

COMMISSION REPORTS

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The Belhar Confession proclaims:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; *that God calls the church to follow him in this*, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry [emphasis added].

The confession goes on to announce that God frees, restores, supports, protects, helps, blocks, and “wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right” and that the church “must stand where the Lord stands.” The Belhar asserts what disciples of Jesus have learned since the beginning: that in following Christ, we are called to action. In endeavoring to faithfully carry out the mandate given to it, the Commission on Christian Action hopes to “inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (BCO 3.I.5.2.b).

The Commission on Christian Action met October 16-18, 2008, and January 29-31, 2009, in Chicago, Illinois, working on substantive materials preparing for both General Synod 2009 and 2010.

Poverty

Following is the statement of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., an ecumenical organization of which the RCA is a part.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES TOGETHER STATEMENT ON POVERTY

As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The gospel and our ethical principles place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.

Our common faith compels us. Christ our Lord teaches us that when we serve and stand with “the least of these,” we serve and stand with Him. Our Bible teaches us in hundreds of places that the God we worship has a special concern for the poor. God judges individuals and societies by how they respond to the needs of the poor. As leaders in Christian Churches Together, we believe that a renewed commitment to overcome poverty is central to the mission of the church and essential to our unity in Christ. Therefore in order to obey our God, respect the dignity of every person, and promote the common good of society, we must act. Our focus here is domestic poverty, but we reaffirm our commitment to overcome poverty all around the world.

Widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, 18 percent of all our children struggle in poverty. The sad reality is that millions in our nation work hard and still cannot escape poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.

Our faith in Christ who is the truth compels us to confront the ignorance of and indifference to the scandal of widespread, persistent poverty in this rich nation. We must call this situation by its real names: moral failure, unacceptable injustice. Our faith in Christ drives us to call our churches and our society to a more urgent, united response.

We are grateful for the vast array of ways our churches are already helping millions of struggling people. We want to build on these efforts, learn from each other, and collaborate more closely. But we can, we must, do more.

We also recognize and encourage leaders in community, economic and public life who seek justice for poor people in our land. But we can, we must, do more. Our goal must be the elimination of poverty in this land.

As we as Christians renew and strengthen our efforts to overcome domestic poverty, we will seek to work with people of other faiths and all persons of good will in this urgent task.

Unfortunately, partisan and ideological divisions too often promote one-sided solutions and prevent genuine progress. We believe substantial success in reducing domestic poverty requires an overall framework that insists that overcoming poverty requires both more personal responsibility and broader societal responsibility, both better choices by individuals and better policies and investments by government, both renewing wholesome families and strengthening economic incentives. We believe that genuine success in reducing American poverty will require greater commitment and concrete action by all four of the following: churches, neighborhoods, communities, and faith-based and other organizations; government that implements better public policy at local, state, and federal levels; individuals and families; the market and private sector (employers, unions and other economic actors).

We are leaders of the Christian community, not an interest group. We have no partisan political agenda. We are conservatives and liberals, Independents, Republicans and Democrats. Together we believe that our faith demands and the people of this land yearn for concrete proposals that transcend divisive political divisions.

We give thanks to God for bringing together at one Christian table in Christian Churches Together for the first time in our history representatives of almost all the families in Christianity in the United States: Evangelicals/Pentecostals, Catholics, Racial/Ethnic, Orthodox and Historic Protestants. As a united voice of Christianity in this country, we pledge to strengthen our efforts to end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in history.

Four Objectives

CCT will promote its commitment to overcoming domestic poverty by inviting all Christians and all people, especially our leaders in public life, to embrace and implement the following objectives:

1. to strengthen families and communities; because they are essential bulwarks against poverty;
2. to reduce child poverty; we seek to cut child poverty by 50 percent in the next ten years;
3. to make work work; by combating racism and guaranteeing that full time work offers a realistic escape from poverty and access to good health care;
4. to strengthen the educational system in our country with particular attention to the public schools; because access to quality education offers perhaps the best way out of poverty.

In January 2009, Christian Churches Together (CCT) came together to further reflect implementing the four above objectives. They reaffirmed “that our service to the poor and our work for justice are ‘at the center of Christian life and witness.’ And we agreed to renew our prayers to understand and live in faithfulness to our Lord’s teaching that when we serve ‘the least of these,’ we truly minister to our Lord Himself” (from a report titled “Implementing the Call to Cut Poverty in Half,” from the January 2009 annual meeting of CCT). CCT then went on to lay out further principles and ideas:

Principles

To reduce poverty, we call on churches, government, businesses, communities and families to:

A. Strengthen Families

1. Recognize that financial stress exacerbates family instability and abuse, and family brokenness places families at risk of poverty.
2. Ensure that all families have access to resources for strengthening families and safeguarding child safety.
3. Ensure that all families have access to the basic needs of food, health care, and housing.
4. Correct racial disparities and structural injustices that undermine families, especially in low-income communities.
5. Affirm the central importance of healthy families to strong communities, and reinforce parents’ responsibility for their children.

- B. Strengthen Communities
 - 1. Identify, support, nurture and retain local community leadership.
 - 2. Promote together in our congregations the need to address both the results and the causes of poverty in our communities, offering resources and models.
 - 3. Support the efforts of community organizing which empowers local communities in their efforts to overcome poverty.
- C. Make Work Work
 - 1. Affirm that a full-time job should keep people out of poverty, not keep people in it. People who are able and willing to work full-time should not be poor. People unable to work should be supported and treated with dignity.
 - 2. Affirm that a living family income should include a combination of family earnings and supports for transportation, health care, nutrition, child care, education, housing, and other basic needs to provide a decent standard of living.
- D. Improve Education
 - 1. Family, community, and schools must share responsibility for strengthening education.
 - 2. All children have the right to a physically and emotionally safe school environment.
 - 3. School funding must result in equitable education for all.
 - 4. Because everyone is created in the image of God, the inequities and segregation in public education which result from economic and racial injustice must be corrected.
 - 5. It is important to assure access to early childhood education for all children in poverty.

Concrete Ideas for Church and Society

While Christian Churches Together does not endorse or promote specific public policies, the commission encourages church and societal leaders to consider these specific ideas to reduce poverty:

- A. Strengthen Families
 - 1. Strengthened national child-nutrition programs, with funding to meet the growing need.
 - 2. Universal access to health care, especially for children in poverty.
 - 3. Assistance to families at risk of losing housing due to the mortgage crisis, including protections for tenants.
 - 4. Comprehensive immigration reform that protects the dignity and unity of immigrant families.
 - 5. Subsidies that provide access to resources for strengthening families, such as pre-marital and marital counseling, parenting skills, mental health care, conflict resolution, financial management skills, and other services to prevent family crises and restore healthy family relationships.
- B. Strengthen Communities
 - 1. Investment in low-income communities and families should be a part of the economic recovery package (more resources for job creation, food stamps, a fully refundable child tax credit, and education for everyone from pre-kindergarten to adults).
 - 2. People who are poor should be a part of the decision-making process of the recovery proposals.
- C. Make Work Work

In order to protect and uplift vulnerable families, there must be the right mix of the following: an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; a just minimum wage; expanded coverage of food stamps, increased unemployment insurance; and other proven investments that reward work.
- D. Improve Education
 - 1. Mentoring programs to students in pre-school through grade 12 should be provided using the trained voluntary efforts of college students, church members and others.
 - 2. Research should be undertaken to identify safe school models that can be observed as part of a comprehensive program to assure safety for students and staff in all publicly funded schools.

3. Present state/local formulas that depend too much on local property taxes for school funding must be corrected.
4. Funding and/or provision for early childhood education should be a joint effort among government agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and private contributors.

R-22

To direct the General Synod Council to make the Christian Churches Together poverty objectives a priority; and further;

to widely share the Christian Churches Together Statement on Poverty and subsequent principles and ideas with congregations and encourage congregations to take active steps in confronting poverty in the community.

Extension of Dialogue on Homosexuality

The decision of the Reformed Church at the 2005 General Synod to enter into a period of dialogue on the issue of homosexuality is now ending. The value of that time and the concentrated efforts that the denomination has invested have begun to bear fruit in open conversations among individuals, congregations, and assemblies around the topic. Aspects of the dialogue process have led to an open exchange of viewpoints and honest conversation. Furthermore, the dialogue process has revealed both the seriousness and integrity of conviction with which Christians of various perspectives approach these issues, areas of continued struggle and perplexity, and a wish for loving and faithful witness of the gospel on the part of all involved. In light of the denomination's experience thus far, the Commission on Christian Action perceives that the valuable fruit of dialogue has yet to become fully manifest, and that the process itself is beneficial to the health of the denomination.

R-23

To affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps that wound the body of Christ and seek to coerce conformity are not helpful at this time; and further;

to affirm and extend the decisions of the 2005 and 2006 General Synods to reject disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue; and further;

to recommend that officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved.

Report of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

The Discipleship Team of the RCA has defined discipleship as “the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming more like him in all we think, say, and do, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

The Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship describes discipleship as “deep” and “rich.”

- Discipleship is deep when it is transformational at personal, communal, and institutional levels.
- It is deep when it is incarnational, that is, when the gospel is not simply known intellectually but embodied and lived out in daily life.
- Discipleship is rich when it is both educational and missional, when the movement is both inward and outward.
- It is rich because it is relational, involving all generations teaching each other and learning from each other.

A vision of a Reformed Church where discipleship is deep and rich:

- Is a church that involves everyone—adults, youth, children.
- No one is left out; all people belong because all have a place to serve in ways that best suit their gifts and abilities and limitations.
- Deep and rich discipleship happens in a place that doesn’t avoid difficult issues, but confronts them and teaches a way of freedom and grace.
- Is engaged in meaningful prayer at all times.
- Deep and rich discipleship happens when the adults model lifelong learning to the children and youth. Adults remain engaged in teaching and learning opportunities, deepening their faith in God.
- Its people are actively involved in the ministry of Jesus—bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free.

187

The following questions were presented last year at General Synod for round table discussion:

1. Share a story of a time when discipleship was deep and rich for you. Where were you? Who was with you? What was happening? What did you learn or experience?
2. Describe education and discipleship in your congregation. Is it deep and rich? Transformational? Incarnational? Missional?
3. What resources are necessary for deep and rich discipleship to be experienced throughout the RCA?

Some of the responses at that synod were:

As a small boy [I lived] in a home next to a church. A man named Mr. Atway saw me and acknowledged me, a young boy. I went to church and found people who cared for me. They talked to me and invited me in. With this small action, these people had a huge impact on my life. Some small action and words, but a great impact for my future.

I had a Sunday school teacher who took time to face and answer questions honestly and challenge us in our personal lives.

In college the guy next door was two years older than I and not a mature Christian. I decided to mentor him through a once a week Bible study. He became a leader, leading other Bible studies.

Leaders are equipped to recognize their call and develop a personal calling statement, leading to greater effectiveness.

Our congregation has a multi-age-led worship experience, engaging children and adults.

Transformational—working with special needs people who give us the grace of Christ more than we can ever give.

We need time and a plan for what to measure, measuring spiritual growth—how can we do that?

Following the round table discussion, the synod passed a recommendation for the General Synod Council to work in collaboration with the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship to design a denomination-wide Season of Discipleship (*MGS 2008*, R-55, p 232). The responses above and others were given to the group that was subsequently formed to inform their work.

Seasons of Discipleship Update

The group that has undertaken the commission's Season of Discipleship study has been meeting to begin to determine its shape and design. Keeping at the forefront Christ's directive to his own disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), the commission continues to hold up the value of a deep and rich relationship with Jesus Christ in all encounters in life as the task force charts this course of fostering an ongoing, meaningful, and significant commitment in the lives of congregations, consistories, small groups, and individuals throughout the Reformed Church in America.

The task force's highest goal for this new venture is that it be definitive of discipleship in every sense of what being a disciple of Jesus means. Discipleship permeates every aspect of the life of a follower of Christ and every stage of his or her life. It is a continual awareness of God's presence and a constant striving to emulate that Presence, no matter at what chronological or spiritual stage of life one may be. Hence the word "season" has been changed to "seasons," suggesting an ongoing, fluctuating cycle of growth, prosperity, struggle, and rejuvenation.

The next objective that stands at the forefront of our discussion is that the experience be uniquely prescriptive. The realm of discipleship, while it has its basic essentials, becomes unique as it begins to take root and flourish in different places and situations. The intent is for congregations all over the denomination, large or small, healthy or struggling, young or aging, to be able, after exploring the definition of discipleship, to determine for themselves what is the best way for their people to engage in discipleship in their own cultural contexts.

The study must be innovative in its format. In order to link the most congregations with the largest number of resources, and to provide the most impact for our efforts, we are exploring new ways to communicate and collaborate with others who are on the same journey throughout the denomination. Conversations can take place, with the interaction of ideas and stories, sharing successes and challenges. These innovative delivery systems can be the catalyst for the positive changes that encourage and enhance discipleship practices that are deep and rich.

An experiential emphasis is intended to encourage people to become more communal in their journey. Discipling itself is an engagement with all of God's people, both in mentoring and in upholding those who are on the journey with each other.

"Seasons of Discipleship" is a vision that expects inclusivity, potentially involving every worshiping body in the denomination, in every season of their chronological and spiritual journeys. At the same time, that vision also expects an expansive outcome, where all people who consider themselves disciples of Christ are traveling on a road that not only nurtures their own individual hearts but invites, plants, waters, and feeds the needs of each and every other person traveling alongside them on that road.

The next step for the group will be to identify ideas that help focus its work, that have the most merit, and that will generate the most energy. This will be done through the summer so that a focused and detailed report can be given to the Commission on Christian Education at its fall 2009 meeting. Following the commission's modifications and approval, and with a clear and specific plan for funding from the commission, the "Seasons" vision can be launched.

Members of the Seasons of Discipleship group are Lois Fiegl, Nancy McNiven, Jane Schuyler, Arlene Sorce, James Steward, Deb Swanson, Mark Veldt, and Kirsty DePree (staff person).

Leaders of Christian Education and Discipleship

The commission recognizes rich and deep discipleship happens best in congregations where leaders are well equipped to lead in this area of ministry. The commission continues to have conversation on practical ways of training professionals in Christian education and discipleship, including youth ministry. Western Theological Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Northwestern, Hope, and Central Colleges may be invited into such a conversation.

The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship

The commission continues its support for the Belhar Confession and is committed to its core values of unity, reconciliation, and justice. The commission will continue to seek ways to help congregations use, understand, and live with this document.

“Observe All Things”: The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship

One way to tell which passages of scripture are beloved and influential in the church is by whether or not they have a name. Perhaps the two most identifiable in this way are the “Great Commandment” and the “Great Commission.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the first, and you will likely get fairly uniform versions of “love God, love your neighbor.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the second and chances are that you will hear a little more variety of emphasis: “Go,” “make disciples,” “make disciples of all nations,” and perhaps even “baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

While “baptizing” is the first clause, the second clause explaining how we are to make disciples is frequently and curiously overlooked: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” “Observe all things” is the way that the King James version renders it. Teach them. To obey. Everything. It is hard to find more sobering words in the Gospels. When G. K. Chesterton observed that the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, but rather found difficult and untried, he could have had this clause of the Great Commission in mind.

