

# REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

## What Is the Glue that Holds Us Together?

By Carol M. Bechtel  
President, General Synod

The first and most important thing to say on this occasion is thank you! Thank you for the confidence that you have placed in me this past year as your president. Thank you for the hospitality with which you greeted me as I traveled around the RCA—whether it was over chicken foot soup at Flatbush Reformed in Mid-Hudson Classis, or Jell-O salad and bars in the back of little Strasburg Reformed in Dakota Classis, birthday cake with the Classis of Ontario, or a French/Vietnamese fusion feast with the staff of City Church, San Francisco. But most of all, thank you for the candor with which you shared both your joys and your sorrows. I am honored by your honesty. I pray that it will be well placed. And I pledge to treat all that you have told me reverently.

Everywhere I have gone this year I have asked the same two questions: “What are you celebrating?” and “What are you mourning?”

If I do say so myself, those were good questions. They elicited a wealth of rich responses. I learned a great deal from what you said. You will hear echoes of what you’ve taught me throughout this report.

Did you know that the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* states that this should be “a report on the state of religion in the classes” (1.IV.5)? Somewhat intimidated by that task, I sought guidance in the reports of presidents past. I didn’t read them all, mind you, but I did go back as far as the year of my birth: 1959. The only problem with this plan was that the first report I read was by the illustrious Howard Hageman—and his was so good I didn’t know whether to be inspired or depressed! But I persevered, and I was struck by how accurately many of them anticipated the future which is now the RCA’s present. I won’t attempt to be as prophetic, but I will try to recycle some of their wisdom and apply it to our current situation. So you will hear some echoes of presidents past in this report as well.

I’d like to begin with a question asked in 1984 by Len Kalkwarf: “What is the glue that holds us together?” Did you know that in one way or another, that question was asked by almost all of the presidents I read? It’s a question we seem to be working our way through with “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). It is, at its heart, a question of identity. And it is the question that is dearest to my heart after a year of being your president.

### Identity

So, what should we say about identity? We could dive right into that question by surveying ourselves as the Reformed Church in America. But since our identity as a Reformed Church got its start long before we—by God’s grace—set up shop here in America, I’d like to begin a bit farther back. (It is the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, after all!)

When the Reformation took hold in sixteenth-century Europe it gave birth to a whole family of reformed churches that are now scattered across the globe. One of my “joyful duties” as your president was to represent the RCA to a few of these reformed “cousins.” Those visits gave me a better sense of our role in the broader reformed family, and I think that sense may be relevant for our identity quest. So I’d like to share some brief snapshots of those visits as we begin.

Because the Belhar Confession is a major topic for us this year, I chose to visit people in our broader reformed family who have had significant experience with one of the Belhar’s central themes: reconciliation. This took me to:

- Northern Ireland, where the people of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the staff of a place called the Corrymeela Community work tirelessly and creatively for reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics. As I stood looking out at the waves breaking against the rocks below Corrymeela’s campus, I couldn’t help but pray that these patient peacemakers would eventually wear away the anger and prejudice in that place.
- Hungary, where RCA missionaries Dick and Carolyn Otterness work with the Reformed Church in Hungary among the chronically abused Roma people commonly known as “gypsies.”

- Croatia, where Eric and Nancy Titus are a healing presence in a place where bullet holes still pock-mark the walls and burned-out buildings still litter the lanes.
- South Africa, where the Belhar was born, but to which it is not confined. As one Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa leader reminded us, the word “apartheid” was deliberately left out of the Belhar Confession because they did not want it to be limited to their particular context. While it was forged in that furnace of racial hatred, it was carefully crafted so that it could be a gift to any and every place where the biblical values of unity, justice, and reconciliation need to be applied with passion and power.
- Kenya, where Jane and Rowland Van Es Jr. introduced us to reformed cousins in three east African denominations whose members are indeed working out their salvation with fear and trembling. We found them still shaking, in fact, from the terror that ripped through their communities in the wake of the post-election violence of late 2007 and early 2008. Imagine—if you can—what it would be like in your town if members of RCA, Presbyterian, and Christian Reformed churches took to the streets to burn each other’s churches and murder each other with machetes. It’s unimaginable! That’s what the Christians in Kenya thought, too, but tragically, for many tribal identity trumped baptismal identity. The hopeful news is that the leaders of these three African denominations have banded together to work for reconciliation and to school their people for peace. There is some urgency to this training, since the 2012 election looms large. In view of this, I have designated this year’s General Synod offerings to go toward peacemaking workshops among our reformed brothers and sisters in Kenya. I hope that it will save lives. But I know that it will be a way of reaching the hand of Christian fellowship across the continents to say—in a very tangible way—“Peace be with you.”

