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# Reformed Church in America Vision 2020 Team Final Report

## Introduction

To the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Since June 2018, the Vision 2020 Team has been researching possible scenarios for the future of the RCA. We give you thanks for helping us, for praying with us, for offering support, giving feedback, and sharing your hopes, dreams, and best thinking. The following report is a synthesis of what we have seen and heard and what we propose as next steps for our beloved denomination.

In crafting this report, we want to acknowledge that there are challenges and opportunities that face us in the midst of the current global health crisis. Our main challenge: the June 2020 meeting at which this report would have been delivered has been postponed until June 2021. Just as it is difficult for our team to wait for our work to be completed, we recognize that many others are waiting to see what the ultimate impact of that work will be: candidates for ministry, current and hopeful seminarians, pastors, missionaries, staff, and in some cases, entire congregations, classes, and regional synods. We remember you, and we acknowledge this tension.

Here in the waiting, we also see opportunities. Where General Synod delegates typically have a month to digest reports like this prior to meeting as a full body, we now have twelve months. Where much of delegates' reflection and discernment about recommendations often takes place in isolation leading up to General Synod, we have time now to do that important work in community over the coming year. As a team, we suggest that RCA leadership take advantage of this by creating opportunities for dialogue on the report at every level of the denomination between now and next June. We also encourage you to create these opportunities with each other. Talk to your local bodies, to your neighbors within your classes, and to those beyond classis boundaries. Listen to the ways our recommendations may impact those who agree with you and those who see things differently. Absorb as much as you can, and carry it with you to General Synod 2021.

## **What to expect**

In the paragraphs and pages that follow, there are several things we hope to accomplish. First, we want to share a bit about what this process was like for us and how we approached it. Knowing the potential impact of this work, it has been a strong value for our team to be as transparent as possible in communicating our process and progress with you along the way. We have attempted to do this faithfully, using RCA communication channels to offer news updates after each meeting, share feedback surveys, and provide discussion tools. We hope this has allowed you to feel invited into the work rather than playing the role of an observer. We will make every effort to continue in this spirit in what follows.

Secondly, we hope to make connections for you between the study, prayer, and dialogue we engaged in and the recommendations we're making for the denomination. We did our best to go broad as well as deep in our research and conversations, wrestling with our understanding of what it means to be the church, Christ's body, and seeking to be faithful to our common values and theology in all things. While there isn't space to include the fullness of our work in detail, we will summarize it for you and help you see where the recommendations we make have been informed by it. Further, where the details of the work we have done and resources we have gathered would be helpful to future work groups, we will be happy to make them available.

Finally, we hope to clearly communicate our very best thinking about the current reality of our denomination and the possible ways forward that we have explored.

## Historical context

Before diving into our recent work and the ways it may impact our denomination, we feel it important to briefly note the historical context in which this work was done.

In 1974 the Christian Action Commission, citing the "need for expression of pastoral care towards those who are rejected because of their homosexual identity," called for the simultaneous affirmation of "the Bible's teaching against the practice of homosexuality" and the "study of homosexuality as it relates to the life and work of the church" (*MGS 1974*, p. 222). This recommendation held in tension a need to be defined (to affirm the RCA's theological position on human sexuality) and a desire to extend care to a group seen to be living on the margins. We might view it as the first in a long line of efforts by the RCA to answer the questions of "What does God say about God's children who identify this way?" and "What is the right way for us to be in relationship together?" Or said another way, "Can we be in fellowship with each other if we see this differently?"

These questions have continued to resurface over the last 46 years, with various overtures, papers, study teams, and dialogues attempting to answer them. In all this time and through all these actions, the people of God at all levels of the denomination have done their best to faithfully interpret God's will for the church where those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or ally are concerned. There have been many moments where we have truly been the church, drawing closer to God through prayer and worship, and drawing closer to one another by listening and seeking to understand. Other moments have been a cause for grief, admonition, confession, and repentance, when we have forgotten who God calls us to be as the church and in relation to one another.