Because this task is difficult, we struggle with it. That is why we need help. From the perspective of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, the Belhar Confession offers help by way of its encouragement to live a Christ-like life characterized by unity, reconciliation, and justice. Given the fact that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the scriptures of the Old Testament, surely true discipleship is interested in obeying all the commands and teachings of scripture. Looking at these three central tenets of the Belhar confession—unity, reconciliation, justice—we find an articulation of what can be considered the heart and soul of what discipleship looks like. In fact, we are reminded of the Staples office supply store slogan, “Yeah, we’ve got that.” Unity? Yeah, we’re called to that. Jesus prays in John 17 that his followers would be one even as he and the father are one. Reconciliation? Yes, we are called to that too. “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Justice? Yes, we are also called to that. God has shown human beings what is good and required: that we “do justice” (Micah 6:8).

In this way, the Belhar not only encourages us to continue to think well, but also to live well. It tells how to live in the world, how to live like disciples in unity, reconciled and reconciling, and seeking the justice that characterizes the reign of Christ.

As we reflect on our call to follow Christ in word and deed, we are reminded of how radical true discipleship really is. We may well wonder, can we do it? Or better, can we even come close to true discipleship? In our finite, fallible, sinful world our work will only begin to embody these kingdom principles in shadowy, emerging ways. But not engaging in these high callings is not an option, and what’s more, at our weakest, we must rely on God’s strength. If we despair at what seems to be a hard, if not impossible, task, we have the comfort of the final words of the Great Commission, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Those words of comfort can sustain us in the midst of the hard work of a discipleship which seeks unity in the midst of division, a discipleship which works for reconciliation where there is alienation, and a discipleship that rolls up its sleeves, in the words of Amos, to “let justice roll down like waters.” In this way, then, the Belhar can serve as an effective shorthand for the church’s passion for Christian education and discipleship.

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). In response to Christ's prayer that we may all be one (John 17:21) 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. The commission advises General Synod on ecumenical matters and communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies. The commission educates 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 refers ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The 2000 General Synod voted to instruct the commission to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13 amended, p. 100). The commission has made the Belhar Confession and the church-wide study its highest priority for the last seven years. An overview of how the General Synod has studied the Belhar Confession is available in the 2007 report of the commission (*MGS 2007*, pp. 271-274). The following constitutes a further elaboration of what can be found there.

Introduction

(This section of this report is from an introduction to the Belhar Confession written by representatives of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America to introduce the Belhar to delegates at their respective synods.)

From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world: Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do. These statements of faith, including the ecumenical creeds and the historic Reformed confessions, though centuries old and far removed from their place of origin, today still guide our understanding of Scripture and of faith, and of the life they call us to live.

In the late twentieth century the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, like those Christian leaders centuries before them, stepped forward to confront yet another critical issue that threatened the very core of the gospel message. In this case, the church and the society in which it functioned were torn by horrible internal conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and subjugation of those disenfranchised. From this crucible of suffering emerged the Belhar Confession, a biblically based doctrinal standard of justice, reconciliation, and unity, intended to guide not only the personal lives of God's children but the body of Christ in the world as well.

Like the confessions which preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from one particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world, a testimony for all of God's people in our time. For South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the downtrodden. This history of oppression in our own countries, and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time, calls for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—one that not only speaks against injustice but also offers a biblically faithful picture of hope, mercy, and reconciliation.

Our South African brothers and sisters have asked us to join them in confession, forgiveness, and healing by formal adoption of the Belhar Confession, that we might together say it aloud and live it together. May our prayer as we respond mirror the words in an "Accompanying Letter," which they ask always be read with the confession: "Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling-blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and unifying."

Historical Background

The Belhar Confession is rooted in the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa. It is an “outcry of faith” and a “call for faithfulness and repentance.” It was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC, colored) under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak. That church took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis* in which the very truth of the gospel was at stake.

The Belhar Confession was adopted in 1986 by the DRMC after years of conversation with its “mother church,” the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa (DRC, white). This adoption, which was not repeated in the DRC, set the DRMC apart from the DRC. In April of 1994 the Belhar Confession was adopted as the theological foundation of the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, comprised of the former bodies of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA, black). Though some regional synods of the DRC have adopted the Belhar Confession, the DRC as a whole has not yet done so. Even so, the DRC no longer offers theological justification to apartheid.

What Belhar Addresses: The Belhar Confession addresses the issues of church unity, reconciliation, and God’s justice. Unity is seen as a gift and an obligation for the church. It is to be pursued and sought and built, becoming visible wherever and whenever possible as a witness to the working of God’s Spirit for the unity manifest in the unity of the Trinity and so that the world might believe.

Reconciliation is a message entrusted to the church by God. The church is called to be a peacemaker, giving witness in word and in deed. The church is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Peace is the salt and the light. Justice and true peace are revealed as the nature of God, who is God to the destitute, the poor, and the wronged. The church is called and must stand where God stands, with people in any form of suffering.

The Belhar Is a Gift: The Belhar Confession is a gift to the whole church. Born in the struggle in southern Africa, it has wide implications beyond its original context. It is a confession for the whole church seeking to be faithful to God, who stands in the midst of suffering of any and all expression.

Our Historic Confessions: The confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that comprise the Reformed Standards of Unity are the Heidelberg Catechism (1563; adopted by the Reformed Church in America in 1792); the Belgic Confession (1561; revised 1619; adopted at the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, with foreign delegates exhorted to preserve it); and the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619).

Timely in their context and of great value and significance for the faith of the church, these “standards of unity” say little about the centrality of unity to the life, witness, and mission of the church as an expression of the fullness of the Reformed faith. Unity is the prayer of Christ in the Gospel of John, chapter 17.

The themes of reconciliation and justice are repeatedly expressed in and through the ministry and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are intrinsic in the call to the church to stand where God stands in the world. Their absence from the sixteenth-century confessions diminishes the fullness of the Reformed faith in today’s world. The twentieth-century Belhar Confession rounds out the RCA’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century standards of unity.

In compliance with the General Synod directive of 2000, the Commission on Christian Unity has prayerfully and intentionally presented the Belhar Confession to each General Synod since 2002. These presentations have been coupled with the desire of bringing to confessional completeness the fullness of the Reformed faith—its biblical witness, its loyalty to Christ, and its mission of, and witness to, the gospel of unity, justice, and reconciliation of “a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

What Is a Confession?

A confession is a written formal statement that acknowledges, declares, and gives evidence of religious beliefs.

A confession speaks internally to the church that makes the declaration and as such is informing for the vision and mission of the church. A confession gives material form to the

vision and mission...it states the characteristic quality of the vision and mission...it communicates the vision and mission of the church...to the church...about the church...thus inwardly forming the church, calling it to and reminding it of its vision and mission.

A confession speaks externally—to the *oikoumene*, the “whole inhabited world,” the world so loved by God...as known in other churches, faiths, cultures, and societies both religious and secular, in other words, the “total community” in its various lifestyles and structures.

A confession puts forth a declarative statement to the *oikoumene* so that the church’s beliefs regarding the call of God to a vision and mission can be known, made evident by, in, and through the church.

“A confession does not only say something about God and his heaven, about the believer and his church, but also something about the world. It says something about God as he comes to meet the world in Jesus Christ the Lord; and about the Church as it lives in the world; and about the world as it exists before God” (A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982, edited by Cloete and Smit, William B. Eerdmans, p. 113).

How Does a Confession Come About?

A confession begins its formation at a time when an extremely serious situation and a very important issue or issues arise that seem to go “right to the heart of the gospel,” those occasions when the gospel is threatened, when the integrity of the gospel is at stake (*status confessionis*), such as in the sixteenth century when classical Reformed confessions were formed, written, and embraced and in the twentieth century when the Confessing Church in Germany came into existence over against those Christians loyal to Hitler and produced the Barmen Declaration of 1934.

In the later part of the twentieth century the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Southern Africa challenged the biblical and theological legitimacy of the doctrine and law of apartheid as being a situation that “struck a moment of truth” in which “the gospel was at stake.”

What Purpose Does a Confession Serve?

“Christian faith is the decision in which men have the freedom to be publicly responsible for their trust in God’s Word and for their knowledge of the truth in Jesus Christ, in the language of the Church, but also in worldly attitudes and above all in their corresponding actions and conduct” (*Dogmatics in Outline*, Karl Barth; SCM Press, p. 28).

A confession declares that God is historical. The nature and action of God are imbedded in creation, i.e., the world. The world is the theater of God’s action, God’s glory. The world is the purpose of God’s action. God’s calling of the church into existence is to be a community that arises out of the world and lives in the world for the world.

A confession declares that the church is gathered not on its own behalf or for its own purposes, but to be the manifestation of God’s healing, redeeming, repairing, renewing of the world. As we say in the language of our day: a thousand churches/congregations in a million ways doing one thing—“following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

A confession professes to the world in word and deed that the church’s business is God’s business and that God’s business is the world. It is a declaration to the world and a reminder to itself that the church is called to be radically attentive to the world, even as God is radically attentive to the world as creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

A confession gives expression of faith, by and through the church, giving rise to action/mission that becomes a historical witness to the truth that God is a living, active, expressive, moving God in events and time.

For nearly a decade the Reformed Church in America has been studying and reflecting upon the gift of the Belhar Confession. This gift was given to us from sisters and brothers who were faced with the challenge of how to live faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ in a culture of segregation and violence. To facilitate the process of our reception of this gift, the newly formed Commission on Race and Ethnicity in 1991 recommended to General Synod

“to endorse and use the theological foundation of the Belhar Confession to inform the RCA’s commitment to be a church freed from racism” (*MGS 2001*, R-115, p. 389) and “to invite members of congregations and classes to carefully study the Belhar Confession and the implications of its adoption for life and ministry in the RCA, using materials made available by the Commission on Christian Unity (*MGS 2001*, R-116, p. 389).

Having worked collaboratively, these two commissions, with ongoing support from other General Synod commissions, the General Synod Council, and the African American/Black Council, have now determined that the time has come to move to the final step in the process of our reception of the Belhar Confession. The Commission on Christian Unity believes the Reformed Church in America is now ready to receive this gift as its fourth confession and thereby join with one voice in confessing to the world that our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to be a church committed to work for unity, reconciliation, and justice. The commission therefore recommends the following.

R-24

To adopt the following amendment to the first paragraph of the Preamble to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions stricken out):

The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards. The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. Its Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, ~~and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession~~), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures.

BELHAR CONFESSION
September 1986*

- 1. We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
- 2. We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2.11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4.1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17.20, 23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new

humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2.1-5; 1 Cor. 12.4-31; John 13.1-17; 1 Cor. 1.10-13; Eph. 4.1-6; Eph. 3.14-20; 1 Cor. 10.16-17; 1 Cor. 11.17-34; Gal. 6.2; 2 Cor. 1.3-4);

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12.3-8; 1 Cor. 12.1-11; Eph. 4.7-13; Gal. 3.27-28; Jas. 2.1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5.17-21; Mt. 5.13-16; Mt. 5.9; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21-22).
- that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world (Eph 4.17-6.23; Rom. 6; Col. 1.9-14; Col. 2.13-19; Col. 3.1-4.6);
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right

(Deut. 32.4; Luke 2.14; John 14.27; Eph. 2.14; Isa. 1.16-17; Jas. 1.27; Jas. 5.1-6; Luke 1.46-55; Luke 6.20-26; Luke 7.22; Luke 16.19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4.16-19; Rom. 6.13-18; Amos 5);

- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. **We believe** that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4.15-16; Acts 5.29-33; 1 Pet. 2.18-25; 1 Pet. 3.15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

* This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

THE ECUMENICAL LIFE OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

Though the RCA's ecumenical life can be generally summarized under the rubrics "programmatic ecumenism," "conciliar ecumenism," and "ecumenical dialogue," these categories remain inadequate to express the full spectrum of the church's ecumenical life.

Programmatic ecumenism refers to cooperative work with other churches creating joint programs of mission. This may be done formally or informally, from denominational to local levels. It emerges from a mutual desire to carry out a specific mission. Examples are cooperative education, curriculum development, disaster relief, vacation church schools, shelters for the homeless, food banks, youth events, and services of worship. The RCA's global mission program is an excellent example of programmatic ecumenism through partnerships and cooperative work.

Conciliar ecumenism represents the world, national, regional, state, and local councils where churches come together for mission. Councils facilitate collaboration of denominations and churches in a host of programs of service and witness, while recognizing and accepting the distinctive history, polity, and ecclesial expression of the church catholic.

The RCA is a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches, and a charter member of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Most recently the RCA has become an originating member of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. Several regional synods, classes, and local congregations hold memberships in the National Association of Evangelicals.

Ecumenical dialogues are expressions of ecumenical practices that occur between churches at the denominational level. They may be either bilateral (one-to-one) or multilateral (among more than two). Through dialogue, faithful expression is given to what churches believe. Areas of common belief are identified alongside those that need further reflection. The process of dialogue requires respectful listening to one another, letting each church speak for itself, and then together recognizing any emergent consensus offering substantial fellowship and common mission. The RCA is currently involved in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues including the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue, the Moravian dialogue, and a dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Interreligious dialogue is an emerging subject of discussion in the commission. This is a period in human history in which people of different religious traditions are meeting and interacting more than ever before. We live in a time of religious pluralism. For earlier generations in our context religious pluralism or diversity meant Judaism, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. But there is more that these religious traditions share in common than any of them share with Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, all of which have become increasingly prominent in several of the communities in which RCA congregations serve. Ignorance of the faiths of others can breed mistrust, and mistrust hostility. This is among the reasons why Christians need to be open to learning about people of other faiths through study and dialogue. The commission has been witnessing a need among RCA congregations for resources that will enable them to enhance their understanding of different religious traditions so as to make interreligious dialogue mutually profitable. The commission has begun to research the subject of interreligious dialogue and intends to continue to explore ways in which to foster interreligious understanding and communication.

Ecumenical Appointees of the Reformed Church in America

The RCA is represented at ecumenical tables and events by persons elected or appointed who willingly give of their ecumenical gifts and time to promote a greater witness to the unity we have in Christ. Following participation in events or meetings, these appointees provide brief reports to the Office of the General Secretary and to the Commission on Christian Unity.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches

The RCA is a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which has a membership of over 75 million Reformed Christians in its four area councils. The RCA is a member of the Caribbean and North American Area Council (CANAAC). WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council have agreed to join together in the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010. WCRC will represent 80 million Reformed Christians around the world. WARC's priority program is the Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth Project. It works with churches and communities in its area councils to assess systemic injustice and is active in the struggle for justice and peace by preparing resources, hosting educational forums and conferences, and networking diverse community based organizations committed to human rights and justice. In 2008 the Pan African Family Gathering Planning Committee met in Accra, Ghana. The 2010 conference will continue the work begun in the Pilgrimage to Nelson Island, Trinidad, on October 24, 2007, and in Runaway Bay, Jamaica, December 10-15, 2007, which produced the paper "Abolished But Not Destroyed: Remembering the Slave Trade in the 21st Century." (To read the paper, visit www.oikoumene.org and enter "Abolished But Not Destroyed" in the search box.) CANAAC's North American Covenanting for Justice Working Group is completing a website from which it will be possible to download exemplary missional workshops. Gretel Van Wieren coordinates this project.

The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A.

The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ U.S.A. continues its work on the church's exercise of authority in the world, the doctrines of justification and sanctification, and full communion.