I want to share one more story about Kenya because I think it speaks powerfully to this matter of identity—and to the ways a confession can shape both who we are and what we do.

Samson Kipruto was one of the pastors we met in Eldoret, Kenya. He now leads an ecumenical group of over six hundred pastors who are working for peace in that place. But when the violence erupted in late 2007, Samson was at his family’s compound on the outskirts of Eldoret. He angered some of the tribally affiliated gangs when he offered life-saving shelter to over three hundred people of various tribal backgrounds. Soon after Samson’s “houseguests” had gone home, one of the gangs showed up, intent on taking his life and burning the compound. Samson told me that at that moment, he thought his life was over. So he simply held out his hands and said: “This belongs to God, and I belong to God. Do what you will.” Inexplicably—or providentially—the angry young men went away.

Is it me, or did you, too, hear an echo of the Heidelberg Catechism in his words? “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” the catechism asks. And the answer is: “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...” This belongs to God, and I belong to God. Do what you will.

This story surely illustrates God’s grace and Samson’s courage. Yet, it illustrates four other things as well—four things that are very important for us as we consider adopting the Belhar Confession:

1. It illustrates the way a confession—in this case, the Heidelberg—sharpens the point of Scripture and pokes us with it. Question and Answer #1 is, after all, a pointed paraphrase of Romans 14:8: “...whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”
2. It illustrates the way confessions help us to distill and articulate what we believe.
3. It illustrates the way confessions form us so that when push comes to shove—as in Samson’s case—we are more likely to do as we say.
4. And finally, it illustrates the way confessions are a witness to the world—inviting the world to hold us accountable for what we publicly say we believe.

In light of all of this, it’s obvious that adopting a new confession is not something that should be entered into lightly or ill-advisedly, but rather reverently and prayerfully. Having said that, however, it seems to me that we do have the weight and wisdom of a decade’s worth of General Synods behind us. Surely that helps to build momentum for this moment.

It is not my business to tell you what to do when it comes time to vote on the Belhar. Nor would I want to, since our reformed faith affirms that the Spirit speaks most reliably and consistently through the gathered people of God. But it is my business—or better, my responsibility—to report to you that everything I have heard and seen this past year has

testified to the power and potential of the Belhar. It is my responsibility to tell you that whenever I shared the Belhar with our reformed cousins elsewhere in the world—whether it was in Northern Ireland, Europe, or Kenya—it was greeted with great interest and excitement—sometimes as if slaking a great thirst. It is my responsibility to tell you that there seems to be a growing consensus that the Belhar is a faithful and helpful expression of reformed faith—and a growing edge of our identity.

But what about the Reformed Church in America? What are the issues of identity that we are wrestling with? And in the midst of them, what is the glue that holds us together?