Two years ago at General Synod 2018, then–interim general secretary, Don Poest, shared a necessary and critical observation; namely, that these questions have never been answered to the full denomination’s satisfaction, and our ongoing attempts to answer them are ultimately “keeping us from the mission on which we should be focusing” (*MGS 2018*, p.18).

With the support of then-general secretary candidate Eddy Alemán and the General Synod Council and informed by consultation with the Council of Synod Executives (COSE), Don proposed a team be formed to examine possible ways forward for the denomination. In the proposal, the team was directed to thoroughly examine and discern (at a minimum) the following three scenarios:

1. Staying together
2. Radical reconstituting and reorganizing
3. Grace-filled separation

## The work of the Vision 2020 Team

Members of the team were named by Poest and general secretary Eddy Alemán in consultation with the General Synod Council (GSC), and were chosen to reflect the wide diversity of the RCA, including all regional synods and racial/ethnic councils. The members are as follows:

- Charlie Contreras: Faith Church (RCA) Munster Campus pastor, Indiana; serves on the GSC.
- Barbara Felker: pastor of leadership development at Highbridge Community Church (RCA) in the Bronx, New York; member of the board of trustees at New Brunswick Theological Seminary; vice president of strategic community partnerships at Northwell Health (Brooklyn region).
- Thomas Goodhart: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Ridgewood, New York; served at Plattekill Reformed Church in Mount Marion, New York; past GSC vice-moderator.
- Brian Keepers: pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa; served congregations in Holland, Michigan, and Sheldon, Iowa.
- Kristen Livingston: pastor of congregational care at Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan; serves as a specialized minister for Great Lakes City Classis.
- John Messer: regional executive of the Synod of the Great Lakes; served as pastor of Good News Community Church (RCA) in Okoboji, Iowa.
- Christa Mooi: RCA minister of Word and sacrament currently living in Iowa; past GSC moderator.
- Rudy Rubio: pastor of Reformed Church of Los Angeles, an RCA church plant in Lynwood, California.

- Diane Smith Faubion: elder at First Reformed Church of Scotia, New York; serves on the board of the Church Growth Fund; executive vice president of First National Bank of Scotia.
- Marijke Strong: executive secretary of the Regional Synod of Canada; served Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.
- Scott Treadway: pastor of Rancho Community Reformed Church in Temecula, California; president of the California Classis.
- Imos Wu: co-pastor of Bogart Memorial Reformed Church in Bogota, New Jersey; serves on the GSC.

Alemán and Poest served as *ex officio* members without vote.

From the beginning, the Vision 2020 Team knew that trust was essential for such a diverse team to function at a high level. So we spent a considerable amount of time building relationships, learning about differing work styles and points of view on various topics that we would consider, and practicing the skill of dialogue. Coached and supported by consultants Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and Ryan Donovan from The Leader’s Journey, trust grew, and authentic, vulnerable dialogue became the way we committed to engaging with each other in our meetings.

Parallel to working on building strong relationships, during our first year together, we focused on learning all we could about the impact that the three proposed scenarios would have on the denomination, its people, and the witness of Christ to the world. Not surprisingly, it quickly became clear that none of these options would be easy, simple, or ideal. We requested and were granted significant time at General Synod 2019 for delegates to work in facilitated small groups in order to engage in dialogue and feedback on our first year’s work on the three scenarios. This revealed important themes to carry us into the next year. We heard from delegates their longing for unity in our denomination and reiteration of the hard truth we have been learning for many years—that it would be unlikely for us to find that unity around the topic of human sexuality. The RCA is both deeply convicted and deeply divided on this topic, and none of the many efforts to date have produced a clear path forward without loss.

Our goal for the second year of our work was to gather more feedback from the denomination via an online survey, to interview various leaders, experts, and teams who could speak to the impact of our work, and to craft a final report that would inform recommendations to General Synod 2020. As we met in September and October, we reflected that our denomination has existed for many years as, what we would call, “defined and connected.” By this, we mean that we are unified in our core theological convictions, shared history, and practices (RCA standards and polity) and yet diverse (as allowed by our polity) in some of our interpretations and practices where we lack full

agreement (such as sexuality, women in leadership, gun control, immigration, global warming, etc.). We combined feedback from the delegates at General Synod 2019 with insights gleaned from the survey conducted by Mullins Consulting, Inc. This combined feedback revealed that much of the tension we have been experiencing may stem from this reality: some people are comfortable to continue in a denomination that is diversely defined on such topics, while others see this as an untenable dilution of their theological position.

