GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

When the General Synod of 1989 elected me president, it was both a privilege and a duty to visit many areas of the church and to meet leaders and members of local congregations of the Reformed Church in America and Canada. Right after the General Synod meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, my wife and I travelled to Ontario. We told our Canadian Reformed people that we definitely count them as important members of this denomination. We heard about their struggle to get other Canadians to overcome the view that the Reformed congregations in Canada are immigrant Dutch churches and therefore not for them. Some Reformed Churches in Canada are attracting non-Dutch Canadians, and most of the Reformed congregations are communicating their openness to all peoples in Canada who accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Later on, at the end of January, we met with Canadians in British Columbia, where there is great enthusiasm over new churches being planted and transferred to the Classis of Cascades. They are hopeful that soon their numbers will enable them to form a classis of their own in western Canada.

The anticipation of new ministries through the Putting People in Mission (PPIM) drive was a recurring note we heard throughout the RCA. We noted a balance of urban and non-urban projects, and it was especially pleasing to know that the love of our Lord for the poor and the distressed was now better expressed through the diaconal ministries of PPIM.

Previously, the General Synod Executive Committee made the recommendation that General Synod presidents make a special effort to visit a few new church starts. In December and early January, my wife and I travelled throughout the south and west. We were impressed by the dedication and hard work of the men and women who are making the Reformed Church in America known in areas where our denomination is an unfamiliar name, where folks know little or nothing of the RCA's long—more than 350 years—history on this continent. I applaud the "98 by '98" proposal to coordinate the planning of the particular synods and classes in the great effort to begin new churches. You will have the opportunity to consider this proposal later during this 1990 General Synod.

General Synod presidents usually travel abroad. Our overseas venture had a distinctly ecumenical flavor. I had been aware of a church body in Italy which has ties to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. When I inquired further, I discovered several more things about that church body—the Waldensian Church. For one thing, I found out that it has an office on the eighteenth floor of 475 Riverside Drive, the same floor where our own denominational offices are. I also learned that 1989 was the 300th anniversary of the Waldensians' return to Italy after having been driven out by persecution. Therefore, last August, my wife and I spent a week at the Waldensian Synod in Torre Pellice, Italy, and joined in the celebration of the Glorious Return.

Two other ecumenical links were possible through visits to Geneva and Rome. I spoke about the RCA to the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Emilio Castro, and toured the council's headquarters through the kindness of Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, an ordained RCA minister. In Rome, my wife and I attended an audience with Pope John Paul II in a huge chamber designed to hold 10,000 visitors. Since we had been seated in the front row, my
wife and I were able to exchange handshakes and a few words with the Pope, letting him know that we represented the Reformed Church in America.

Our experiences in Germany included an overnight stay in two unusual institutions run respectively by the German Evangelical Church and the Free Evangelical Church. One was a home for the elderly which included nursing care, and the other institution combined a camp program with an alcohol rehabilitation effort.

As for "mission" sites visited this past year, we had a chance to tour the work in Annville, Kentucky, in Brewton, Alabama, and in Mescalero, New Mexico. At the native American church in Mescalero, we spent a worthwhile hour with twenty-six junior highs who spoke with us about their perceptions of and hopes for their community.

INCLUSIVITY

"YOU ARE INCLUDED!"

Our Lord Jesus Christ invites all who feel excluded or alienated to come to him. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). During my travels this past year throughout the Reformed Churches of Canada and the United States, the General Synod's selection of me as president has exemplified the inclusivity of our church. There are some who wonder if the church welcomes all people. To those who may have doubts, I continue to communicate the message that all people are welcome in our church; anyone can be a full participant in and a contributor to the ongoing life and ministry of the Reformed Church in America, and my message is: "You are included!" In the two previous General Synods, I have experienced this inclusivity. The message I received was something like this: "You have not been shunted to a sidetrack. You are an important part of the main line. You are really included!" This isn't original with me or with the Synod delegates of the past two years. The message, "You are included," is rooted in Christ's invitation to all of us.

INCLUSION OF MULTI-RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN RCA CONGREGATIONS

It was not necessary for someone named Sylvio Scorza to convince people throughout our church that we are not a church limited to a single or double ethnic variety. As I met with councils and visited churches which included members of various races and ethnic identities, I learned they are not "strangers among us," but that they are the Reformed Church in America no more or less than any other group in our denomination. We need to proclaim this message, for not all have heard it. Although we are beginning to share across erased racial and ethnic lines in classes, particular synods, and General Synod, our final goal should be to eliminate the monochromatic nature of "white" churches, "black" churches, "Hispanic" churches, "Asian" churches, "native American" churches and any other ethnic or racial variety which we may observe among us, while retaining for a time the minority voices of the councils. I therefore propose:

P-1. To urge the councils to explore avenues which will encourage development of congregations in the RCA which are composed of people of multi-racial and ethnic identities, proclaiming our oneness in Jesus Christ.**

INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY FOR PHYSICALLY DISABLED
I did not try to enter every church facility my wife and I visited during our tour of RCA churches in Canada and the United States, but I rejoice in the progress most congregations have made toward becoming accessible to people with physical limitations. A number of pastors were embarrassed that their plans and hopes of reaching openness had not yet been fulfilled. However, I am pleased that there is an awareness of the problem and that it is being discussed seriously. I encourage those congregations who have already achieved full accessibility in their facilities to examine their programs in music, education, and outreach to determine whether or not they are also accessible to everyone. With respect to physical disabilities I therefore propose:

**P-2. To instruct the Office of Promotion, Communication, and Development to prepare advertisements which congregations may use for declaring to their respective communities an open welcome to any with physical limitations.**