The World Council of Churches

In 2006 the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued a call to member churches to respond to a text on ecclesiology that came out of the Porto Allegre assembly "Called to Be One Church." (To read the paper, visit www.oikoumene.org and enter "Called to Be One Church" in the search box.) This text is meant to be read in conjunction with a Faith and Order study document, "The Nature and Mission of the Church." (To read the document, go to www.oikoumene.org and enter the title of the study document in the search box.) The purpose of these texts is to invite member churches to reflect on what they can say together about the church of Jesus Christ as well as to open up renewed conversation about the issues that continue to divide them. Both texts contain a set of questions that are intended to guide the responses of the member churches which accept the invitation. The responses are due January 10, 2010.

In the course of its deliberations about how to move forward on this agenda, the commission has determined to invite selected RCA theology professors and clergy to read the texts

and prepare papers addressing those questions that relate to their respective areas of expertise. The commission will serve as a kind of clearinghouse for those papers and will try to determine how to consolidate them into a report which it will then send as the RCA's response to the WCC.

The commission welcomes this opportunity to prompt the RCA to engage the ecclesiological issues that the WCC has put before it. The commission is of the opinion that the process in which the study of these texts would involve the RCA will only serve to clarify further the issues that the Belhar has challenged it to confront. The commission envisions the RCA's response as an important complement to its stance on Belhar.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. (CCT) is the most recent ecumenical initiative in the United States. It is comprised of members and representatives from the five ecumenical families: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical/Pentecostal, historic Protestant, and racial and ethnic, representing forty-three churches. In addition, there are members from parachurch organizations such as the Salvation Army, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourners, Evangelicals for Social Action, American Bible Society, and World Vision. CCT provides the broadest national "table" for gathering in prayer, theological dialogue, and fellowship and aims to foster a common understanding of each tradition.

Since its inception, CCT has focused on the issue of poverty in the United States. It has committed itself to reduce and overcome domestic poverty in the next ten years. Toward that end, CCT embraces four objectives: 1) strengthening families and communities; 2) reducing child poverty; 3) making work "work" by combating racism and guaranteeing full-time employment and good health care; and 4) strengthening educational systems with particular attention to public schools.

The 2009 annual meeting was held in Baltimore, Maryland, in January. As part of the annual meeting, attendees were invited to the U.S. Capitol building, where they met with their members of the House and Senate. Discussions focused on poverty issues and initiatives before Congress. Breakout groups were held to study more closely the four objectives. Daily worship was led by representatives of each of the five ecumenical families.

RCA representatives were Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Douglas Fromm, Jessica Bratt, Tom DeVries, and Earl James. Seminarians attending were Marla Rotman and Duane Brown.

Roman Catholic/Reformed Dialogue

For the past several years a dialogue has been held under the auspices of WARC member churches and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The dialogue has focused on the sacrament of baptism with the goal of producing a common statement on baptism. RCA members of the dialogue are Renee House and John Paarlberg. Douglas Fromm serves as RCA staff to the dialogue.

The most recent round of the dialogue was held in February 2009 on the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary in California. A final draft of the common consensus paper was prepared and readied for presentation to the participating churches, which include the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Roman Catholic Church. The participating churches are reviewing the paper with the aim of receiving it "at a deeper level that will give it authority" among them.

The common statement will be reviewed by the Commission on Christian Unity for presentation to the 2010 General Synod.

Report of the Commission on Christian Worship

The Commission on Christian Worship met twice since General Synod 2008: October 16-18, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois, and February 10-11, 2009, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The commission's agenda included ongoing work related to:

- The RCA's participation with the Consultation on Common Texts.
- A joint hymnal project between the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America.
- Baptism and the reaffirmation of baptism.
- Worship for General Synod.

Liturgies for the Lord's Supper

The commission's primary focus since 2005 has been related to an overture from the Classis of Central Iowa:

To affirm the Commission on Christian Worship's work to create additional liturgies of the Lord's Supper, and to ensure that these liturgies are briefer than those currently available; and further, to request that the commission define the essential components and expectations of the liturgy, for report to the General Synod of 2007 (*MGS 2005*, R-95, p. 373).

After extensive consultation throughout the RCA and with representatives from other Reformed bodies (cf. *MSG 2008*, pp. 240-242), the commission interpreted R-95 to reflect three basic desires:

1. A desire for brevity (shorter options for celebration of the Lord's Supper).
2. A desire for diversity (options suited for a variety of settings).
3. Clarity (on what is "essential" for a genuine celebration of communion).

In response to these three desires, the commission recommended that the General Synod of 2008 adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 11c, for recommendation to the classes for approval (addition is underlined):

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall be administered, if possible, at least once every three months in every church. "The Office for the Administration of the Lord's Supper" or a liturgy approved by General Synod for occasional use shall be read. All baptized Christians present who are admitted to the Lord's Supper are to be invited to participate (*MGS 2008*, R-56, p. 242).

The General Synod of 2008 approved R-56.

In response to that approval, the commission presents four liturgies to be approved by General Synod for occasional use. The first three of these liturgies (the Lima Liturgy, the Consultation on Church Union Liturgy, and the Formula of Agreement Liturgy) have been previously recommended by General Synods and offer diversity for settings looking for variety. The fourth is a dramatically shorter liturgy for settings where the constitutional liturgy may be inappropriate.

Recommendations

R-25

To commend to the congregations of the Reformed Church in America the Consultation on Church Union Liturgy, the Lima Liturgy, and the Formula of Agreement Liturgy for occasional use.

R-26

To commend to the congregations of the Reformed Church in America "Occasional Use Liturgy No. 1" for occasional use.

Future Plans

It is the commission's intent to continue to solicit, create, and recommend occasional-use liturgies for approval by the General Synod in future years.

The commission also plans to continue working on resources to help congregations celebrate and reaffirm baptism and looks forward to presenting them in 2010.

Gratitude

The Commission on Christian Worship joyfully and gratefully celebrates the participation of Kathy Davelaar and Lisa VanderWal and their service to the commission and the denomination over the past six years. Their enthusiasm, wisdom, and experience have been integral to the commission's work and will be sorely missed.

LIMA EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

Upon recommendation by the Commission on Christian Worship, the 1986 synod commended the Lima Eucharistic Liturgy to the churches "as a provisional form for occasional use" (MGS 1986, R-1, p. 168). The Lima Eucharistic Liturgy is recommended for occasional use by churches, presumably in ecumenical settings and within the context of a particular congregation's worship when the RCA's relationship to the universal Christian church is emphasized. Therefore, approval of this liturgy for use by RCA congregations should not be understood to imply regular use or adoption of the form.

P = Presiding Minister
C = Congregation
O = Another Celebrant

Liturgy of the Eucharist

PREPARATION

- O. Blessed are you, Lord God of the universe, you are the giver of this bread, fruit of the earth and of human labour, let it become the bread of Life.
- C. **Blessed be God, now and for ever!**
- O. Blessed are you, Lord God of the universe, you are the giver of this wine, fruit of the vine and of human labour, let it become the wine of the eternal Kingdom.
- C. **Blessed be God, now and for ever!**
- O. As the grain once scattered in the fields and the grapes once dispersed on the hillside are now reunited on this table in bread and wine, so, Lord, may your whole Church soon be gathered together from the corners of the earth into your Kingdom.
- C. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

DIALOGUE

- P. The Lord be with you.
- C. **And also with you.**
- P. Lift up your hearts.
- C. **We lift them to the Lord.**
- P. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
- C. **It is right to give him thanks and praise.**

PREFACE

- P. Truly it is right and good to glorify you, at all times and in all places, to offer you our thanksgiving O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty and Everlasting God.

Through your living Word you created all things, and pronounced them good. You made human beings in your own image, to share your life and reflect your glory. When the time had fully come, you gave Christ to us as the Way, the Truth and the Life. He accepted baptism and consecration as your Servant to announce the good news to the poor.

At the last supper Christ bequeathed to us the eucharist, that we should celebrate the memorial of the cross and resurrection, and receive his presence as food. To all the redeemed Christ gave the royal priesthood and, in loving his brothers and sisters, chooses those who share in the ministry, that they may feed the Church with your Word and enable it to live by your Sacraments.

Wherefore, Lord, with the angels and all the saints, we proclaim and sing your glory:

SANCTUS

C. Holy, Holy, Holy...

EPICLESIS I

P. O God, Lord of the universe, you are holy and your glory is beyond measure. Upon your eucharist send the life-giving Spirit, who spoke by Moses and the prophets, who overshadowed the Virgin Mary with grace, who descended upon Jesus in the river Jordan and upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost.

May the outpouring of this Spirit of Fire transfigure this thanksgiving meal that this bread and wine may become for us the body and blood of Christ.

C. Veni Creator Spiritus!

INSTITUTION

P. May this Creator Spirit accomplish the words of your beloved Son, who, in the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks to you, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take, eat: this is my body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and said: Drink this, all of you: this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this for the remembrance of me. Great is the mystery of faith.

**C. Your death, Lord Jesus, we proclaim!
Your resurrection we celebrate!
Your coming in glory we await!**

ANAMNESIS

P. Wherefore, Lord, we celebrate today the memorial of our redemption: we recall the birth and life of your Son among us, his baptism by John, his last meal with the apostles, his death and descent to the abode of the dead; we proclaim Christ's resurrection and ascension in glory, where as our Great High Priest he ever intercedes for all people; and we look for his coming at the last. United in Christ's priesthood, we present to you this memorial: Remember the sacrifice of your Son and grant to people everywhere the benefits of Christ's redemptive work.

C. Maranatha, the Lord comes!

EPICLESIS II

P. Behold, Lord, this eucharist which you yourself gave to the Church and graciously receive it, as you accept the offering of your Son whereby we are reinstated in your Covenant. As we partake of Christ's body and blood, fill us with the Holy Spirit that we may be one single body and one single spirit in Christ, a living sacrifice to the praise of your glory.

C. Veni Creator Spiritus!

COMMEMORATIONS

O. Remember, Lord, your one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, redeemed by the blood of Christ. Reveal its unity, guard its faith, and preserve it in peace.

Remember, Lord, all the servants of your Church: bishops, presbyters, deacons, and all to whom you have given special gifts of ministry.

(Remember especially...)

Remember also all our sisters and brothers who have died in the peace of Christ, and those whose faith is known to you alone: guide them to the joyful feast prepared for all peoples in your presence, with the blessed Virgin Mary, with the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles and martyrs...

and all the saints for whom your friendship was life.

With all these we sing your praise and await the happiness of your Kingdom where with the whole creation, finally delivered from sin and death, we shall be enabled to glorify you through Christ our Lord;

C. Maranatha, the Lord comes!

CONCLUSION

- P. Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, all honour and glory is yours, Almighty God and Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.
- C. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

- O. United by one baptism in the same Holy Spirit and the same Body of Christ, we pray as God's sons and daughters:
- C. **Our Father,...**

THE PEACE

- O. Lord Jesus Christ, you told your apostles: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church; in order that your will be done, grant us always this peace and guide us toward the perfect unity of your Kingdom for ever.
- C. **Amen.**
- P. The peace of the Lord be with you always.
- C. **And also with you.**
- O. Let us give one another a sign of reconciliation and peace.

THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

- P. The bread which we break is the communion of the Body of Christ, the cup of blessing for which we give thanks is the communion in the Blood of Christ.

LAMB OF GOD

- C. **Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.**
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

COMMUNION

THANKSGIVING PRAYER

- P. In peace let us pray to the Lord: O Lord our God, we give you thanks for uniting us by baptism in the Body of Christ and for filling us with joy in the eucharist. Lead us towards the full visible unity of your Church and help us to treasure all the signs of reconciliation you have granted us. Now that we have tasted of the banquet you have prepared for us in the world to come, may we all one day share together the inheritance of the saints in the life of your heavenly city, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.
- C. **Amen.**

FINAL HYMN

WORD OF MISSION

BLESSING

- P. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favour and give you peace. Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever.
- C. **Amen.**

CONSULTATION ON CHURCH UNION LITURGY

This liturgy, like the Lima Eucharistic Liturgy, is recommended for occasional use by the churches, particularly in ecumenical settings, but also, perhaps, within the context of a particular congregation's worship when the relationship to the universal church is being emphasized. Therefore, approval of this liturgy for use by RCA congregations should not be understood to imply regular use or adoption of the form (MGS 1988, p. 213).

M = Minister
C = Congregation

Service of the Table

THE PEACE

M: The peace of Christ be with you.
C: **And also with you.**

(The ministers and people may stand and exchange signs and words of God's peace.)

PRESENTING THE GIFTS

GREAT THANKSGIVING

M: Lift up your hearts.
C: **We lift them to the Lord.**
M: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
C: **It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

THE PREFACE

M: It is right and good to give you thanks, Almighty God, for you are the source of light and life. You made us in your image and called us to new life in Jesus Christ. In all times and places your people proclaim your glory in unending praise:

(Local congregations and eucharistic communities are encouraged to make their own decisions about the content and style of the preface, focusing on general themes stressing the creation, the season or day in the church year, or a local occasion.)

C: **Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

M: We remember with joy the grace by which you created all things and made us in your own image. We rejoice that you called a people in covenant to be a light to the nations. Yet we rebelled against your will. In spite of the prophets and pastors sent forth to us, we continued to break your covenant.

In the fullness of time, you sent your only son to save us,
Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of your favored one, Mary,
sharing our life, he reconciled us to your love.

At the Jordan your Spirit descended upon him, anointing him to preach the good news of your reign.

He healed the sick and fed the hungry,
manifesting the power of your compassion.

He sought out the lost and broke bread with sinners,
witnessing the fullness of your grace.

We beheld his glory.
On the night before he died for us, Jesus took bread;
giving thanks to you, he broke the bread
and offered it to his disciples, saying:

“Take this and eat; this is my body which is given for you,
do this in remembrance of me.”

Taking a cup, again he gave thanks to you,
shared the cup with his disciples and said:

“This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.
Drink from this all of you.
This is poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.”

After the meal our Lord was arrested, abandoned by his followers and beaten.

He stood trial and was put to death on a cross.

Having emptied himself in the form of a servant, and being obedient even to death,
he was raised from the dead
and exalted as Lord of heaven and earth.

Through him you bestow the gift of your Spirit
uniting your church, empowering its mission,
and leading us into the new creation you have promised.

Gracious God, we celebrate with joy the redemption you won for us in Jesus Christ.

Grant that in praise and thanksgiving we may be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable in your sight, that our lives may proclaim the mystery of faith:

C: **Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.**

M: Loving God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these gifts,
that they may be for us the body and blood
of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Grant that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed through his blood,
serving and reconciling all people to you.

Remember your church, scattered upon the face of the earth:
gather it in unity and preserve it in truth.

Remember the saints who have gone before us
especially _____ and _____.

(here may occur special names)

In communion with them and with all creation,
we worship and glorify you always:

Through your Son Jesus Christ
with the Holy Spirit in your Holy Church,
all glory and honor is yours, Almighty God,
now and forever.
Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

(The minister breaks the bread in silence or while saying:)

M: The bread which we break,
Is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ?
Because there is one bread,
we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.
The wine which we drink,
is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The cup which we bless
is the communion in the blood of Christ.

SHARING OF THE BREAD AND THE CUP

FORMULA OF AGREEMENT LITURGY

In 1998 the General Synod examined the order of worship prepared by the Lutheran-Reformed Subcommittee on Worship for joint celebrations of the adoption of full communion between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in America. Upon the recommendation of its review committee, the synod voted "to encourage RCA congregations to make occasional use of the order of worship and the guidelines prepared by the Lutheran-Reformed Subcommittee on Worship" (MGS 1998, p. 275).