The first thing to say is that we, too, are a work in progress. And while we may feel quite mature celebrating, as we are, our 203rd General Synod—in the grand scheme of things we might better be described as teenagers. This struck me quite powerfully when I visited the Reformed Church in Hungary—which is not only significantly older (dating to the mid 1500s), but also considerably bigger (1.6 million in Hungary alone). So, if we're teenagers, perhaps it's not surprising that we should be having certain "growing pains." Not so many decades ago we still pointed to our Dutch heritage as the primary way to describe our identity. Now, one of the major "celebrations" I heard as I traveled around the RCA is our growing diversity. This is a good change—and yet all change brings a certain amount of uncertainty with it. Growing pains, if you will. As we try to come to terms with who we are in this transitional "teenage" time, we would do well to keep Paul's words to the church at Philippi in mind: "I am confident...that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). But we might also want to bear in mind the words of Eugene Peterson, who points out that while "growing up is hard, the alternative is disastrous!"\*

At my house, we do something that's relevant, I think, to this question of evolving identity. I'm not sure how it started, but in my family we sometimes say goodbye by marking the sign of the cross on each other's forehead. What we're really doing is retracing the "sign and seal" that was marked on our foreheads at baptism. And this simple, silent act is a kind of shorthand for saying, "Go with God and remember who and whose you are." As the kids grew up—especially during their teenage years—I found myself marking them more and more often. ("What? You're going on a date? Well, just let me...there you go!")

The spoken equivalent of this practice for the RCA is perhaps our frequent repetition of that Reformation mantra: "Reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God." The only problem is that we often try to "reform" without having a strong sense of what it means to be "reformed." This often came out in feedback I got from people who had participated in the Reformed and Missional Dialogue. They celebrated that we were having the dialogue, but they mourned what the dialogue often revealed. They asked, "How can we be 'always reforming' faithfully if we can't remember what it means to be reformed?"

Here's an analogy that might help us think about this "reformed and always reforming" thing. Mozart wrote the tune we would recognize as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." [Pianist plays opening measures of theme.] He also wrote twelve variations on that theme. Here's one of my favorites. [Pianist plays opening measures of variation #5.] It's charming, isn't it? But when you heard the variation, I'm guessing you didn't say to yourself, "Ah—that's 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.'" No. You recognized it as a riff on "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The variation is closely related to the theme. It is clearly recognizable—albeit delightfully different.

As I traveled around the RCA this year, many, many people expressed sadness over their sense that we as a church may be morphing into a completely different tune. What can we do, they asked, to make sure that what we are becoming is a recognizable rendition of what we've been? How can we be truly reformed even as we are ever reforming according to the Word of God?

These are identity questions. They go to the very heart of who we are—and who God is calling us to be.

As I pondered what recommendations to make as part of this report, I decided to focus on things that I hope will help us clarify this question of identity...that might, by the grace of God, strengthen the glue that holds us together. These things fall into three areas: worship, baptism, and ministry.

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\* From a lecture at Western Theological Seminary, October 3, 2008.

## Worship

I want to make one thing crystal clear before I say a word about worship. Here it is: I believe that reformed worship can be expressed in many ways and in diverse manners. There is no one style of music or one shape of sanctuary that has a monopoly on what's reformed. And in the past year, believe me, I've experienced pretty much the whole spectrum of styles and enjoyed them! I wanted to make sure we understood each other on that score, lest you assume I'm saying something I'm not.

Let's start, then, by doing a little exercise I like to call "Where's Worship?" (Reminiscent, I suppose, of "Where's Waldo?") Take a look if you will at our Our Call logo. [Logo displayed on screen.] Where's worship? Can you find it? I see: "discipleship," "mission," and "leadership." I see "revitalizing existing congregations" and "starting new congregations." We've added another swath of color highlighting the sixth element of Our Call: "multiracial future freed from racism." But where's worship? Isn't that an important element of our call as the people of God? Isn't that an integral part of our identity?

First, you can relax. I'm not going to suggest adding a seventh element to Our Call. But I would like to call your attention to the little stick figure under the cross. What is he or she doing? Aha! It looks to me like we've found worship. I don't know if it was a conscious decision or not, but we have put worship at the very center of this symbolic expression of our identity. That is a very good thing, and I think it suggests that worship needs to radiate out—to permeate all the surrounding areas of Our Call.

But if worship is in our logo—albeit subtly—why doesn't it show up in more of what we say about ourselves? Why isn't it a more prominent part of our goal statements or our resourcing or our staffing? Do you know that I could not find the word "worship" in any of our General Synod Council's "ends policies"? This is not surprising, in some ways, since these policies are a direct reflection of the six dimensions of Our Call. But given the figure in the middle, wouldn't you think the word worship would show up somewhere as a priority?