**INCLUSION FOR THE DEVELOPMENTALLY LIMITED**

Just as there are members in our churches with varying degrees of physical limitation, there are different levels of developmental ability. We must include the developmentally limited in the ministry of our congregations, both as people who receive ministry and as those who can minister to others. In the past, many such valuable people were relegated to county and state institutions and forgotten, but Jesus did not forget them. I therefore propose:

**P-3. To encourage classes to work with local councils of churches and to initiate their involvement in programs, such as the Friendship Bible Series, which include and empower developmentally limited people.**

**INCLUSION FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DISABLING CRISSES**

Others have been excluded because of experiential, emotional, or social difficulties. One West Coast pastor told me of his special ministry among Vietnam veterans and it made me think also of those who fled to Canada rather than to be drafted for that war. Many have faced other disabling crises in their lives, so that they feel the church has rejected them. Some have experienced bankruptcy, others have dropped out of school, and some are victims of poor decisions and choices. Our churches need to seek out the hurting people of our communities and welcome them to a Christ who forgives and heals. I therefore propose:

**P-4. To urge the Division of Christian Discipleship to prepare a guidebook for ministry to groups in our communities which have passed through identifiable crises.**

**INCLUSION OF DIACONAL REPRESENTATION**

It was a disappointment to me that the Book of Church Order changes adopted by the 1989 General Synod to effect broader roles of full participation in classes and synods for deacons, did not gain classis approval this past year. The church was ready to accept the principle of broader inclusion of deacons and the ministry of mercy to which they are called, but there was confusion in many classes over the complexity of details for implementation. Each of the past two General Synods gave an enthusiastic approval to the principle.

However, it now appears that we need clarification of some details for implementation by the classes. If we now allow different methods for electing consistories and flexibility in the
number of consistory members, the opportunity for representation of deacons at classes and synods needs to still be considered. I therefore propose:

**P-5. To approve the principle of diaconal representation for RCA classes, particular synods, and the General Synod, and further,**

*to instruct GSEC, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order, to create a workable plan for diaconal representation at each judicatory level of the RCA for presentation to the 1991 General Synod.*

**INCLUSION OF ALL RCA CONGREGATIONS**

I commend the Church Planning and Development Division of the General Program Council on the "98 by '98" plan. This plan seeks to place new church starts in areas of Canada and the United States where the Reformed Church has not previously existed. At the same time, I have heard the pleas of our urban pastors for help and encouragement to maintain and strengthen the important ministries in the cities. I therefore propose:

**P-6. To instruct the General Program Council to plan programs and distributions of funds for ministry on the North American continent that will show inclusivity for urban, suburban, and rural congregations.**

**INCLUSION OF VOLUNTEERS**

Volunteer service from students, retired persons, and others has multiplied the RCA's outreach on this continent and throughout the world. This volunteer ministry has been coordinated through college chaplains, the RCA seminaries, the RCA's director of volunteer services, and in various other ways. I therefore propose:

**P-7. To encourage colleges, seminaries, and others in the RCA who are involved in volunteer programs to keep the RCA Office of Volunteer Services informed about their activities.**

**INCLUSION OF CANADIAN CHURCHES**

Wilbur Washington, my immediate predecessor as General Synod president, expressed concern for Canadian churches being included in the denomination's name description of Reformed Church in America. In response, the General Synod Executive Committee (GSEC) at its January 1990 meeting voted to permit the Canadian church of the RCA to function in Canada as "Reformed Church in Canada." This permission was granted pending approval by legal counsel and representatives of the Emerging Synod of Canada. I enthusiastically support this decision adopted by GSEC and encourage all of us on both sides of the United States and Canadian borders to be cognizant of the fact that the Reformed Church in America is always inclusive of United States and Canadian churches. We proclaim our belonging together as part of the same denomination from both sides of our borders. I therefore propose:

**P-8 To support Canadian churches of the RCA in their using the title of "Reformed Church in Canada," and further,**

*to encourage the usage of "Reformed Church in Canada" in all denominational communications referring to Canadian churches of the RCA.*

**INCLUSION OF WOMEN**
A final significant issue on inclusivity relates to the lack of opportunities currently available for RCA women who have graduated with a Master of Divinity degree. For an even larger number of women who have been granted the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, these women too have experienced reluctance from churches to hire women in positions of ministry. In fact, some churches that have been supportive of ordained women in ministry are cautious about actually employing a woman to a position of ministry. I therefore propose:

**P-9. To instruct the Office of Human Resources to develop appropriate strategies which will improve the placement of women in ordained ministry in the RCA and present a report to the 1991 General Synod.**

CONCLUSION

Over all, we concluded our travels throughout the church with great hopes for the future of the Reformed Church in America. We, as a denomination will be able through the power of the Spirit to be a truly inclusive church, carrying the gospel of Christ’s love to many who need it.

I thank all the classes, particular synods, and congregations that welcomed me so warmly and were willing to express their delights and concerns about the work and leadership of the Reformed Church in America. I will leave the office of the presidency of the General Synod with the feeling that all of you are my friends in Christ.

—Sylvio J. Scorza

Upon recommendation of the Committee of Reference: P-1 and P-6 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Evangelization and Church Growth; P-2 and P-8 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Heritage and Communications; P-3 and P-4 were referred to the Advisory Committee on Christian Education and Discipleship; P-5 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Order; P-7 was referred to the Advisory Committee on World Mission; and P-9 was referred to the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations.

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Postscript: Following advice from the advisory committees receiving the president’s proposals, 8 of the 9 were adopted: P-1 was expanded, P-4 was slightly amended, and the others were adopted largely as proposed. Only P-5 was referred (to the Commission on Theology, to review the 1989 report and make recommendations to General Synod 1991).