M = Minister
C = Congregation

Eucharist

OFFERING OF GIFTS

PRAYER

M: As the bread broken was first scattered on the hills,
then was gathered and became one,
so let your church be gathered
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom
for yours is glory and power through all ages.
Blessed be God, forever and ever. Amen.

GREAT THANKSGIVING

M: The Lord be with you.
C: **And also with you.**
M: Lift up your hearts.
C: **We lift them to the Lord.**
M: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.
Loving God, the Source of all,
we thank you and praise you
with our lips and in our lives
that having created us and all things through your Word
you welcome and accept our prayer and praise.
For the goodness of creation
and the glory of redemption to which you call us,
we praise you.
For the law of holiness inviting our obedience
and the call of prophets, rebuking our disobedience
we praise you.
With all that is, seen and unseen,
and with all the faithful
of every time and place,
we join in this hymn
of praise and thanksgiving:

SANCTUS

C: **Holy, holy, Lord most holy, God of power and God of might;
Heaven and earth reveal your glory, hail, hosanna, Lord of light!
Blessed be the coming Savior; hail, hosanna, Lord of light!**

M: Loving God, the Holy One,
we offer you praise and thanksgiving
over this bread and cup
because in Jesus Christ,
your only begotten
you have forever joined yourself to us,
uniting heaven and earth.
Now therefore we gratefully recall and remember
the wonder of his incarnation
his birth as one of us
his baptism for our sin,
his compassion for our suffering,

his intimacy with our frailty,
 his rebuke of our pride
 his bearing of the cross with its death
 and his rising from the tomb by the power of God.
 It was he who on the night when he was betrayed
 took a loaf of bread and gave thanks,
 broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying:
 Take, and eat; this is my body given for you.
 Do this for the remembrance of me.
 Again, after supper, he took the cup,
 gave thanks and gave it to all to drink saying:
 This cup is the new covenant in my blood
 shed for you and for all people
 for the forgiveness of sin.
 Do this for the remembrance of me.
 According to his command and promise of presence,
 we affirm the mystery of faith:

**C: Christ has died,
 Christ is risen,
 Christ will come again.**

M: Loving God, Creative Power,
 blessing your Name, we seek your Spirit.
 Come to us and bless these gifts of bread and wine,
 that they may be for us by faith the body and blood of Christ,
 the sign and seal of our forgiveness in him
 and our adoption as the children of God.
 As we eat and drink together
 make us one with Christ and one in Christ;
 a sign of his eternal reign in all the world.
 This sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving
 we offer you, loving God,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God to ages of ages.

C: Amen.

M: With the confidence of the children of God, let us pray:

**C: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
 Save us from the time of trial
 and deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
 now and forever: Amen.**

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

Tune: St. Columba

**C: O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world away;
 you suffered death our lives to save: have mercy now, we pray.
 O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world away;
 you set us free from guilt and grave, have mercy now, we pray.
 O Lamb of God, you bear the sin of all the world away;
 eternal peace with God you made, give us your peace, we pray.**

COMMUNION OF THE PEOPLE

MUSIC AT THE DISTRIBUTION

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

M: O God the One God, you have opened wide your hands and satisfied the desire
 of your living creatures. You have fed us with one food

C: that we may be one.

M: You have filled us with your presence

C: that we may be one.

M: You have showered on us your Spirit

C: **that we may be one:**
M: You in Christ, and Christ in us,
C: **That all may be one.**
M: Send us into the world as your servants, fed and on fire with the Spirit, that the world may know that you have loved them, through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise with you and the Holy Spirit, to the ages of ages.
C: **Amen.**

OCCASIONAL USE LITURGY NO. 1

M = Minister
C = Congregation

COMMUNION LITURGY

M: Beloved in the Lord Jesus, the meal which we are about to celebrate is a feast of remembrance, communion, and hope.
C: **We come to remember that Jesus was sent into the world to assume our flesh and blood, to become God with us, that we might be redeemed.**
M: We come to have communion with this same Christ who has promised to be with us even to the end of the world.
C: **We come in hope, believing that this bread and this cup are a pledge and a fore-taste of a new heaven and a new earth, where we shall behold God.**
M: Jesus said, I was hungry and you gave me food;
C: **I was thirsty and you gave me drink.**
M: Here is the bread of life given for us;
C: **let all who hunger come and eat.**
M: Here is the fruit of the vine, poured out for us;
C: **let all who thirst come and drink.**

M: The Lord be with you.
C: **And also with you.**
M: Lift up your hearts!
C: **We lift them up to the Lord.**
M: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
C: **It is right to give our thanks and praise!**

M: Holy and right it is to give you thanks and praise at all times and in all places, O God our Creator. Source of all life and goodness, You created heaven with all its hosts and the earth with all its plenty and preserve us by your providence.
C: **When we disobeyed, you sent Jesus to deliver us from sin and death and free us to joyful obedience.**
M: With your whole church on earth and with all the company of heaven we proclaim your glory.

C: The Sanctus may be used here, if desired.
Examples: *Sing! A New Creation* 250, 251, 252, 259]

M: Most righteous God, we remember in this meal the perfect sacrifice offered once on the cross by our Lord Jesus Christ for the sin of the whole world.
C: **United with Christ in his suffering, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the power of God to triumph over evil, we wait in joyful hope for the fullness of God's reign.**
M: Send your Holy Spirit upon us, we pray, that the bread which we break and the cup which we bless may be to us the communion of the body and blood of Christ. Grant that, being joined together in him, we may attain to the unity of the faith and grow up in all things into Christ our Lord.
C: **And as this grain has been gathered from many fields into one loaf, and these grapes from many hills into one cup, grant, O Lord, that your whole Church**

**may soon be gathered from the ends of the earth
into your kingdom.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus!**

M: The Lord Jesus, the same night he was betrayed, took bread;
and when he had given thanks,
he broke it

(The minister shall break the bread.)

and gave it to them, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you:
do this in remembrance of me."

(Lifting the cup, the minister shall say:)

After the same manner also, he took the cup when they had supped,
saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood:
this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

(In partaking of the bread it shall be said:)

The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ.

(In partaking of the cup it shall be said:)

The cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.

THANKSGIVING AFTER COMMUNION

Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order met October 16-19, 2008, in Rosemont, Illinois, and again January 30-31, 2009, at the RCA Michigan Regional Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Additionally the commission met by means of conference calls and communicated by email to process the business of the commission.

Judicial Bodies

In 2007 the commission brought to General Synod a recommendation for the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that proposed significant changes in how judicial business would be conducted in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Generally it proposed that in most assemblies when functioning as a judicatory the work of the judicatory would be facilitated by a new judicial body of that assembly called a Commission on Judicial Business. The Commission on Church Order believed there to be a number of advantages to this system including freeing the assembly to do the work of the church while leaving the details of a judicial procedure to those elected by the assembly (i.e. the Commission on Judicial Business), who would have the ability to handle it efficiently and fairly.

While the 2007 General Synod approved the recommendation and while a majority of the classes ratified the proposed *BCO* amendments, the amendments failed to receive the necessary approval by two-thirds of the classes to allow for the incorporation of the changes into the *BCO*.

The commission has dialogued with the greater church about concerns that were perceived by the classes as they considered the ratification vote. The message heard is that many believed that having a judicial body do the work of the judicatory works on the level of the regional synod and the General Synod, but there were concerns about it at the classis level. (Note that there never was a proposed change to use judicial bodies at the level of the board of elders.)

There remains on the part of the Commission on Church Order a belief in the value of judicial bodies doing the work of the judicatory. Therefore, the commission worked during the past year toward a proposal to the church that would be similar to what was proposed to the General Synod in 2007 but would be only on the level of the regional synods and the General Synod. While the work on this proposal is not yet complete, the commission plans to bring a recommendation for new judicial bodies to the 2010 General Synod. The commission welcomes input from the church as it continues to work on a judicial bodies proposal.

Recourse for the Decision of an Investigative Committee

Provision is made in the polity of the RCA for a procedure to impose discipline when there are offenses subject to accusation that can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures or from the Constitution of the RCA. That provision is found in the Discipline section of the *BCO* (Chapter 2, Part I). A specific part of this is the procedure for bringing a charge (*BCO*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4). In this procedure a committee of the judicatory is appointed to determine if there is sufficient merit for the charge to warrant further consideration. This committee is usually referred to as the investigative committee. After a stipulated process, the *BCO* states in part that if the committee finds that “there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge by the judicatory” (*BCO*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Sec. 6).

It has come to the attention of the commission that there is not clarity about what “final resolution of the charge” means from the point of view of an accuser—a person who brought the charge. What recourse does the accuser have if he or she does not agree with the decision of the investigative committee? How can this be a resolution by the judicatory when only a committee considered the charge? Can the accuser file an appeal of this decision to a higher judicatory?

An example of the confusion was laid before the 2008 General Synod in a matter presented by the Commission on Judicial Business where a charge was dismissed by an investigative committee of a classis and subsequently that charge was appealed to the higher judicatory. Without going into detail suffice it to say that the 2008 General Synod said that such a dismissal cannot be appealed because it is only in order when a judgment has been reached. Dismissal by an investigative committee is not a judgment.

The commission agrees with the opinion of the 2008 General Synod that a dismissal of a charge cannot be appealed to a higher body. While not constitutional, the explanatory note for Section 6 (explanatory note 15, *BCO* page 92) states in part that if “dissatisfied with the decision of the committee of the judicatory, a new charge(s) may be filed.” A further recourse might be that a complaint against the actions of the investigative committee may be filed, if one of the grounds of a complaint is alleged.

To clarify that the dismissal of a charge by an investigative committee is not a judgment of a judicatory and therefore not open to appeal, the commission offers the following recommendation:

R-27

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 6, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 2, Part I, Article 4, Section 6

Sec. 6. If the charge is not otherwise resolved, and the committee determines there is sufficient merit in the charge, the judicatory shall proceed to trial. If there is not sufficient merit, the committee shall dismiss the charge. This dismissal shall be the final resolution of the charge ~~by the judicatory.~~

The Commission on Church Order will be amending explanatory note 15 (*BCO*, page 92) to indicate that additional recourse for dissatisfaction with the decision of the investigative committee may be a complaint against the actions of the investigative committee, providing that one of the grounds for complaint is alleged.

Supersession of a Consistory

The commission was given the following General Synod referral (*MGS 2008*, R-26, p. 123):

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to review the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*), Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 12-15 (regarding the supersession of consistories by classes) and *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 8 (regarding the dissolution of pastoral relationships), specifically looking to clarify the meaning and implication of these sections and recommending, as it sees fit, possible amendments to the *Book of Church Order*, for report to the 2009 General Synod.

The commission performed a thorough review of the *BCO* sections that give the rules for a classis to supersede a consistory (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 12-15). Reasons that accompanied the referral included statements of concern about the hostile nature of the language to supersede a consistory and about issues that may arise on a potential dissolution of a pastoral relationship as it relates to the rules found in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12, Section 8.

While noting and addressing the specific concerns addressed in the rationale for the referral, the instruction was to do a general review. The commission offers three recommendations that are designed to help both the classis and the affected church with the process of classis supersession of a consistory. Two of the recommendations propose additional reasons for which a classis might supersede a consistory, and the third recommendation will be to clarify the process within the *BCO*. Additionally the commission offers some guidelines for a classis to follow in the process.

Classes are required to determine that at least one of the conditions that is listed in *BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12 exists before moving to supersede a consistory. In reviewing this list of conditions, it came to the attention of the commission that another harmful condition could be present in a church that would call for superseding the consistory of that church. While items like property foreclosure and neglect of property are mentioned as conditions, there is no mention of a condition where financial irregularities or improprieties are occurring. Therefore the commission makes the following recommendation to add such a reason:

R-28

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out, subsequent subsections are renumbered):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12

Sec. 12. The classis shall have the authority to supersede a consistory in the administration of a local church when, in its judgment, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfill the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis. Such conditions shall include at least one of the following:

- a. Failure to hold regularly scheduled Sunday services.
- b. Absence of a quorum of a governing body as prescribed by the constitution, bylaws, or rules of order of the church, for a period of three months.
- c. Lack of a governing body.
- d. Danger of loss of property by reason of foreclosure or otherwise.
- e. Financial irregularities or improprieties, including, but not limited to, the improper use of church funds.
- ~~e.~~ f. Neglect of the physical condition of the church properties.
- ~~f.~~ g. Insufficiency of confessing membership to fulfill the purposes and responsibilities of an organized church.
- ~~g.~~ h. Long-term or rapid decline in participation or membership.
- ~~h.~~ i. Inability to provide adequate ministerial services.

211

A time may come in the life of a church when both the consistory and the classis realize that it is the end of that church's ministry. For a classis to close a church the classis needs to assume control of that church by superseding the consistory. In these cases the supersession is voluntary and may actually be requested by the consistory. While undoubtedly this currently occurs, the *BCO* provisions assume an adversarial supersession with no provision for a request by the consistory. Therefore the commission makes the following recommendation to add a condition to the list found in Section 12:

R-29

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12

Sec. 12. The classis shall have the authority to supersede a consistory in the administration of a local church when, in its judgment, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfill the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis. Such conditions shall include at least one of the following:

- a. Failure to hold regularly scheduled Sunday services.
- b. Absence of a quorum of a governing body as prescribed by the constitution, bylaws, or rules of order of the church, for a period of three months.
- c. Lack of a governing body.

- d. Danger of loss of property by reason of foreclosure or otherwise.
- e. Neglect of the physical condition of the church properties.
- f. Insufficiency of confessing membership to fulfill the purposes and responsibilities of an organized church.
- g. Long-term or rapid decline in participation or membership.
- h. Inability to provide adequate ministerial services.
- i. The consistory requests supersession.

The commission believes that the remaining sections that give the classis rules regarding supersession and reconstitution of a consistory (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 13-15) should be refined and clarified so that those involved in this action have a clear understanding of what is expected during the process as well as the structure after the supersession. This includes adding a clear statement about the persons classis appoints to exercise the functions of a consistory. The commission offers the following recommendation that is intended primarily to clarify the intent and clean up the language rather than make any substantive change:

R-30

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Sections 13-15, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 13. Classis shall be directed by the following rules when superseding a consistory:

- a. Before superseding a consistory, the classis shall ~~state~~ notify the church of its intention and summon the ~~consistory of that church governing body~~ to show cause why that consistory should not be dissolved and the church and its property be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. The notice shall include the following:
 - 1. the basis upon which the classis is seeking supersession.
 - 2. the time, date, and location of the classis meeting where supersession shall be considered.
 - 3. a statement that the consistory must appear at the meeting identified in Section 13(b) and show cause why it should not be dissolved.
- b. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may, instead, advise the classis of its approval of this action.
- c. If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it shall dissolve the consistory and otherwise terminate the formal organization of that church and take such steps as may be necessary to bring that church, its ministry, and its property under the direct administration of the classis.
- d. Such a church shall not have a consistory, but the classis shall designate those persons, not necessarily members of that church, who shall exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church. These persons shall serve the church in the same capacity as a consistory until such time as the life of the church has reached an end or a consistory for the church is reconstituted

(Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 15).