This understanding moved us to view the three scenarios—staying together, radically restructuring, and moving apart—less as mutually exclusive and more as pieces that would all be required in our final recommendation. Some churches will separate, and we want to provide a way for them to do that well. Some will stay, and we want what remains to be a healthy organization for them. Lastly, the landscape on which we all live out our faith is rapidly shifting, and new strategies may be needed for the RCA to not only survive but actually thrive in this rapidly changing context. Our meetings in January and throughout this spring allowed us to lean into both the loss we recognize as inevitable and the hope that comes with envisioning something new.

## Recommendations and rationale

We were originally asked to imagine what it would mean for the denomination to embark on one of three possible paths: staying together, radically reorganizing the denomination, or grace-filled separation. Throughout our time together, we've come to believe that the most fruitful future for the RCA would involve all three of these things. Already we're aware that some churches plan to leave the denomination regardless of what decisions are made, and these congregations deserve a thoughtful and generous separation. Others are committed to staying and helping to shape what remains into an organization equipped to live in theological tension and thrive in a changing context. We want to give them our best thinking on what that may look like. Some are waiting to see what comes of this report before choosing their paths. We have held all three of these groups in mind in crafting what follows.

Based on our time together, our study of relevant data, and the many generous ways RCA members have responded to our work to date, we plan to present the following recommendations to the next meeting of General Synod, which we anticipate will be in June 2021. While we hope and recommend that all three are adopted, we have structured them in such a way that each can exist independent of the others.

# Together, Yet Changed (Recommendation 1—Restructuring)

Prior to the 2018 General Synod, the Council of Synod Executives (COSE) submitted a report to the General Synod Council (GSC) summarizing their understanding of the “current reality” of the Reformed Church in America. In that report, COSE outlined their general sense of the denomination’s present state and future and shared anecdotal reports from their specific regions regarding beliefs and practices around the topic of human sexuality. The report painted a picture of a diverse denomination in belief, practice, and even priorities. While it was difficult for the group to reach consensus around how the current reality should be defined, they were united in their assertion that deep change was needed to address both the present divisiveness around controversial topics and various areas of organizational dysfunction.

Following the COSE report, Don Poest called for the formation of our Vision 2020 Team (as referenced earlier in this report). One of the ways the team spent time in our first year together was reflecting on our past, present, and potential future as a denomination. We looked to works like Lynn Japinga’s *Loyalty and Loss*<sup>[1]</sup> to learn about our past, to the COSE report and to survey data collected from our membership to understand the present, and to the expertise of George Bullard<sup>[2]</sup> to help us think about where many denominations, and ours in particular, seem to be headed.

As we reflected on what we learned, some key themes emerged that will give context to the recommendation that follows:

1. The tension and conflict we’re facing today are not new realities. There have been numerous points, especially in the last 70 years, where the RCA has been at an impasse. Points of disagreement and tension have included differences of views on things like ecumenical partnerships, social justice/political involvement, merging with another denomination, communism, internal restructuring, the *Church Herald*, church planting models, women in ministry, and human sexuality.<sup>[3]</sup> **This means we currently face something we have previously weathered, but it also means that we are likely to be here again if we do not find a way to handle conflict differently.**
2. Since the mid 1990’s, about two-thirds of denominations in North America have shifted away from a “product delivery” model in which the headquarters (General Synod) designs a specific “product” and dispatches it to the branch offices (regions and classes) for distribution to the people. Instead, they have shifted to a model where the corporate assembly empowers a staff to equip the regional and local groups with the tools they need, but encourages them to use

the tools in the way that best fits with what the Spirit is doing locally. This is what denominations that thrive are doing (Bullard). **The RCA has not quite made this shift, but we are moving in this direction with some of our initiatives.**

