and made it a priority to engage younger leaders and voices in these gatherings.

Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the RCA, serves on the GCF Committee and its Facilitation Group (the executive committee).

For more information on the Global Christian Forum, visit www.globalchristianforum.org.

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Since its founding in 1950, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) has been a visible presence for ecumenical cooperation among Christians in the United States. The 38 NCC member communions—from a wide spectrum of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African American, and Living Peace churches—include more than 40 million people in more than 100,000 local congregations in communities across the nation. The RCA was a charter member of the NCC.

By necessity, the work of the NCC has evolved in dramatic ways over the last decade, in response to a precipitous decline in revenue. NCC general secretary and president James E. Winkler presides over a very differently structured organization than the one that existed a generation ago. Still, the NCC continues to offer an important witness to the power of a shared voice among Christians. The newest multi-year initiative of the NCC focuses on ending racism. The NCC continues to respond to other urgent issues that Christians face, most recently mass incarceration and interreligious relations with a focus on peace. The RCA has placed members on the NCC’s Convening Tables on Interreligious Relations and Christian Education, Faith Formation, and Leadership. The Commission thanks Norma Coleman-James and Monica Schaap Pierce for their ongoing service on these Convening Tables. This past year, Western Theological Seminary students Trey Tirpak and Laurel Pals also participated in the NCC’s Christian Unity Gathering through the seminarian program.

The website of the NCC is www.nationalcouncilofchurches.us.

Christian Churches Together

Formed in 2007, Christian Churches Together (CCT) is the broadest Christian fellowship in the United States. It represents members from the Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant,
historic Black, Evangelical, and Pentecostal families of Christian churches. In addition, its membership includes national organizations, such as Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. It is this mix of churches and religious organizations that makes CCT unique among North American ecumenical organizations. CCT calls itself and its member churches “to celebrate a common confession of faith in the Triune God; to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer and theological dialogue; to provide fellowship and mutual support; to seek better understanding of each other by affirming our commonalities and understanding our differences; to foster evangelism faithful to the proclamation of the gospel; to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible; and to promote the common good of society” (www.christianchurchestogether.org/about-us).

In 2018, Christian Churches Together held its convocation in Wichita, Kansas, at the Catholic Spiritual Life Center. With the theme “Let’s Talk about Life,” speakers and participants engaged in dialogue on the sacredness of life. Topics of discussion included abortion, poverty, healthcare, racism, sexism, and the ideological divides of our time. The RCA delegation consisted of Monica Schaap Pierce, who also serves on the Steering Committee of CCT, and three young adults: RCA ministers Carlos Corro and Stacey Duensing, and Western Theological Seminary student Anne Elzinga.

Among the many benefits of participating in CCT, RCA delegates laud the annual convocations as opportunities to build personal relationships with people across the church in the U.S., to come to a more nuanced understanding of the differences and commonalities between communions, to grow together in Christ, to deepen spiritual wisdom, to identify new possibilities for a shared witness, and to act as a unified voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of spirituality, life, justice, and peace.

Carlos Malave is the executive director of CCT, which has its offices in Indianapolis, Indiana. CCT’s website (www.christianchurchestogether.org) provides additional information about its mission and activity. There you will also find common statements on poverty, immigration reform, racism, and evangelism.

**RCA—Formula of Agreement Relationships**

In 1997, the Reformed Church in America, in conjunction with its Reformed ecumenical partners the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Church of Christ, approved a historic agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America known as the Formula of Agreement. This landmark agreement brought the four churches—already partners in a number of ministries, both in North America and around the world—into full communion with each other.

Since that agreement, the working relationships between the churches have remained close and vibrant, if not always very public. For example, Daniel Meeter serves as a member of the church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Paul Janssen serves on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s ecumenical committee, and representatives from the Formula of Agreement churches serve as corresponding delegates to this body each year. While the commission regularly looks for means of cooperation between the partner denominations, it also acknowledges that, in fact, much ecumenical work between these denominations happens at the local level, where Reformed and Lutheran congregations join in ministries of worship, education, and service. Behind the scenes, denominational staff from the respective churches, including general secretary Eddy Alemán, meet both to support each other in their respective work and to plan for possible joint historic streams of Protestant Christianity at a time when their common witness makes the gospel of Jesus
Christ more available to more people in more places.