~~e. All actions~~ The final action of the classis under this section to dissolve a consistory shall require a two-thirds vote, of The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 14. When the classis has superseded a consistory, it shall have the authority, in the exercise of its discretion and in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

- a. terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.
- b. take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote, of the members. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 15. The classis shall have the authority to reconstitute the consistory of a church when, in the judgment of the classis, sufficient growth has been achieved or suitable stability created so that the church can continue ministry without classis administration. The classis shall guide the consistory selection process (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 14). All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

213

The process to supersede a consistory—whether requested by a consistory or taken by a classis as a necessary action—is a task that is not always easily understood, especially since it is a task that (fortunately) does not occur regularly. It is a process that often results in the end of the life of a church, but it might be a time of renewal and rebirth. It can be a step in the renewal of a church as it needs to regroup with the classis' help toward restarting its ministry. Whatever the case the classis must do what is best for God's kingdom while still working within strict conformity to those provisions mandated by the *BCO*.

It may be helpful for classes to follow some guidelines as they find supersession of a consistory before them. These guidelines anticipate that some process has occurred with a church prior to the actual steps toward supersession. These guidelines do not change *BCO* provisions, and those must take precedence.

Steps to Guide Classes in the Supersession of a Consistory

1. When there are conditions in a church that the classis determines makes it unable to fulfill the functions of a church, the classis then may move towards superseding a consistory by satisfying itself that one or more of the provisions of Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 12 are true. This determination may be done by the full classis but more likely it will happen within a committee of the classis that has been working with the church and that is authorized to bring this intention before the classis and to the consistory.
2. The classis notifies the church that it is the intention of the classis to dissolve the consistory and that the church and its property will be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. This notification process must occur even if it is a voluntary supersession, i.e. the consistory requests that the classis takes this action. In subsequent steps, the consistory may indicate its approval of or agreement with this action rather than showing cause why it should not happen. The notice will:

- a. give the reason(s) from the list found in Section 12.
 - b. give the time, date, and location of the classis meeting where the action to supersede will be considered.
 - c. summon the consistory to that meeting to show cause why it should not be dissolved.
 - d. be delivered within the constitutional lead time for a notice of a stated or special classis session.
3. When supersession is to be considered at a stated meeting the notice to the classis should include the supersession as an item on the agenda. When this action is to be considered at a special meeting, the notice to classis must follow *BCO* rules in regard to the ten-day notice requirement and the requirement to state the purpose of the meeting.
 4. At said meeting, classis places the motion to supersede on the floor of the classis. The motion should state that in conformity with *BCO* Section 12 reason(s) [state them], the classis dissolves the consistory of [church name] and terminates the formal organization of said church; further, the church, its ministry, and its property is to come under the direct administration of the classis; further, the classis appoints [name the persons] who will exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church.
 5. Said meeting must have the quorum of a stated session (i.e. a majority of the elder delegates and a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of classis).
 6. Classis shall make provision to hear the consistory in addition to any normal discussion on the motion. The said church may also have its normal elder delegate(s), who can participate as fully in discussion as other elder delegates. Provision to adequately allow the consistory to be heard does not necessarily mean that the classis allows others in the congregation to be heard.
 7. The vote on the motion as defined in step 6 (to supersede and appoint those exercising the function of the consistory) requires a two-thirds approval vote to pass. The *BCO* states that “Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 1).
 8. The classis shall appoint persons as trustees for the protection, preservation, management, and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine. Those persons may or may not be the same persons who were appointed to function as the consistory. Note that the way in which property is owned may vary from state to state. It is important to obtain legal advice to insure clear ownership of the property.
 9. The classis should seek proper legal advice regarding terminating the authority of the consistory, especially as it applies to the church property. If appropriate, the classis shall take action (the motion approved by two-thirds vote) to terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.
 10. Finally, throughout the process the classis needs to make sure that every part of the *BCO* process is followed carefully, and that there are no conclusions being reached prematurely, procedural irregularities, or appearances of bias.

Receiving Ministers from Other Denominations

The 2007 General Synod voted:

To instruct the Commission on Church Order to review Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 4a (3-4) of the *Book of Church Order* and to consider amendments to that section that would allow a classis to waive the receipt of an academic degree and a seminary transcript in limited instances when an ordained minister of a church in communion with the General Synod is unable to furnish such documents. (*MGS 2007*, R-28, pp. 108-109)

While in the process of working on this referral the commission received communication from the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) that expressed a concern about how classes are receiving ministers from other denominations. They stated that they have learned of situations where candidates enrolled with MFCA have “opted out of the RCA and then sought and obtained ordination with other churches or organizations” (*MGS 2008*, p. 298). Subsequently, classes receive these same candidates into classis membership—and therefore membership as an RCA minister of Word and sacrament—as ordained ministers from other “denominations.”

BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11 governs how a classis receives ministers (and licensed

candidates) from other denominations. The commission sees a request from a classis that asks for a little more flexibility. The commission sees a request from MFCA that asks that it be clarified that the *BCO* requires the same minister preparation standards for a minister from another denomination as is required by the RCA. The commission believes both requests to be valid.

The commission looked at all of Article 11 not just subsections of it. The first three sections of this article outline the rules for reception of ministers from other denominations while the fourth section, with its many parts, is more like a process guide for implementation of the first three sections. (The fifth and last section of the article deals with licensed candidates and does not enter into this particular discussion.)

The commission debated whether or not the *BCO* should be a procedural manual, as the details of such a manual can become troublesome. For example, the aforementioned Section 4 of Article 11 only refers to a process for ministers from other denominations who wish to be considered for a call from a congregation, which then becomes confusing when ministers are being considered to be received under other circumstances. On the other hand the commission recognized that it is helpful to classes to have steps to follow so that nothing is missed in these important matters. Additionally the commission believes that the items under subsection 4a of Article 11 should be followed in all cases.

To clarify that ministers from other denominations must have completed the same standards of preparation as those required in the RCA, to clarify that in all cases classes need to have proper evidence of the credentials of ministers from other denominations, and to allow classes to not be restricted from exercising good judgment, the commission makes the following recommendation:

R-31

To adopt the following amendment to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 3-5, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11

***Sec. 3.* When an application is made for admission to the classis by a licensed candidate or a minister from another denomination, the classis shall consider only an applicant who has satisfied educational requirements that are equivalent ~~determine whether the applicant's educational qualifications are equal~~ to those required in the Reformed Church in America, and it shall subject the applicant to such examination before classis as shall demonstrate the applicant's understanding of the theology, history, government, and disciplinary procedures of the Reformed Church in America; understanding of and adherence to the Standards of the Reformed Church in America; and loyalty to its agencies.**

***Sec. 4. a:* When an ordained minister of another denomination wishes to ~~be considered for a call from a congregation in the RCA~~ apply for admission to the classis, that minister shall furnish the ~~stated~~ stated ~~elements~~ of classis with the following or the equivalent:**

- ~~1.~~ a.** a written statement from the body holding the minister's credentials attesting that the minister is an ordained minister in good and regular standing;
- ~~2.~~ b.** a completed Minister's Profile form;
- ~~3.~~ c.** copies of academic degrees;
- ~~4.~~ d.** a seminary transcript;
- ~~5.~~ e.** names, addresses, and telephone numbers of five persons who are qualified to comment on the applicant's ministry;
- ~~6.~~ f.** a statement from the applicant which attests to knowledge of Reformed Church history, readiness to adhere to the Standards of the RCA, and a basic knowledge of and readiness to support Reformed Church agencies and institutions.

***Sec. 5.* An ordained minister from another denomination may seek to receive preliminary approval to candidate with RCA congregations.**

- ~~b.~~ a. Prior to becoming a serious candidate for a call from a congregation in the Reformed Church in America, an ordained minister who is affiliated with another denomination shall meet with the appropriate committee of a Reformed Church classis, which shall determine whether, in its judgment, the minister is able to meet the requirements set forth in the *Book of Church Order*, Part II, Article 11, Sections 1, 2, ~~and 3, and 4~~ above. The committee's judgment, whether positive or negative, shall be sent by the stated clerk to the Office of Ministry Services for attachment to the applicant's Minister's Profile form and such distribution as may be appropriate.
- ~~e.~~ b. If the committee's judgment is negative, the classis may appoint one or more of its ministers to assist the applicant in preparation for a second meeting with the classis committee, which shall take place not less than six months after the initial meeting. The committee may also require additional formal study prior to a second meeting.
- ~~d.~~ c. When an ordained minister who is affiliated with another denomination has met with a classis committee in order to determine whether the minister is qualified to be considered for a call to a Reformed church, and the committee is not satisfied with the minister's qualifications, any subsequent meetings for the same purpose shall take place within the same classis, unless the classis specifically requests another classis to act on its behalf.
- ~~e.~~ d. When a classis is requested to approve a call to a minister who is affiliated with another denomination, prior to its examination of the applicant it shall obtain full information from the chairperson of the committee which reviewed the applicant's qualifications, as outlined in ~~b, c, and d~~ a, b, and c above.

[The current Section 5 becomes Section 6.]

Church Growth Fund Representation at General Synod

The bylaws of the General Synod provide for corresponding delegates from various agencies, commissions, and other related entities to provide for a proper communication link between the General Synod and the entity. Examples include corresponding delegates from the RCA colleges, the *Church Herald*, the seminaries, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, and the Board of Benefits Services.

The RCA Church Growth Fund currently has no such connection. The RCA Church Growth Fund has requested such a connection be established to allow for proper connectedness to the General Synod. Therefore the commission proposes a change to the bylaws of the General Synod:

R-32

To adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 8, for approval by the synod and to be voted for ratification at the 2010 General Synod (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 13. RCA Church Growth Fund

The president of the RCA Church Growth Fund board of directors, or another of its members designated by the RCA Church Growth Fund board of directors, shall be a corresponding delegate.

Membership of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

The commission received a communication that came jointly from the Commission on Nominations and the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. That communication requested that the Commission on Church Order consider changes to a section of

the bylaws of General Synod that sets the membership of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship. The reasons for the request as stated by the two commissions are:

First, there is a significant (and seemingly growing) focus in the RCA on discipleship and youth ministries due to the prevalence of all age groups coming to communities of faith with no previous Christian faith development. Assuming this is so, the commissions believe it is appropriate for this to be reflected in the *BCO* provisions regarding membership on the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship.

Second, it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy some of the requirements for membership on the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship—particularly the requirement that two of the members of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship be members from the faculties of RCA-affiliated institutions. Simply put, there are a limited number of faculty members of RCA-affiliated institutions who both a) have knowledge of and interest in Christian education and b) are members of the Reformed Church in America.

The Commission on Church Order concurs with these commissions. Therefore it recommends the following change in the bylaws of the General Synod:

R-33

To adopt the following revision to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12a, for approval by the synod and to be voted for ratification at the 2010 General Synod (additions are underlined, deletions are stricken out):

Sec. 12. Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

a. Membership

The commission shall have seven members. At least three shall be persons with responsibility for discipleship and education ~~and discipleship~~ in RCA churches and ~~one two~~ shall be a members from the faculties of an RCA-affiliated institutions. A ~~general~~ knowledge of, and interest in, Christian education and discipleship shall be required of all members.

217

Affinity Classis—Definition of Bounds

Included in the Commission on Church Order report to the 2008 General Synod was the topic regarding a classis that is formed using other than geographical boundaries. A so-called affinity classis was formed by the Regional Synod of the Far West; that classis is called the Center City Network Classis. Repeating what was said in the commission's 2008 report (*MGS 2008*, p. 250):

Although the commission believes that the historical intention of the *BCO* was for classis bounds to be geographic lines, nothing was found that clearly prohibits the formation of this type of classis. The *BCO* gives the regional synods the power to “form, combine, and disband classes, and may transfer churches from one classis to another within its bounds” (*BCO*, Chapter 1, Part III, Article 2, Section 3). While it is not within the area of responsibility of the commission to determine the merits of such a decision, several suggestions were offered by the commission to the Regional Synod of the Far West prior to the new classis formation.

At the 2008 General Synod Center City Network Classis representatives were invited to participate in the life of the synod but were not allowed to vote. They were not allowed to vote only because the bylaws of the General Synod state that the configuration of the classes for determining General Synod delegates shall be as of “December 31st of the year immediately preceding the year in which General Synod is convened” (*BCO* 3.I.1.1c), and the classis was formed after that date. Coming out of the discussion of seating the new classis at the 2008 General Synod, a written statement was delivered to the president of the General Synod that requested that the Commission on Church Order form a definition of “bounds” as it is used in the *BCO*. The president referred that request to the commission.

In the fall of 2008 the commission received a communication from the Classis of Greater Palisades. That communication asked the commission to respond to several questions that revolved on the “bounds” definition as it is used in the *BCO*.

On a different but related issue, the commission continued its discussion and initiated communication regarding the Church Multiplication Team (CMT) conviction document. The specifics of the commission work with this document will be given later in this Commission on Church Order report. However, suffice it to say here, some of the issues that to the commission are less than clear in the CMT conviction document are about how authority is granted to classes across traditional classis boundaries.

It became clear to the commission that this is a larger issue than is appropriate for the Commission on Church Order to determine. While the commission understands the history of the intention of “bounds” in the *BCO*, it also realizes that the *BCO* is a document that evolves as the church’s understanding of its polity develops. The *BCO* does not specifically forbid what has occurred nor does it specifically permit it. Church order is there to serve the church, not the other way around. It must be flexible enough to free the church to do the things that are important while still giving the necessary structure and reflection of Reformed theology.

Given that this is a larger issue than the commission, the following recommendation is offered:

R-34

To instruct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the RCA seminaries and the General Synod professors of theology, to offer a church-wide discussion on the issue of “bounds” as it is used in the *Book of Church Order*, particularly on the issue of classis boundaries; and further;

that this church-wide discussion event be one that is self-funded.

Church Multiplication Team Conviction Document

The RCA Church Multiplication Team (CMT) developed a conviction document that defines the relationship between a church plant and its classis of accountability. This document is commonly known as the CMT Conviction. The CMT is a ministry arm of the General Synod Council (GSC). It reports to the GSC through the general secretary.

The Commission on Church Order reported to the 2008 General Synod that prior to the 2008 synod session it entered into dialogue with CMT representatives along with General Synod officers and others. Out of that discussion came some changes in the CMT Conviction. That conviction was quoted for the 2008 General Synod in the workbook and it appears in the *2008 Minutes of General Synod* on pages 136-137.

The commission report to the 2008 General Synod on this matter concluded with the following: “The commission will remain in discussion with the Church Multiplication Team and/or the General Synod Council (GSC)—which had voted that the document is not in violation of GSC policies—as the commission believes that continued refinement of such a document is in the best interest of all” (*MGS 2008*, p. 250).

The CMT conviction states that a classis of a parenting church determines the classis of accountability and support for a new church start. It goes on to say that this relationship will remain with the classis of the parent church for the initial ten years—or longer.

The primary concern that the commission has with this document is not so much crossing traditional boundaries—although when that boundary crossing happens, that is when issues might arise—rather it is that the authority is vested in this document rather than appropriately in an assembly. While the CMT may wish this document to mandate the classis relationship, our polity states that “governance of the Reformed church is executed through the offices gathered in assemblies” (*BCO*, Preamble, p. 4). It is the assemblies that govern, not a conviction, not the GSC, and not staff employed by any assembly.