Now perhaps I'm nit-picking. Worship is surely implied in the ends policies just as it is implicit in the logo. When we speak of "ministry" and "congregations," surely we assume that worship is an important part of those realities. Surely! But is it enough to assume that? Isn't the danger of assuming that worship is everywhere that it will not necessarily be anywhere?

I'm going to say more in a moment about why worship is so crucial to our identity as a church, but since I'm talking about the GSC's ends policies, let me just pause for a moment to make a proposal related to these. And just so we're clear, ends policies are statements that guide the work of the GSC and the general secretary on our behalf. Here's the proposal:

### **P-1**

**To affirm that worship is a part of every dimension of Our Call; and further;**

**to instruct the General Synod Council to incorporate more explicit language about worship into their global end, ends, and sub-ends policies.**

This may not seem like a significant change to you, but I promise, it will make a difference over time in *who* we are and *how* we are as a covenant community.

Now let's wonder a little together about the reasons worship seems to have dropped off our radar screen.

One reason might be that we're trying to sidestep controversy. Churches do disagree about worship, after all. But just because one doesn't talk about a problem doesn't mean it isn't still a problem. And wouldn't talking about it make it more likely that we'd see the possibilities as well as the problems? It's a bit like a troubled couple that refuses to go to marriage counseling because they don't want to acknowledge that they are troubled. But problems don't just disappear when we refuse to talk about them. (I'm sure this is not news to any of you who are married!) And sometimes, by the grace of God, talking leads to understanding—and understanding leads to reconciliation—and reconciliation leads to a rela-

tionship that is richer and stronger than ever. Wouldn't that be something—if in the RCA the worship wars could become a worship wedding?

But there's another reason I think worship has received less emphasis of late. In recent years we have—quite rightly—put renewed emphasis on becoming more missional. We have worked hard to become more “externally focused,” reaching out into our communities with tangible expressions of God's transforming grace.

Hear me well: this is good. This is very good. But it becomes not so very good when being “externally focused” leads to the neglect of a legitimate “internal focus.” We need to be both. And we need to make it clear that an internal focus on worship is not the same as being “self-absorbed” or “self-indulgent.” Why is that? It's because worship is not about us. It's about God. God is the recipient of our worship—the “audience” if you will.

But if worship is primarily about God, does that mean there's nothing in it for us? Of course not. The hymn we sang this morning names several gifts God gives to us in worship: “God, you call us to this place, where we know your love and grace. Here your hospitality makes of us one family...called, forgiven, loved, and freed, for the world we intercede...in the Spirit let us be one in faith and unity.”\*

Those aren't small things. In fact, they're a rich feast...a feast to which we should be eager to invite others. And in this sense, worship can indeed be missional. Here are just a couple of thoughts about that which will finish setting the stage for my second recommendation.

Sometimes we assume that in order to be “missional” in our worship we have to make it feel completely familiar, so that there is no discernable distinction between what people might experience in general culture. This is the kind of logic that turns worship into a warm bath rather than a dip into a fresh, flowing stream.

Or sometimes we assume that worship must be reduced to only those things that a “seeker” would understand. But I wonder if this is a misdirected attempt to be missional. Even John Calvin—after wrestling with the meaning of the Lord's Supper for a couple of chapters in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—finally throws up his hands and admits, “I rather experience it than understand it” (IV.17.32). We might do well to take our cue from Calvin here.

As I thought about these things I recalled—don't ask me how—a scene from the early years of the television series *ER*. It features the character of Susan, a young doctor, who is hurrying past a church one day on her way to work. She's almost past the door when she notices that an elderly woman has dropped a sweater on her way into worship. Torn between getting to work on time and helping the woman, she hesitates—then grabs the sweater and rushes in.