To help churches grow in mutual understanding and, in particular, to implement the Formula’s provisions for the exchange of ministers at the local level, denominational staff of each of the Formula churches have produced a newly revised guide in “The Orderly Exchange of Ministers of Word and Sacrament” document: www.rca.org/rca-basics/ecumenical-partners/formula-agreement. We commend this resource to those classes, ministers, and consistory leaders that are considering an exchange of ministers with other Formula churches. The commission would like to thank RCA staff Andy Bossardet and Molly Towne for their work on this updated guide.

Roman Catholic–Reformed Dialogue

For more than 50 years, the Reformed Church in America has participated in an ongoing theological dialogue with other Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives. Recently, the Reformed–Roman Catholic consultation concluded its eighth round of dialogue. Included in the dialogue were representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the RCA. The RCA was represented by Allan Janssen, Wes Granberg-Michaelson, and Monica Schaap Pierce. The dialogue focused on ecclesiology, and in particular, on the roles of the Trinity, covenant, Word and sacrament, mission, and unity and diversity in the life of the church. The dialogue also examined ecclesial ministry and oversight and uncovered a unifying affirmation that ecclesial ministry and oversight are undertaken personally and collegially in service to the church, not just for the church’s own sake, but for the sake of the world God so loves.

The commission commends the report of the eighth round, titled *The One Body of Christ: Ministry in Service to the Church and the World*, to churches for study. The text can be found on the ecumenical page on the RCA website: www.rca.org/partners. The ninth round of dialogue will commence upon approval by partner denominations and will focus on the relationship between justification and justice. The prospectus for the ninth round can also be found at www.rca.org/partners.

Christian Unity at Home and Abroad

The commission continues to focus time at each meeting exploring the explosive growth of Christianity in the global south—the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia—where the Christian church is growing at a remarkable pace. As a commission, we believe that the witness of Christianity in the global south has much to teach us in North America and in the RCA, and we are committed to discussing this reality and its possible impact on and lessons for the RCA. Just as the RCA was at the forefront of the ecumenical movements of the twentieth century, the RCA also needs to be deeply involved in these new realities in the twenty-first century.

The commission remains committed to the biblical mandate of unity in Christ and in joining with the work of the Holy Spirit as the gospel continues to cross boundaries of geography, society, and culture. What is also clear, however, is that ecumenism in this new reality is not the work of the commission alone or simply the work of a denomination. These changing patterns of global Christianity have produced the unexpected opportunities of “glo-cal” (global + local) ecumenical work. Many of the communities in which the RCA has congregations are now home to new immigrant Christian gatherings, the result of a global movement that brings millions of immigrants to the United States and Canada each year—75 percent of whom are Christian. Many of the groups have ties to churches
in their country of origin, but not here. The ecumenical challenge, then, rests not only in formal groups or structures, but also locally, even reaching into each congregation with this challenge: to engage ecumenically in our own communities by exhibiting both the meaning and importance of practicing radical Christian hospitality. In practicing such hospitality, local churches often find themselves recipients of remarkable grace and compassion. The commission will continue to hold this need before the church.

Additionally, many ministers of Word and sacrament, along with their congregations, participate in local ecumenical expressions such as ministerial associations and councils of churches. Many such associations are longstanding and offer member pastors support on many levels and engage them together in mercy and justice projects. Historically, the Commission on Christian Unity has not engaged these local expressions. In the future, the commission might connect with these associations and councils to promote and enhance learning, to identify opportunities for wider impact, and to explore together how the denominational mandate for the commission can serve local Christian unity efforts, perhaps especially given the enormous “glo-cal” trends, needs, and climate.

Reflecting on its mandate for Christian unity, the commission is concerned about fissures of disunity within and among local churches and in the RCA as a whole. Diversity of thought is realistic and healthy. Diversity is realistic because the church is comprised of a multiplicity of people with sundry gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Diversity is healthy because through these diverse gifts, creativity emerges, and with it, fresh approaches to upholding sacred traditions as well as addressing new issues in changing times. Diversity is not inimical to unity. Rather, the unity that has already been established in Christ comes to its fullest expression through the various gifts of the faithful, which are unified in their service to the gospel.