Suggestions have been given for modification of the CMT conviction document that would direct an appropriate assembly to make the classis of accountability decision when the parent church and church plant relationship crosses traditional boundaries. It may well happen that the decision will be to keep the church plant’s classis of accountability with the classis of the parent church as stated in the CMT conviction, but that decision should be made by an appropriate assembly.

As of this writing the members of the CMT have only modified their document by adding

a footnote that states that those involved with a particular church plant will be “in consultation with other regional synods, classes, and congregations prior to the establishment of a new ministry.” The commission appreciates this assurance, however, it does not provide for resolution if disagreement would occur between the parties involved.

The commission intends to continue to monitor how the CMT Conviction is used. It is the commission’s intention to remain in communication with the CMT and the GSC. The commission has expressed to both the CMT and the GSC its desire to serve the General Synod and to do what is best for the RCA and God’s kingdom. It hopes and prays that a way will be found that so that all parties can work in unity and support the efforts of the CMT in multiplication of congregations and the growth of God’s kingdom.

Work with Other Commissions and Task Forces

The commission is in communication and consultation with other commissions and task forces especially as their work may involve changes in the *BCO*. Specific to this General Synod the commission has worked with two such groups.

Consultation occurred with the Commission on Christian Unity as they bring a recommendation for a *BCO* amendment adding the Belhar Confession as an additional RCA doctrinal standard.

Additionally the Commission on Church Order worked extensively with the *BCO* recommendation coming from the task force that worked on the “R-11” recommendation coming out of the 2008 General Synod. In part that task force was to “study how to increase the participation of people from racial and ethnic backgrounds other than the majority in the life of General Synod, and to increase the participation of women and those of younger generations, so that these voices may be more fully heard and welcomed in the life of the General Synod; and...to report and bring recommendations to the 2009 General Synod, including any possible changes in the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod” (*MGS 2008*, R-11, pp. 81-82). It is with regard to the latter part of the task that the commission worked in order to bring the requested changes in conformity with the polity of the RCA.

Report of the Commission on History

The Commission on History was established in 1966 and is responsible for advising the General Synod on the collection and preservation of official denominational records. Through the oversight of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, review of historical resources, and the creation of a “virtual history center” (in cooperation with the Office of Historical Services), the commission promotes research and reflection on the history of the RCA, its classes, and its congregations in order to help the denomination learn from its past and grow into the future God has in mind.

The commission met October 16-18, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois (in conjunction with the other commissions and the General Synod Council), and January 29-30, 2009, at First Reformed Church and New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

While delegates to the synod and others across the RCA may see obvious reasons for commissions addressing issues such as church order, Christian action, worship, and education, questions can arise from time to time about the continuing relevance of history to the church. For example, how does history enrich and inform a denomination that is forward-focused on mission, revitalization, and growth? Doesn't attention to history make the church a prisoner of its past? Quite the contrary; the Protestant origins of the Reformed Church in America are missional and reformed through and through. In fact, this year Reformed communities throughout the world are celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. In his life, ministry, and scholarship Calvin sought to reform preaching, revitalize worship, and nurture churches devoted to mission and the transformation of society. In fulfillment of its charge to inform the RCA of pertinent history and traditions (*BCO* Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 5), this year the Commission on History highlights John Calvin and his contributions to our past, present, and future. (See *MGS 2008*, R-62, p. 254.)

In addition to items related to Calvin's legacy, RCA archives and historical collections include a treasure trove of accumulated wisdom, experience, and devotion awaiting discovery. The heritage of the RCA is a vital source of inspiration and direction as the church discerns its path and calling for the future. For example, the remarkable story of RCA missions and missionaries around the globe reminds the church that the term “missional” aptly describes both the past and the future of the RCA. Indeed, 2009 marks the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of RCA mission in Japan. Growth and progress in the RCA can further be celebrated this year with attention to the history of women in the denomination: thirty years ago the General Synod judicial session upheld the ordination of women. History gives us cause to celebrate and provides vital perspective. In fact, year after year the current moderator of the commission is impressed by the reaction of Hope College students as they explore the riches of Christian history. Many report that their encounter with history results in a deeper faith, a more profound sense of calling, and a greater commitment to the church. Thus, grasp of history can nurture personal and church-wide growth. If young people are so moved by history, then a series of questions are worth pondering. What historical resources and wisdom lie untapped in local churches and classes, regional synods, and denominational archives? How can knowledge of Reformed and RCA heritage provide a crucial foundation for the mission and growth of the church? Is it even possible to find and explore this heritage?

There is very good news. For over forty years the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America has been answering these urgent questions. Fifty-seven volumes have appeared since the inception of the series in 1968. The commission is pleased to announce the publication of three additional volumes, which are now available for purchase: *Old Wing Mission*, by Robert Swierenga and William Van Appledorn; *Herman J. Ridder: Contextual Preacher and Seminary President* (George Brown Jr., editor); and *Chinese Theological Education, 1970-2006* (Marvin Hoff, editor).

The commission would also like to highlight another Historical Series publication that it considers invaluable for communicating an essential knowledge of the RCA's heritage both to new members and to those who would wish renewed pride in our past: *By Grace Alone: Stories of the Reformed Church in America*, by Donald J. Bruggink and Kim Nathan Baker. A list of all the titles of the RCA Historical Series and information on availability and purchasing is posted online at www.rca.org. From the “About Us” drop-down menu, choose “Archives” and then “The RCA Historical Series.”

The Commission on History continues to fulfill its calling in part by reviewing manuscripts for future publication in the Historical Series and encourages persons who are contemplating RCA research projects and new volumes to contact the commission for guidance and possible collaboration.

This year the commission is delighted to recognize and celebrate the eightieth birthday of Donald J. Bruggink. For over half of his life he has served as the tireless and superb general editor of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. The commission thanks him for his outstanding dedication and service to the church.

Report of the Commission on Judicial Business

The Office of the General Synod received one appeal during the past year. It was referred to the General Synod's Commission on Judicial Business (CJB) for review, recommendation, and report to the 2009 General Synod. The appeal was from an action by the Regional Synod of New York. It was filed by the consistory of New Lots Community Church in Brooklyn, New York, and may be referred to herein as the New Lots Appeal.

A. The Parties to the New Lots Appeal

The appellant in this appeal is the consistory of New Lots Community Church (New Lots Consistory). The respondent is the Regional Synod of New York (Regional Synod). The Classis of Brooklyn (Brooklyn Classis) was also considered a party respondent in light of *Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Sections 4 and 5, which provide generally for all parties to be involved.

B. Pre-Hearing Procedural Matters

All filing and notice requirements for the appeal were met. Each of the three parties (acting through their respective counsel) submitted a written brief. New Lots Consistory was represented by the Rev. Paul Janssen. The Regional Synod was represented by Elder Richard Lavorata, Jr. (who also serves as chair of the Regional Synod's Judicial Business Committee). The Brooklyn Classis was represented by Mr. Mark Wingerson and the Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter.

The CJB initially conferred by conference call on September 4, 2008. None of the parties waived their respective rights to a hearing (which right is provided pursuant to *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 5). Accordingly, a hearing was held in Newark, New Jersey, on Tuesday, November 11, 2008, and the CJB met in conference after the hearing that same day. John Busey Wood, who serves on the CJB as the representative from the Regional Synod of New York, recused himself and did not participate in this appeal. The Rev. Stephen Eckert, who serves on the CJB as the representative from the Regional Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, was unable to participate in the September 4, 2008, conference call or attend the hearing, and therefore did not participate in the hearing or the decision.

223

C. The Nature of the New Lots Appeal; Procedural Matters

The New Lots Appeal arises out of the decision of the Regional Synod at its meeting on April 12, 2008.

As ground of appeal, the New Lots Consistory claims manifest injustice in the decision of the Regional Synod to affirm the decision of the Brooklyn Classis despite procedural irregularities in that lower judicatory.

D. Procedural and Factual Background

The facts and history surrounding the dispute between the parties are found in the record provided to the CJB, pages 300000-300130.

This appeal is the result of a complaint dated April 6, 2007, filed with the Brooklyn Classis by members of the New Lots Community Church against the New Lots Consistory. The complaint was referred to the Judicial Business Committee of the Brooklyn Classis (Brooklyn Classis JBC). The Brooklyn Classis JBC determined that, among other things, the Brooklyn Classis should supersede the New Lots Consistory, and so recommended to the Brooklyn Classis. After a hearing on October 16, 2007, the Brooklyn Classis approved and adopted all the recommendations of the Brooklyn Classis JBC, including supersession. The New Lots Consistory appealed to the Regional Synod. The appeal was referred to the Judicial Business Committee of the Regional Synod (Regional Synod JBC). After a hearing on April 12, 2008, the Regional Synod JBC recommended that the entire decision of the Brooklyn Classis be upheld and the appeal be dismissed. The Regional Synod adopted the recommendations of the Regional Synod JBC. The New Lots Consistory appealed to the General Synod.

E. Discussion

The *BCO* provides that the New Lots Consistory, as appellant, has the responsibility to

establish that the lower judicatory (the Regional Synod) erred in its decision (*BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 9). The General Synod, according to the *BCO*, shall give deference to the decision of the lower judicatory, and shall uphold the decision of the lower judicatory if it is supported by substantial evidence in the record when the record is viewed as a whole (*BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 2, Section 10).

The *BCO* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 13) sets out the procedure for superseding a consistory. Supersession is an action taken by the classis as an assembly. The classis is required first, by a two-thirds majority, to state its intention to supersede the consistory and to summon the consistory to show cause why it should not be dissolved. If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it may supersede the consistory by a two-thirds majority vote.

Herein, the Brooklyn Classis never voted by a two-thirds majority to state its intention to supersede the consistory and it never summoned the New Lots Consistory to show cause why it should not be dissolved.

The New Lots Consistory knew before it attended the meeting of October 16, 2007, that the Brooklyn Classis' Judicial Business Committee had recommended, among other "remedies" for the complaint of members of the congregation, that the consistory be superseded, and that supersession would be discussed at the meeting. A formal notice of intent to supersede, however, must be given by the classis, and can only be given following a two-thirds vote of the classis (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 13), and there is no record of such a vote having occurred. While the classis' meeting agenda indicated that the possibility of supersession could be discussed, this does not satisfy the two-thirds vote requirement specifically imposed by the *BCO*. Consequently, no notice of intent to supersede was ever given. Simply put, while the Brooklyn Classis may have clearly indicated its intent, it missed an important step that is specifically required under the *BCO*, and consequently the New Lots Consistory was never afforded an opportunity to prepare or present a response to the Brooklyn Classis' intention to supersede.

Counsel for the Brooklyn Classis admitted in oral argument that the Brooklyn Classis had not formed an intention to supersede the New Lots Consistory before the meeting of October 16, 2007, and that the decision to supersede was arrived at in the process of dealing with the complaint. This was a curious way of proceeding. Generally, on a complaint a classis acting as a judicatory has the power to confirm or reverse the actions complained of, or to remit the matters in controversy to the consistory with instructions. It can only supersede a consistory in the exercise of its supervisory function. In the case herein, the classis erred by grafting its supervisory function onto the complaint.

An assembly that moves into judicial session does not lose its power to act as an assembly. But it must exercise its powers in accordance with the provisions of the *BCO*. The commission finds that the failure to observe the basic prerequisite to superseding a consistory is a procedural irregularity that cannot be ignored. With or without notice, Brooklyn Classis acted without authority because a two-thirds majority had not stated the intention to supersede the consistory and had not summoned the consistory to show cause why it should not be dissolved.

The New Lots Consistory, in its appeal to the Regional Synod, expressly raised the failure to issue the notice required by *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 13. (See record at pp. 300079-80.) The Regional Synod was in error, in the commission's view, to affirm the decision of the Brooklyn Classis, and manifest injustice resulted.

Superseding a consistory is an action that a classis takes as an assembly. Normally, the appropriate route of challenge to such a decision would be a complaint under *BCO* Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1. In the present case, however, the action was part of a judicial decision, namely a complaint that was heard in judicial session. It was the proper course for the New Lots Consistory to appeal to the Regional Synod, as it did. Pending that appeal, the action was stayed by operation of *BCO* Chapter 2, Part III, Article 1, Section 3. Pending the appeal to the General Synod, the Regional Synod's affirmation of the action of the Brooklyn Classis is stayed by the same provision. Ideally, superseding a consistory is not an action that should be held in suspension for a long time. If the Brooklyn Classis had not chosen to fulfill this important supervisory function (supersession) in the context of a judicial action, the delay would not have happened. New Lots Consistory could have made a complaint from being superseded and this would not have had the effect of staying the action. (See *BCO* Chapter 2, Part II, Article 1, Section 5.) This, and the unfortunate dispute over this point that has resulted, illustrate that the procedure chosen by the Brooklyn Classis was ill-advised.

The Brooklyn Classis has the right, without waiting for the present appeal to be decided, to initiate the procedure set out in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 13 if it considers it advisable to supersede the New Lots Consistory. It was urged upon us that it would be inconsistent with judicial economy to re-initiate the supersession process. In the commission's view, the potential duplication of effort is the result of failure to comply with the clear requirements of the *BCO*.

F. Recommendation

The Commission on Judicial Business makes the following recommendation to the General Synod:

R-35

To reverse the decision of the Regional Synod of New York, and thereby reverse the action of the Brooklyn Classis to supersede the New Lots Consistory.

Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity

The Commission on Race and Ethnicity met October 16-19, 2008, in Rosemont, Illinois, and again March 6-9, 2009, at Iglesia Cristiana Emmanuel Church, Sacramento, California.

Our Call and Racism

The Reformed Church in America has adopted a sixth dimension of Our Call. This adoption is built on a profound spiritual belief in God as well as a profound socio-historical dynamic that racial and ethnic groups must treat each other in light of God's biblical mandates for unity, reconciliation, and justice (Matt. 5:23-24; Eph. 2:11-22; Eph. 4:1-16; John 17:20-23; Luke 4:16-19; Gal. 3:26-29; 2 Cor. 5:17-19; Rom. 8:14; Rev. 7:9-11).

The fundamental underpinning for Our Call lacks a clear declarative statement that because racism is an offense to God, racism is a sin. The RCA has never formally declared racism a sin, and the sixth dimension of Our Call should be rooted in such a declaration. In order for us to fully worship as a denomination and be the body of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God, we need to collectively declare racism a sin.

Part of the reason we engage in the sixth dimension of Our Call is to overcome and defeat the sin of racism. Therefore, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) recommends that the General Synod adopt the action:

R-36

To declare that racism is a sin because it is an offense to God.

Native American Congregations and Ministries

There is a growing disconnect between the Reformed Church in America and Native American congregations and ministries. This disconnect is apparent because there are stories from Native American communities that have not been heard. For instance, the Native American Indian Ministries Council (NAIMC) disbanded for purposes of better stewardship and transferred NAIMC funds toward Native American leadership training. Over the years this amount has been decreased by 80 percent without the knowledge of Native American leadership, pastors, or congregations. Also, representation and consideration of the Native American congregations or communities in the RCA is almost nonexistent.

In March 2008, CORE met at Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church in Dulce, New Mexico. CORE met with consistory and community members and sat in on a Native American Historical Trauma lecture given by an Arizona State University professor of Native American studies who is originally from Dulce. During this visit, CORE learned that the RCA has played a part in the destruction of indigenous culture, values, family systems, and sense of communities.