It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to the candlelight. The elderly woman is nowhere in sight, so Susan stands for a moment—unsure what to do. But then her eyes are drawn to a pool of light and a group gathered at the front of the sanctuary around the baptismal font. The sound of their prayers drifts down the aisle, mixing with the soft sounds of the organ and the baby's shrill cry. The sweater is forgotten as Susan stands transfixed, drawn—in spite of herself—into the sphere of the sacred—into the gracious work of God.

Maybe the reason this scene made such an impression on my memory was because it symbolized so beautifully the way we are drawn into the mystery in worship. Susan doesn't “understand” the fine points of the theology of baptism, but she's drawn to it—she responds to the warmth and the welcome she feels in that place and in the people gathered around that font. It touches something deep inside her and it “claims” her in a way that no lecture or tract ever could.

So where does this leave us? It leaves me, at least, at the cusp of another recommendation. In light of the fact that worship is central to our call, crucial to God's mission, and formational for our identity as the people of God, I make the following proposal:

**P-2**

**To instruct the officers of the General Synod to appoint a task force of no more than eight persons to explore the nature of and funding for a**

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\* Text by Delores Dufner.

**major worship initiative in the RCA; and further;**

**to include on this task force persons with particular expertise and experience in the understanding and practice of Reformed worship, in worship education, in the unique worship needs of new and emerging congregations, and in funding development, so that any proposed initiative (and its aspects) might be multi-generational in scope, multi-faceted in approach, and affordable; and further;**

**to instruct the task force to report back to the next meeting of the General Synod with the results of its work and any relevant recommendations.**

## **Baptism**

Next to worship, baptism was the most talked about topic on my visits around the RCA. There are some real reasons to celebrate over this subject. Witness, for instance, the astonishing increase in the number of adult baptisms in the Synod of the Far West: from 354 adult baptisms in the year 2000 to the 532 in 2007. These figures obviously reflect the work of the Holy Spirit in that region—as well as the hard work of those who labor in that vineyard! But there is another statistical trend in this same region that I find perplexing. In the same stretch of time (2000 to 2007), while adult baptisms went up significantly, infant baptisms did not rise accordingly. In fact, they decreased from 417 in 2000 to 288 in 2007. Focusing on the figures from 2007 alone, one would expect that with 532 adult baptisms there would be at least one-third-again as many infants. (Adults often have children, after all!) But instead, the ratio is 532 adults to 288 children—slightly more than one-third fewer. So unless most of these baptized adults were childless, I think it's reasonable to conclude that there is something else going on here.

It is not my intent to single out one region of the church for criticism. I cite these statistics only because I suspect they illustrate what may well be a growing trend in several places in the RCA. That trend seems to be the result of two converging phenomena. First, there are many people coming into the RCA who do not believe in infant baptism. Second, there are a growing number of ministers who seem to be discouraging infant baptisms or who are simply refusing to do them.

Sisters and brothers, if this is true, then it grieves me. And I hope it grieves you. It goes back to that issue of identity we've been talking about. One of the bedrocks of our reformed "take" on the Christian faith is that we do not and cannot earn our way into God's good graces. Baptism—even for an adult—is not so much about what we do as it is about what God does. And when the minister takes an infant into his or her arms at the baptismal font and says, "For you, little one, Christ died—though you know nothing of it as yet. We love because God first loved us," it is a powerful expression of this Reformation principle. In baptism God welcomes us into the covenant family. It is grace—all grace. And while the covenant family makes promises and takes on responsibilities for that child's nurture in the faith, and while we pray that the child will one day affirm the faith seeds that were planted and watered at the font—it is still grace—all grace.