The RCA has a long history of collaborating with other Christians of diverse cultures, histories, gifts, and beliefs. Whether in hospitals founded by missionaries, in a local vacation Bible school hosted with neighboring churches, or in dialogue with other communions, we partner with other believers in order to advance Christ’s mission on earth. Our common, unifying work is a response to Jesus’s prayer that we “may all be one” (John 17:21). In the Bible, Christian unity is described as a gift and a call. It is a gift that has already been realized by Jesus Christ, who has broken down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). It is a call to bear one another’s burdens so as to make visible to all a unity that God already sees (Galatians 6:2).

Yet, within our denomination, we have turned away from the gift of oneness. Stymied by fear and pride, we have fallen short of our call to manifest the unity that we have in Christ. Rather than modeling wholeness within the RCA, we have allowed walls to be built up and have allowed hostilities to fester. The ecumenical pursuit of Christian unity is deficient without internal concord. It is inconsistent for us to reach out in ecumenical relationships while failing to reach across our own denomination to extend hospitality and strive for compromise.

The urgent work of reconciliation and cooperation within our denomination requires renewed strength and courage, which we can only find in God. It necessitates trust in, and openness to, the Spirit. It demands an unqualified, intentional, and prayerful commitment to heal the brokenness of the body of Christ. As a commission, we prayerfully urge our denomination to seek a deeper and more authentic expression of oneness that we have in Christ. For Christian unity—while universal in God’s promise—must begin at home.
Emerging Leaders’ Call to Unity

While some might argue that ecumenism is passé—that the work of this commission is no longer relevant or needed—we have discovered just how important our work is for all generations in the church, and especially so for the emerging leaders of today and tomorrow.

Through the intentional work of ecumenical associate Monica Schaap Pierce, the RCA has sent several of these emerging leaders to various ecumenical gatherings, including the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, and the Global Christian Forum. After each gathering, these emerging leaders submit written reports to the commission. They regularly express deep appreciation for the RCA’s strong commitment to the unity of the church. For these young leaders, there is deep resonance between their understanding of the gospel and their commitment to the work of Christian unity.

Western Theological Seminary students Anne Elzinga and Trey Tirpak have both participated in ecumenical gatherings as representatives of the RCA.

Anne Elzinga attended the Christian Churches Together convocation in Wichita, Kansas, in October 2018. For Anne, the work of Christian unity is vitally important: “We are meant to be in unity with one another because we are one body of Christ.” Anne sees denominational differences not as obstacles to overcome, but as “beautiful” and “unique” perspectives that help us grow in understanding of our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. She also believes that denominational partnerships are vital as we engage in Christian mission.

Trey Tirpak attended the National Council of Churches gathering in Baltimore, Maryland, in October 2018. Trey believes that the work of Christian unity is “the way forward in mission, both in evangelization and in the cultivation of shalom.” He adds that “ecumenical work is a significant life-giving and strategic practice that historical denominations that are in decline can do” to infuse life into their own ministry and strengthen their service and mission to the world.

Anne and Trey give voice to what many of our emerging leaders of today and tomorrow believe: Christian unity is vital to our Christian witness.

In light of what the commission has been learning from our emerging leaders, we have produced “The Christian Unity Project,” a video that conveys the perspectives of young people on issues of unity and disunity in the church. To share what we have learned, the commission makes the following recommendation:

CU 19-1
To commend the video “The Christian Unity Project” to regional synods, classes, and consistories, encouraging them to use this video as a stimulant for discussion as they seek to follow Christ’s call to unity and to listen to the perspectives of our emerging leaders of today and tomorrow about the importance of Christian unity. (ADOPTED)
Acknowledgments

The commission wishes to offer deep gratitude to Lisa Vander Wal, who is completing her second term. Lisa served as moderator for two years and has been and will continue to be a deeply involved and engaged leader with the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Finally, the commission expresses its profound appreciation for the excellent work of our ecumenical associate, Monica Schaap Pierce.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael Hardeman, moderator