Reconnecting and strengthening our relationships with our Native American ministries is at the heart and soul of the sixth dimension of Our Call. Not only do we as a denomination have a responsibility to Native American congregations but we will be enriched and blessed by strengthening this relationship. By doing this, we demonstrate our commitment to all racial and ethnic councils, congregations, and ministries.

The commission offers a recommendation that will help reclaim and strengthen the voices of Native American communities and congregations within the General Synod and General Synod Council, and help empower or reestablish indigenous leadership in Native American ministries and in the RCA. In adopting this recommendation, the church will show it is intentional about living out Our Call.

The RCA will more fully be the body of Christ and reflect the image of God as we work to improve our inclusion of our Native American brothers and sisters in our leadership and denomination. The commission recognizes that this is true as we embrace all ethnicities, but there are particular ministries this recommendation is designed to address. Therefore, the commission recommends:

R-37

To urgently direct the General Synod Council 1) to explore the current status of the relationship between the Reformed Church in America and Native American congregations and communities, 2) to create a

plan to restore the voices of Native American congregations in the life, work, and ministry of the RCA, 3) to fund these efforts with 5 percent of the Lilly Endowment grant, and 4) to report back to the Commission on Race and Ethnicity by October 2009 with its conclusions and intentions; and further;

to ensure the success of this project, one of the project leaders will be a Native American person who is familiar with the goals and objectives of the Commission on Race and Ethnicity on this matter; and further;

to encourage the Synods of the Heartland, the Far West, and Canada to implement plans to enrich and strengthen their relationships with existing Native American congregations and ministries in their regions.

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology met in Chicago, Illinois, October 16-18, 2008, and again February 16-17, 2009. The commission has a very full agenda right now, despite the fact that it only brings one paper to this year's General Synod. Because of the high volume of the commission's workload, some projects which we had hoped to present to the 2009 synod are not yet complete and will be brought to future synods. The commission hopes that the synod will understand the limitations faced by the commission and will be patient as the commission seeks to do its work.

Deacons in Higher Assemblies

The commission continues its work on deacons in higher assemblies (see *MGS 2007*, R-18, p. 103) and hopes to present its report to the 2010 General Synod, one year later than requested by the synod in 2007. The commission's initial efforts on this paper led to further insight and a refocusing of the direction of its study. This is why the commission is requesting the longer timeframe.

Marks of the Church

Similarly, the commission continues work on the request from the 2007 General Synod "to engage in a study of the historic 'marks' of the church, as articulated in the RCA Standards and in light of missional understandings of the gospel, and to consider the recommendation of the addition of a fourth 'mark' of the church, for report to the General Synod no later than 2010" (*MGS 2007*, R-20, p. 103). The commission hopes to fulfill this request with a report for the 2010 General Synod.

Common Translation of the Standards with the Christian Reformed Church

The commission continues to receive consultative reports from Todd Billings and Eugene Heideman, the RCA representatives on a joint RCA/CRC task force that is preparing a new common translation of our Standards for inclusion in a joint RCA/CRC hymnbook to be published in 2013. The commission hopes to review a draft of the new translation at its fall 2009 meeting and to bring a recommendation to the 2010 General Synod regarding the approval of the new translation for use and study within the RCA.

Christian-Muslim Relations

The commission also continues its collaborative work with a number of RCA missionaries with extensive experience in the Middle East, preparing a new paper that will help the RCA deepen and strengthen its life and witness among Muslim people. The principle objective of the paper is to address issues that have arisen since 9/11 and reassess how Christians may more effectively and winsomely engage their Muslim neighbors in a globalized world.

Reformed and Missional Lexicon

The commission has been considering the directive from the 2008 General Synod "to instruct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship and the R-16/Reformed and Missional Task Force, to compile a brief theological dictionary in order to provide a common language for continued conversation, giving particular attention and emphasis to the terms "Reformed" and "missional," with report to General Synod 2009..." (*MGS 2008*, R-12, pp. 93f.). The commission began its work in the fall by consulting with the R-16 task force to select the terms that might be included in the lexicon. However, when it attempted to produce a first draft of brief definitions at its spring meeting, it quickly realized that the project is more complex than might initially appear. Very brief definitions are more comprehensible but can quickly be faulted for what they leave out, particularly in a context where the approval of such definitions by the General Synod may lend to them a normative weight in the life of the RCA. Longer definitions gain in precision, but with diminishing effectiveness as educational tools. The commission is still trying to find the most effective way forward and would welcome further clarification from the General Synod. It also requests from the General Synod additional time to complete its work.

Conversation on Ephesians 4:11 and "Apostolic Ministry"

The commission has noted that increasingly in RCA circles, especially those involved in

church multiplication (and in the RCA website sections on church multiplication), there is a strong emphasis on Ephesians 4:11 and the role of “apostles” or “apostolic leaders” in the life of the church, as well as discussion of the five-fold gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher in the life of the church. The commission recognizes that these emphases may pose some significant challenges to the existing order and ecclesiological assumptions within the RCA. In an effort to assist the church in reflecting on these issues, the commission has invited several leaders in the church multiplication movement in the RCA to engage in dialogue around these issues. That conversation is ongoing, and the commission has not yet decided whether it will produce a formal paper on the topic.

The Belhar Confession and “Our Call”

Finally, the commission offers the following paper for consideration by the General Synod. The 2008 General Synod directed the General Synod Council (GSC) “in collaboration with appropriate commissions and agencies of the RCA, to prepare a proposal to integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice...” (*MGS 2008*, R-67, p. 267). This mandate was the focus of much of the commission’s joint session with the GSC and with other commissions last fall. As part of this consultation, the commission also met with Earl James, coordinator of multiracial ministries and social justice, who invited the commission to assist the church in thinking more theologically about issues of racism, justice, and public witness. As the commission considered what sort of contribution it might make to this effort to integrate the Belhar Confession into the RCA, and into the language of Our Call, it decided to offer this paper. It hopes that the paper will assist the church both in considering the relationship between the Belhar Confession and Our Call, and in considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth doctrinal standard for the RCA.

Belhar and “Our Call”:

Theological Reflections on the Implications of a New RCA Confession for the Identity and Direction of the RCA as a Denomination

230

This summer, the RCA will decide whether or not to take an action that it has not done in almost four hundred years: it will consider whether to adopt the Belhar Confession for inclusion among its doctrinal standards, alongside the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. This is undoubtedly a major decision, and the Commission on Theology believes it may be helpful to the church to explore how the adoption of Belhar might reshape and refocus our self-understanding and direction as a denomination. What are the implications of the adoption of Belhar, with its focus on unity, reconciliation, and justice, for a denomination which believes that God is calling it to start new congregations and revitalize existing congregations, and thereby empower fruitful and faithful ministries for the glory of God?¹

This question of the relationship between Belhar and “Our Call” is further deepened by the action of the 2008 General Synod, which directed the General Synod Council to find a way to “integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice, for report to the 2009 General Synod.”²

At issue in this mandate is the necessary link between our confession as a church and our actual lived practice. If we are to confess the Belhar Confession with integrity, such a confession must flow from our common life, and it must inform the direction of our life together as a church. How can we do this most faithfully and effectively?

One possible answer might be to add the concerns of the Belhar Confession—unity, reconciliation, and justice—to the existing agendas and programs of the church. Indeed, something quite like this was proposed in 2003, when the language of Our Call was adopted. At that time, an amendment to Our Call was proposed from the floor of synod, and was rejected by the 2003 synod. That motion involved adding a third overall goal to the twin goals of starting new congregations and revitalizing existing congregations: “developing and supporting efforts to care for the poor and seeking to create greater justice in our world.”³

Perhaps it is simply the case that the 2009 General Synod, in considering the adoption of Belhar, is simply more ready to consider such a change than it was in 2003. That might be true, but something more basic and important is also at stake here. The Belhar Confession is not simply a call to a program focused on care for the poor and seeking greater justice

in the world. It is, at heart, a confession, an acknowledgement of and confrontation with the presence and lordship of Jesus Christ, mediated to us in the witness of Scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit. A confession is not first and foremost a social or ecclesiastical program; confession is rather what Christians do when they have met God face-to-face, and find that their lives have been irrevocably changed. Christians confess when they find that they can do nothing else except to confess a reality which far exceeds their own agendas, programs, ideas, goals, or visions. We do not confess to add greater weight to existing programs or goals; it is rather the case that our confession forces us to reconsider all our programs and goals, in light of God's great purposes revealed to us in Christ by the power of the Spirit.

This is where we must begin as we consider the implications of the Belhar Confession for Our Call. Belhar confronts us with a radical vision of unity, in which all alienation, enmity, hostility, and conflict are overcome in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because God's great purpose is to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:15-20), unity is both a gift given to the church in Christ, and also an obligation that drives the church into God's future. Because such unity cannot be achieved on earth without the reconciliation of enmity, division, alienation, and hostility, the church embraces the reconciling power given to us in Christ, and commits itself to be shaped by that power in all that it does. And because such reconciliation cannot take place without a deeper experience of justice throughout the world, the church finds itself compelled to bear witness to a new form of life in Christ where all oppression is ended, where all life comes to its fullness, and where all of creation is restored to God's gracious purpose.

What is the relationship between such a vision and Our Call? Quite simply, Belhar has the potential, not to replace Our Call, but rather to further ground and focus the denominational goal. By confessing Belhar, the RCA is saying that it is precisely our vision of the centrality of unity, reconciliation, and justice that drives us to start new congregations and revitalize existing congregations, building on the dynamic foundations of leadership, discipleship, and mission. To put it differently, Belhar is not an addition to Our Call, but rather enhances the basis of Our Call.

Why is it that the RCA wants to start new congregations and revitalize existing ones? Why is it that Our Call sets these goals upon the dynamic foundations of leadership, discipleship, and mission? One cynical answer is to say that the RCA has finally gotten anxious enough about its numerical decline that it has gone "all in" on an aggressive program simply to survive as a denomination. By this view, Our Call is driven fundamentally by the fear of death—the death of the RCA. Although a humble honesty must acknowledge that our motives as a denomination are not always pure, and that some of our actions may have indeed been driven by the fear of death, the adoption of Our Call in 2003 was also a moment of deep conviction—that God's purposes for the RCA were far from over, and that the RCA has been entrusted with good news for the whole world. The deepest and truest motive behind Our Call is the conviction that God's Spirit is still at work in the world, calling us out into the world to start new congregations and revitalize existing ones, not for our own survival, but for God's glory. Ultimately, the RCA adopted Our Call not out of anxiety, but out of obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God.

The adoption of Belhar can be seen as the deepening of this core conviction. What Belhar does is to add texture and specificity to our vision of what the Spirit of God is doing in and through the church, on behalf of the world. When we start new congregations in response to Our Call, we do so because congregations form the basic context where the unity, reconciliation, and justice God intends for the whole creation can first be tasted and offered to the world in word and deed. We revitalize existing congregations so that they are empowered to be salt and light in their contexts, so that God's great reconciling purposes can be made manifest to the world around us, to the glory of God. In this sense, the adoption of Belhar further clarifies the motives that drove the adoption of Our Call in the first place.

But the adoption of the Belhar Confession will not simply reinforce our existing agenda as a denomination. It will also reshape and refocus our work in several important ways. One of the ways that Belhar will challenge us as a denomination is to challenge a notion of growth for its own sake, as if simply increasing the numbers of the RCA were the final destination to which God is leading us. Such a preoccupation with numbers alone can all too easily become the ecclesiological equivalent of cancer, where growth leads not to deeper strength and effectiveness, but rather to the proliferation of churches that have lost their shared sense of unity, confession, and conviction. Although Belhar doesn't address directly the growth of the church, it implicitly warns against any approach to the growth

of the church (or any other aspect of the church's life) which undermines the unity of the Church for which Christ died—the unity that stands as the core gift and obligation undergirding all of the church's life and witness. In this sense, Belhar's call to unity, reconciliation, and justice tempers and focuses the growth goals of the church, and keeps us centered in Jesus Christ and his gracious purposes for the world.

Secondly, Belhar places before us with particular emphasis the work of Christ in reconciling races, peoples, and cultures where there has been alienation, hostility, oppression, and indifference. Here as well, Belhar has the capacity to lend focus and specificity to Our Call. The adoption of Belhar will call the RCA to continue to deepen its emphasis upon cross-cultural and multiracial ministry. This is a call that is “close to home” for many RCA churches, where neighborhood changes have challenged the ability of churches and classes to continue as mono-cultural, mono-racial, and mono-ethnic groups. The adoption of Belhar would be a statement by the RCA that its future lies in starting and revitalizing not just any sorts of congregations. Rather, the focus would fall more heavily on welcoming the diversity in our midst, in order to become more authentically multiracial and multiethnic congregations and classes.

Such a refocusing of denominational energies will not always be easy. It may not always be the most financially lucrative approach for the denomination. It may well place urban ministries as a higher priority for the RCA. It will certainly challenge approaches to church multiplication that only target “niches” of like-minded people for new church starts. It may slow down growth that otherwise might be possible with a more consumer-driven approach to congregational revitalization and multiplication. If the RCA is serious about adopting the Belhar Confession, then it must carefully consider how such challenges might lead it to refocus its understanding of Our Call, not to abandon the call to church revitalization and multiplication, but rather to deepen our grasp of the sorts of churches that God is calling us to start and revitalize.

Finally, Belhar has the capacity to deepen our understanding of the unity of the church. It has become fashionable for many denominations to seek to live by maxims such as “doctrine divides, but mission unites.” While it is often true that a concrete focus on mission can reframe some of our doctrinal or ecclesial disputes, and help us to realize what is truly important, such maxims will ultimately fail the church by forcing us to pit our faith against our missional practice. Maxims such as this represent a kind of “quick fix” for the church, an attempt simply to bypass old conflicts, rather than to resolve them. Such “end runs” will not have staying power. If Our Call is interpreted apart from the call to confession expressed in Belhar, and indeed in all our confessions, it may itself run into such dead-ends.

By contrast, Belhar confronts us, perhaps in a deeper way than we in the RCA have faced before, with the basic and foundational unity of the church as both gift and obligation. To join in confessing the Belhar Confession is to say as a denomination that unity is not merely a luxury that we will pursue only so long as it is expedient to do so. Rather, Belhar reminds us that our unity is absolutely foundational to our identity. If our own only comfort in life and in death is that “we are not our own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior Jesus Christ,” then Belhar confronts us with a necessary and unavoidable corollary: Because we belong to Jesus Christ, we also belong to each other, and must accept that unity as both gift and obligation, whether we like each other or not, whether we always agree with each other or not, whether we always are able to understand each other or not. To confess Belhar is to accept this unity as a given, and to commit ourselves to the practices of reconciliation and justice which allow this unity to manifest itself ever more deeply in our lives and in our world. And yet, this unity to which Belhar calls us can never be restricted to denominational unity, even though it must begin there. The gift and obligation of unity, and its attendant practices of reconciliation and the pursuit of justice, do not belong to the RCA alone. If our unity flows from our union with Christ, this is a gift and obligation that invites us into practices of unity, reconciliation, and justice not just within the RCA, but also with the wider church. This too calls us into a deeper engagement with the phrase in Our Call which speaks of “working together with all the partners that God provides.”