The statistics suggest that we may have some mourning to do around the issue of baptism. And the anecdotal evidence confirms this. But perhaps it would be well to seek out more information. Therefore, I make the following proposal:

### **P-3**

**To direct the General Synod Council to engage in an anonymous survey focused on 1) churches started in the RCA in the last ten years, and 2) a representative sample of other churches in the RCA. Questions should focus on the following:**

- a. Is infant baptism an area of disagreement within the church? If so, where do the disagreements occur?**
- b. Does the church practice infant baptism?**
- c. How many infants were baptized in the last five years? How many adults?**
- d. Has the church rebaptized anyone in the last five years?**
- e. What percentage of parents in the church have not brought their infant children for infant baptism over the last five years?**
- f. Has the church dedicated any infants in the last five years? If so, what percentage, in comparison to infant baptisms?**

**g. Does the church allow baptized children to partake of the Lord's Supper before making a public profession of faith before the congregation?**

It should be noted that the focus here is simply to try and get a clearer and more objective sense of the nature and extent of actual practice in the RCA surrounding infant baptism. New churches are singled out because of the assumption that they may be the "leading edge" of challenges that the rest of the church has still to face.

Even as we seek to gather more information about our actual practices around baptism, it makes sense to remind ourselves about what the sacrament of baptism has meant and means in our community of faith. To that end I make the following proposal:

**P-4**

**To commend to congregations, consistories, ministers, classes, and regional synod staff the following studies on baptism produced by the Commission on Theology, and to make them available on both the RCA website and in a printed packet through the RCA's distributor, Faith Alive Christian Resources:**

- 1967 "A Statement on Infant Baptism," which argues that infant baptism is valid biblically, theologically, sociologically, and historically.
- 1975 "Concerning Rebaptism," which explores why people may request rebaptism, rejects the practice of rebaptism on theological and pastoral grounds, and offers pastoral advice.
- 1977 and 1984 "Baptized Non-Communicants and the Celebration of the Lord's Supper," which argues that baptized children may be admitted to the Lord's Table.
- 1983 "Is Infant Dedication an Alternative to Infant Baptism?" which rejects dedication as an alternative to infant baptism and offers brief pastoral advice on working with parents around this issue.
- 2007 "Who May Present Children for Baptism?" which develops advice for elders dealing with unusual requests for infant baptism from Christians who may not be parents of the child (e.g., grandparents, caretakers, etc.); and further,

**to direct the Commission on Theology to offer a paper on the place and significance of baptism (both infant and adult) in the life of a missional congregation. The focus should fall on the range of flexibility and variance from established RCA baptismal practice that may be justified and appropriate for a church in mission. The paper should be presented to the earliest possible General Synod.**

Finally, now, to the matter of ministry.

**Ministry**

First, let me say that our budget does not begin to reflect our true riches. If there were a line item for "gifts for ministry," the RCA would surely be one of the wealthiest churches in the world.

What a joy it was, for instance, to hear one former student—now a pastor—exclaim, "I love consistory meetings!" Or to see a woman elder preside with such confidence and grace over the meeting of one of our regional synods. Or to catch my breath at the sight of a pastor bending down to give a blessing to a two-year-old member of his flock. Or to watch that one-woman-wonder Terry Troia make her way through a typical day in and among the various missions of Project Hospitality on Staten Island. Or to listen to a surprisingly fine sermon on that passage in 2 Kings where Elisha sics the two she-bears on the boys who had taunted him about his baldness. (It takes a real gift for preaching to pull off a good sermon on that passage!)

We have such reason to celebrate in the area of ministry. So many reasons to be thankful! Yet, there are causes for concern as well. And almost all the concerns I heard expressed in this category had to do with confusion and inconsistency around the role of commissioned pastors.

In 2001, then General Synod president Carol Mutch proposed:

...a one-time summit to study the concept of lay pastoral ministry in the RCA, in order to meet the need for pastoral leadership in churches unable to afford or attract full-time ministers of Word and sacrament and to equip gifted lay leadership being called by God into the mission of the church (*MGS 2001*, pp. 37-38).

What is clear from the first part of this proposal is that what would later come to be called “commissioned pastors” were intended to address the needs of small churches. What is clear from the *BCO*’s subsequent directives is that this form of ministry is to be solidly grounded in the office of elder (1.II.14). In addition, the *BCO* lays out ten areas of competency in which candidates need to be trained and supervised. These include 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the RCA (Government, Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.

My question for the General Synod of 2009 is: How are we doing with this? Seven years into the commissioned pastor project, do we need to evaluate it? What’s working? What isn’t?