The Commission on Theology would like to make one further comment on the RCA's consideration of the Belhar Confession for adoption. This observation concerns the relationship between the Belhar Confession and our other confessions, should the Belhar be adopted as a fourth doctrinal standard by the RCA. The commission notes that the Belhar Confession does not claim to be a general statement of faith like the Belgic Confession, or even a broad document for teaching like the Heidelberg Catechism. Its confessional func-

tion is rather much more akin to the Canons of Dort, written to address a focused set of issues not fully addressed in our existing standards. Moreover, there are statements in the Belhar Confession which, taken by themselves, might be subject to misunderstanding, if they are interpreted apart from our other standards. For example, the Belhar states that “true faith in Christ is the only condition for membership in this church.” It goes on, in the rejection of errors, to reject any doctrine “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.” These statements arose from the need to reject the use of race or ancestry as a means to divide the church.

But such statements, taken out of the larger context of Reformed confessions (and outside of the original context of the Belhar Confession), might conceivably be interpreted by some to suggest that the children of believers should not be considered members of the church by virtue of their “physical descent” from their parents, and thus should not be baptized as a sign of their incorporation into the church. Yet such a view is explicitly contradicted both by our Liturgy, which states that baptized children are “received into the visible membership of the holy catholic church,” and is also contradicted by Belgic Confession, which states that by baptism “we are received into God’s church” (Article 34). Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of how the infant children of believers are, by baptism, “received into the Christian church” (Q&A 74). It is also worth noting that the practice of infant baptism is not an issue of controversy in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and this potential (mis)reading might well surprise many in South Africa!

Such problems, first of all, can be addressed by recognizing that we acknowledge that all of our confessions are “historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God” which must be interpreted in light of their original context and intention. But such potential problems can also be forestalled if the Reformed Church finds a way to make it clear, as it adopts the Belhar Confession, that in freely and fully adopting Belhar, the RCA continues its deep commitment to its existing doctrinal standards, and interprets the Belhar Confession within the framework of its other confessions and creeds. In fact, the adoption of the Belhar Confession offers to the RCA the opportunity to deepen its confessional identity as a whole, and to integrate more fully its confessional and missional identity.

Given all these considerations, the Commission on Theology commends the Belhar Confession to the RCA, and encourages the church to reflect carefully and deeply upon the implications of its adoption for our common life. Belhar has the capacity to deepen and transform our shared life. May God lead us into this new chapter in our lives!

R-38

To approve the document “Belhar and ‘Our Call’” and to commend the document to churches, classes, and synods for use in considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession; and further;

to direct the General Synod Council to make use of “Belhar and ‘Our Call’” in its attempts to integrate the Belhar Confession into the implementation of Our Call.

Endnotes

- ¹ Taken from the RCA ten-year goal statement. For the entire goal statement, see the *Minutes of General Synod 2003*, p. 66; or, on the www.rca.org homepage, click on “Our Mission and Call.”
- ² *Minutes of General Synod 2008*, p. 267.
- ³ *Minutes of General Synod 2003*, p. 66.
- ⁴ Language from *BCO* Formularies 1, 3, and 7.

Report of the Commission for Women

Celebration, Call, and Challenge

Thirty-six years ago, in 1973, Joyce Stedje Fowler was ordained as the first woman minister of Word and sacrament. Three other women were ordained in 1978, but it was in 1979 that the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America voted to approve the ordination of women as ministers. Therefore, during this meeting of the General Synod in 2009, we celebrate that decision thirty years ago as an occasion to bless the ministry of women as well as the ministry of all—men and women.

During the past thirty years dozens of congregations have experienced the ministry and leadership and care of women pastors. Students in colleges and seminaries have studied with women professors who are also ordained ministers. Hurting and dying people have received pastoral care from women chaplains. Certainly it has been a change. Women's voices don't sound quite the same as men's. Women preachers may ask different questions of the texts. But on the whole, people who have been willing to listen to and work with women ministers have found them to be people of integrity, intelligence, and grace. Congregations and students and clients have realized that women ministers are not a problem but a gift.

With thirty years behind us, and with a wonderful future for women ministers, we remind ourselves in the ordination liturgy that "Christ alone is the source of all Christian ministry, through the ages calling men and women to serve." We are privileged to be called to serve Christ's church. The current statistics indicate that there are 267 female ministers of Word and sacrament.

Because there is much to celebrate this year, especially to acknowledge the significant ministry of women, the Commission for Women has requested a time of celebration during this two hundred third session of General Synod meeting June 4-9, 2009, in Holland, Michigan. The Commission for Women is delighted that this thirtieth year celebration occurs under the leadership of Carol Bechtel, the first woman president of synod who is an ordained minister of Word and sacrament. Her presidency is a wonderful sign of the integration of the denomination's decision of thirty years ago with the practice of honoring the leadership and authority—spiritual and formal—of women in the Reformed Church. Thirty years is a fairly short window in the light of God's eternal faithfulness: despite what we perceive to be a sea of change, God's steadfast love continues to summon response.

This year, while we honor the women who bravely stepped forward thirty years ago to receive ordination as ministers of Word and sacrament, we recognize that "all is not right with the world." Forty or fifty years ago, and many years before that, women sought to serve as ordained ministers with little hope of receiving endorsement or spiritual encouragement to follow this call. Some of the voices around us, despite a celebration this year, sadly wonder, "Are we still struggling with some of the same issues, same themes, same limits on women's roles?" The struggle continues—not just for women seeking ordination as ministers of Word and sacrament, but also for those seeking to serve as elders or deacons or commissioned pastors. Over the past five years the percentage of women serving on consistories throughout the denomination has fluctuated between 23 percent and 32 percent, revealing the disparity in leadership at the congregational level. The struggle seems particularly acute when the statistics reflect very little involvement of women in the formal leadership of new church starts. Statistics at this time of writing reveal that of fifty-nine pastors serving new churches, three are female.

Alas, yes, the issues are the same, but some assert that it is for good reason. The opponents of women's ordination say that they do so for biblical reasons, which have not changed in thirty years. Because we are people of Reformed faith and strong biblical tradition, we do not quickly or lightly set aside these interpretations of Scripture. In fact, one of our strengths as a denomination is that various interpretations are honored and held in the same institution.

Nevertheless, to put the struggle in a nutshell, the biblical interpretations of some limit the ability of others to follow God's call. The Commission for Women has received information regarding several instances where consistories or classes did not honor the call of women to various offices of the church, using the "conscience clause" of the *Book of Church Order* not to "refrain from participation" in the ordination of women to the offices of the church, but to actively block those ordinations. Congregations have used irregular

(not approved by classis) methods to nominate and elect consistory members. There have been examples of intimidation and threats along with the dismissal of a pastor who encouraged the full use of women's gifts. These tactics are inappropriate for people who claim to follow Jesus Christ. The conscience clause is frequently cited in support of such actions, although this was certainly not its intent.

When nominations procedures and classis systems do not work "decently and in order," discrimination further pushes aside those who are marginalized. If there is hope that any institution can be careful, caring, and honorable in how it proceeds, one would think the church would be the place. Instead, the church seems to use (and sometimes endorse) methods of selecting leaders that are not honorable or consistent with church order. When members of a congregation disagree on biblical interpretation regarding women holding church office, then a dialogue must occur, rather than unfair practices to avoid the issue.

Women continue to respond to and receive confirmation of the inner and outer call of God to serve in the church and in the world through the various offices of the church. Women who hearken to this call—as well as men—take deeply to heart the words of prophecy in Joel that say, "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy." The church can claim that prophecy to be coming true even now, as women and men are called to bring forth the kingdom of God, and to continue to proclaim and live into the reality of that new day.

Worship leaders "re-present" God and the Word of God to us—in what is said, gestured, and embodied. Women and men leading worship together represent a beautiful embodiment of the Word of God, as well as a balance of God's image in each gender. Worship leaders incarnate the presence of God—not as thoroughly as Jesus did, of course, but in ways that remind each worshiper of the reality that Christ dwells among God's people, and the people of God are the body of Christ. Women who serve as chaplains regularly experience the intimacy of being God's representatives in situations of intense pastoral care and institutional challenge. Women who serve as teachers or professors speak with boldness to their students, drawing from the wisdom of Jesus' teaching and from the power of Jesus' prophetic voice. Women who serve in ministry know that the best advice comes from the Holy Spirit; that advocacy for the downtrodden is best understood through prayer with the Advocate; that the creatures we meet are uniquely made by our Creator.

Most women who serve in the office of minister of Word and sacrament do not serve to "prove a point" or to be adversarial. These women are simply and compellingly responding to God's strong call in a church institution that makes such a response difficult. Most women who seek to serve as ministers do so because this is how the church is organized, and rightly so, in following Paul's words that "the gifts [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

However, statistics tell us that while the denomination says it affirms God's call to both men and women, our actions are inconsistent with our words. Research by professors Don Luidens and Roger Nemeth of Hope College's department of sociology and social work shows that although women make up 60 to 63 percent of the RCA's membership, of the 2,125 total ordained ministers in the RCA, only 12 percent are women. Of the 832 ordained ministers serving congregations, only 92 (about 11 percent) are women.

The Commission for Women and Women Seminarians

The Commission for Women met with several women seminarians attending New Brunswick Theological Seminary on February 5, 2009. Because this commission advocates for women, the commission has intentionally planned its second meeting of the past years to meet with women students. Women students and staff continue to report a lack of opportunities to preach in Reformed Church congregations. It is also more difficult for women than for men to receive calls as installed pastors. These have been ongoing issues throughout the past thirty years, and seem more prevalent in the Midwest and far West in the U.S. and in Canada than in the eastern portion of the United States. Women seminarians indicate good support from faculty and staff at their seminaries. Students who are further along in their seminary studies report the confidence that comes from finding their voices and establishing their identities as church leaders.

Issues of Inclusive Language and the Availability of Materials

Mary Clark, the coordinator for RCA women's ministries, reminded the members of the Commission for Women of her awareness that many RCA women's Bible study groups or

small groups seem woefully disconnected from RCA materials for study and meeting. Mary has observed throughout the denomination that women's groups select materials that have no affiliation with Reformed theology or a Reformed understanding of Scripture. Popular materials are selected based on information from television evangelists and community church publications. Furthermore, even women from the greater Chicago area churches were not given information about the denominational women's conference held in downtown Chicago in 2007, since some pastors did not see fit to inform female members of their congregations of the event because of their own objections. These two observations indicate that RCA women seem not to be well connected to the larger denomination.

Members of the Commission for Women who were present at General Synod 2008 also noted the woeful predominance of exclusively male language for God used during worship, especially in songs and liturgy. Commissioners appeal to the church to consider how narrowly masculine language limits God and our understanding of God. Inclusive language and uses of the variety of biblical metaphors can only enhance our worship, our realization of God's presence among us, and our ability to respond to God in our world.

Denominational Staffing and Structure, and the Position of Coordinator for Women's Ministries

Lynn Japinga served as the Commission for Women representative on the task force formed in response to R-70 (*MGS 2008*, p. 280), which addressed issues of greater inclusion of women and people of color at all levels of staffing within the denomination. This task force met once, reviewed established policies, and made suggestions for changes. This task force, and the approval of R-70 from the 2008 General Synod, represents energetic collaboration between the Commission for Women, the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, and the Commission for Christian Action, especially as representatives work with Sharon Hayes, coordinator of personnel for the RCA.

Mary Clark has served as the RCA staff person assigned to the Commission for Women for the past five years. She has regularly informed us of her work in addressing various women's groups throughout the denomination, encouraging women to see themselves as vital leaders in the denomination and its ministries. Mary has traveled extensively to meet groups of women as they seek to reenergize their ties with the Reformed Church. She encouraged participation in the women's conference of 2007 and in regional women's gatherings. She has developed regional coordinators for women's ministries and Sister Share, a new program to encourage the ongoing support of mission in the Reformed Church. She has utilized the wisdom of the Women's Ministries Advisory Team to increase her effectiveness in promoting the ministry of women throughout the denomination.

Mary has demonstrated strong enthusiasm for the mission of the church around the world, and especially the work of the RCA. She has advocated and encouraged women's participation in the church in formal and informal ways, and she has persistently seen and told of evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the church.

With sadness and some frustration, the Commission for Women members received news that funding for the coordinator for women's ministries would end this fiscal year. The RCA is gaining momentum in using the gifts and leadership of women within our congregations, assemblies, and ministries, in part because of Mary Clark's work. It seems unfortunate to end the role of the coordinator of women's ministries at this time. Commission for Women members and women in the denomination understand that funds raised several years ago which were intended for the coordinator for women's ministries position have now been depleted. The question remains, however, concerning why women need to raise funds for a position when other staff positions are funded by assessments. This separate funding for women's advocacy seems to emphasize all the more the marginalization of women in the Reformed Church in America.

The members of the Commission for Women were assured by senior denominational staff that the RCA and its structures remain firmly committed to supporting women in full leadership at all levels of the church's leadership and ministry. Further, the commission was invited to participate in a future dialogue on the role and structure of such an advocacy position. The commission agrees that, given the current realities for women in ministry in the RCA, this firm commitment of staff to establishing a future position for the support of and advocacy for women in leadership in the RCA is both necessary and warranted. The commission supports this intention and invites the General Synod to do so as well. Being clear about our intentions as a church will enable subsequent discussions of exactly how

to accomplish that work to be both faithful and fruitful. To that end, the commission offers the following recommendations:

R-39

To instruct the General Synod Council to develop and hold a training event for all RCA staff that addresses issues of gender and power; assumptions about women as leaders, the use of language, and specific ways to fully include women in the life of the church.

Reasons:

1. In the absence of a position for women's ministries, RCA staff needs to continue to develop an awareness of issues related to gender differences, especially in the workplace and in church leadership.
2. The very small number of women serving as church-start pastors suggests that there may be some bias in the way that these pastors are selected, and in the assumptions about what makes an effective church-start pastor. A training session would promote opportunities to expand the discussion among staff and, potentially, opportunities for women.
3. There continue to be many occasions within the RCA (at all levels) when the authority and contributions of women are not respected.
4. Such training can enhance the collaborative ministry of women and men throughout the staff and the denomination, and make all better-equipped to serve the church.

R-40

To direct the General Synod Council to develop the funding plan for a future Office for Women that would allow the RCA to live out its stated commitment to the full inclusion of women at all levels of the church's leadership and ministry; and further;

to present the report to the 2010 General Synod and to have a staff member in place by January 2011.

Reasons:

1. The RCA has regularly affirmed the need for a strong and active advocacy role for women in the church, as it has for a number of racial-ethnic groups, but has failed to put in place a consistent and adequate funding base for an Office for Women (as it has for the racial-ethnic groups).
2. Placing the responsibility for structure and funding with the General Synod Council will ensure this action is taken, and will allow the discussions planned by staff with the commission and others to focus on how the office can best work.
3. Such funding would be consistent with the approval of R-70 (*MGS 2008*, p. 280) and the succeeding task force's work.

Commission for Women Meetings

The Commission for Women met twice in the past year: in Chicago, on October 16-18, 2008, in conjunction with the General Synod Council meetings, and in February 2009, at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. The Commission for Women continues to draw from biblical inspiration, stories of effective ministry and mission, and the ongoing and lively presence of the Holy Spirit for its tasks, and calls the RCA to confession for its inadequate response to and support of the many women who seek to be faithful servants of God in all areas of the church. As we celebrate, we also grieve those who have been dismissed or ignored when they sought affirmation of God's call. God does continue to stir up the Spirit among us; the Commission for Women offers glory and gratitude to God for the marvelous energy of living out our call as the body of Christ in this lost and broken world so loved by God.