Here are a few of the reasons I think it is important for us to raise these questions:

1. There is no true consistency among classes as to what constitutes sufficient training for commissioned pastors. Some classes approach the ten areas of competency with a measure of rigor; others seem content with a series of seminars in someone’s living room. In any case, every classis does what is right in its own eyes.
2. If the role of commissioned pastor was originally intended as an extension of the office of elder, it is no longer clearly regarded as such in some places. For instance, a person commissioned as a pastor should—according to the General Synod’s own guidelines—have demonstrated gifts and a clear calling as an elder in a congregation. Yet, I myself witnessed the commissioning of several pastors who were being “simultaneously” ordained as elders. (How a classis can ordain elders is a further mystery to me.)
3. Some classes seem to see commissioned pastors as a way of doing an “end run” around theological education. For instance, students with potential for ministry are being advised to “go the commissioned pastor route” rather than doing the hard—but important—work of seminary...and this without reference to age or other factors that might limit their ability to attend seminary. The words of Howard Hageman may apply here. “Apparently,” he says, “we do not yet believe that the training of the mind is as much a part of the mission of the Church as the proclamation of the Gospel” (*MGS 1960*, p. 224).
4. Some have made the powerful argument that the role of commissioned pastors opens up much-needed avenues for racial/ethnic minorities in the leadership of the church. While this is surely true, are we sure we want to steer these candidates into ministries which will very probably pay less than other avenues? It should also be pointed out that in racial/ethnic denominations, the trend is toward more education rather than less. One suspects that this is because they want only the best for their candidates and they know that their candidates are fully capable of the best.
5. Finally, we need to ask whether we are inadvertently discouraging congregations from calling candidates with the benefits of a careful theological education. I would not like to see commissioned pastors and ministers of Word and sacrament in competition; there should be room for them to work side by side in the cause of Christ’s kingdom. But if current trends continue, we may be setting them up for just such a competition. And that, I am afraid, will benefit no one and may indeed erode our longstanding commitment to theological education.

I could go on. But surely these reasons are sufficient to argue that it is time for a second “summit” on the subject of commissioned pastors. I am not suggesting that we undo the decisions of previous synods—only that we take a careful and prayerful look at how we can evaluate and regulate this process more responsibly. Yes, we need to empower our elders to use their gifts in the proclamation of the gospel. But we also need to be accountable—both to each other and to the flocks we seek to shepherd in God’s name. So I submit the following proposal:

**P-5**

**To direct the moderator of the General Synod Council, in consultation**

**with the officers, to appoint a task force of not more than fifteen members including representatives from the Commission on Theology, the Commission on Church Order, the General Synod professors of theology, and the leadership of the various regional synods to review the role of commissioned pastors in the RCA, and to bring a report and whatever recommendations they deem necessary to the next meeting of the General Synod.**

### **Conclusion**

I have spent a good deal of time encouraging us as a synod and as a church to think about matters of identity. And I have tried to come up with proposals that would help us to strengthen that sense of identity. But finally, the answer to the question, “What is the glue that holds us together?” is as simple as one word: God. God is the glue that holds us together.

The church is not just a collection of people who have decided to align themselves with Jesus. It is the upshot of election. God chooses us, not the other way around. And that, ultimately, is very good news. It means we can cast ourselves on the mercy of God’s Son, who “through his Spirit and Word...gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith” (Heidelberg Catechism 54).

At the end of his presidential report, Howard Hageman commented on our being “one of the smallest denominations in American Christendom.” “I have often asked myself,” he continued, “why God in His mercy has preserved this odd little group of people...through more than three centuries of blundering and inertia, that ought many times to have resulted in our disappearance as a church. Could it be that our greatest work is yet before us?”

The answer, Hageman said, is in our hearts. To that I would respectfully add: and in God’s hands. To God be the glory!

### **Appendix: A Collection of Quotes from Presidents Past**

#### **Leonard Kalkwarf (1984)**

“It is this very diversity, which can be a positive factor in the life of our denomination, that has created a problem for us. I repeatedly heard various individuals raise the question about our identity. The issue seems to be “What is the glue that holds us together?” Early in our history, the answer to this question might have been our Dutch heritage. As one visits different congregations, one is struck by the variety of worship forms, vestments, liturgies, architectural styles, and even theological emphases. Surely these are not what we have in common and perhaps they ought not to be. Perhaps it is to be found within that beloved old document which affirms that *our only comfort in life and in death is that we are a people who belong*. Yet, somehow it seems as if that is not the case. I do not have the answer” (MGS 1984, p. 28).

“We have a beautiful form of church government which can protect us from this creeping individualism, known in church parlance as ‘congregationalism.’ The classis is the corporate bishop in our church. I have the sneaking suspicion, having been a participant in our church’s political process for more than thirty years, that the failure of classes to exercise fully their responsibility is the root cause of much of our difficulties” (MGS 1984, p. 29).

#### **James Neevel (1987)**

“This is why our theme for General Synod, ‘A People Who Belong: Amazed by Grace,’ is the same as that of the Denominational Identity Task Force, which I chair. The task force has attempted to bring us together as a church and celebrate who we are and what we can become! The grace of God is active in our church, from rural America to the teeming cities, from the provinces of Canada to the far-reaches of our world. God is at work in this Reformed Church of ours, as we effectively minister and share the gospel and the graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can be proud of this church: its ministry, its witness, its leadership, and its vision” (MGS 1987, p. 28).

#### **James Cook (1983)**

“Reformed theology with its focus on the covenant which God has chosen to make with his people, proclaims a gospel which is as loving, and personal, and relational as a parent’s heart, without losing sight of the all-important reassuring fact that at its center is the almighty God who created the heavens and the earth. If there is anything that justifies the

continued existence of the Reformed Church in America; if there is any contribution we can make to the full spectrum of the human family, it is the faithful proclamation in word and deed of that whole gospel for the whole person in the whole world” (*MGS 1983*, p. 35).

“How frequently General Synods have debated whether the mission of the church is to save souls or to engage in Christian social action which seeks to apply the gospel to every sphere of daily life. Being Reformed delivers us from this unbiblical split between justification and sanctification. Being Reformed teaches us that there is no such thing as Christian faith without Christian action. Jesus is always both Savior and Lord” (*MGS 1983*, p. 34).

#### **Howard Hageman (1960)**

Increasingly, I think, the Christian Churches throughout the world are learning that the unity of the Church and the mission of the Church are so closely related that it is impossible and, indeed, perhaps even unscriptural to speak of the one without immediately speaking of the other” (*MGS 1960*, p. 226).

Nothing could be more thrilling than to watch the Reformed Church at work in places where it had never been before unless it would be to watch the Reformed Church at work in the very centers of its strength reaching out to minister to new groups of people who had never heard of the Reformed Church before” (*MGS 1960*, p. 227).

[After speaking of the importance of encouraging students to attend seminary, Hageman writes:]

“But I have the feeling that all of this, even were we to do it conscientiously, could still leave our problem of Church and ministry unsolved...When you become aware of the small congregations which we have that are unable economically to afford a permanent minister and so are left easy prey to all kinds of ecclesiastical adventures to say nothing of the large congregation which needs help in pastoral and educational ministry or of the challenging mission fields in our large cities—can we afford to leave our traditional concept of the ministry where it is?...The office would have to be safeguarded by many qualifications. It would certainly require a training course or at least two years in one of our seminaries. There are admittedly many complicating factors. But having been made aware of the practical need, I think we must continue to wrestle with the theoretical objections until we arrive at some solution” (*MGS 1960*, p. 229).

#### **Lester Kuyper (1971)**

“It is surely important that we who are sons and daughters of the Reformation declare that our church, our church which carries the name REFORMED, is always in the process of reformation according to the Word of God. This is to be more than a declaration to be made, let us say, on occasions when Synod meets; it must be a manner of life and a constant study and process” (*MGS 1971*, p. 268).