3. George Bullard views the RCA as being made up of three to four groups with unique understandings and priorities—the West, the East, and Iowa/Canada/the Midwest (with Michigan being similar to both the East and the Midwest, depending on which classis or congregation one considers). The COSE report and the second of the surveys we commissioned reveal similar regional identities at work. **These reports seem to indicate that we have already organically shifted away from a larger corporate identity to more regional identities.**
4. According to Bullard, it takes 2,000 churches to be a full-service denomination. We have fewer than 1,000 today, and our numbers are declining. We may not be large enough to support binational, regional, and local assemblies unless they are very well-defined and discrete from one another in function. Local congregations do not want to fund a structure that isn't delivering value and helping them move their mission forward. **We need to strongly consider the roles of our binational, regional, and local assemblies and look to the experiences of other small denominations for the most efficient and effective way to structure ourselves. This will likely mean dissolving our regional synods and restructuring our classes on an affinity model.**
5. The results of the second survey suggest that we desire unity but that we aren't sure what unites us. We want to be mission-focused, but there is a diverse understanding of what that mission looks like. We share a strong desire to be faithful to the Word of God, but we don't know how to function when we differ on our interpretation of it. **Centering us at the highest levels of our organization around the things we *can* all agree on and giving authority to decide the things we can't agree on to the local levels may be the best way to grow our effectiveness and reclaim some of the unity we feel we've lost through this conflict.**

We know that we will face more loss in the coming years, and we can't yet know the full impact of that loss. Some churches will leave the denomination, and we will feel the impact of that in our relationships and our operations. We do, however, know that there will be those who stay. While we did research several possible options for the future structure of the denomination, we believe a restructure should ultimately be detailed and implemented by those who remain within the RCA. It would make little sense for members intending to leave to vote on what will happen to the denomination after their exit. For that reason, we are not recommending specific RCA *Book of Church Order* changes for restructuring to be voted on at this General Synod. To reiterate, we believe those detailed changes should be decided by those who remain in the denomination. However, recognizing that some will feel undecided about their future with the denomination until

they have more clarity on what that future will hold, we do want to urge serious consideration of some of the changes we think will give the RCA the best chance at a healthy way forward.

We believe a team should be tasked with the specific work of restructuring the denomination in a way that is deeply informed by our ecclesiology (our theology of what it means to be the church) and seeks to optimize our sustained spiritual and organizational health for the 21st century. This team should include several members of current executive RCA staff as well as representation from those regional or local assemblies who have expressed an intention to remain with the denomination. Based on the research referenced above, our belief is that the best chance for success will include a structure in which:

1. **Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geographically-based**, with the ability of any church to choose the classis to which it belongs. We are already seeing these kinds of affinity relationships being sought by congregations both within and outside the RCA. It makes sense that our churches should have the ability to align themselves around shared values, understanding, and practices.
2. **Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.** This would end the debate at the General Synod level around these topics and fit naturally with the proposed affinity model for classes.
3. **Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level.**
4. **The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod are examined** in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains. Our research shows that the future RCA will not be large enough to sustain the regional synod assembly moving forward. One scenario would be for affinity classes and General Synod to assume the responsibilities of the regions. Options like this need to be evaluated and decided upon by those who remain in the denomination.

## Recommendation 1

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of

representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should use the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2023.

## Preserving Our Shared History (Recommendation 2—A New Mission Agency)

We have had multiple opportunities during our two years together as a team to celebrate God's faithfulness in the good efforts of our denomination to see the gospel spread to every part of the globe. At the same time, we have had to face some hard truths about the RCA's declining membership. For many years the overall number of confessing members of RCA congregations has been declining.

Since 1992, we have lost an average of 1 percent per year, and we have informally learned of entire classes' intention to exit the denomination in the near future. These losses have made it and will continue to make it increasingly challenging to fund the work of a full-service denomination, which calls into question whether many of the good works the RCA has begun will ultimately be able to continue.

Much of what the Vision 2020 Team has heard from the RCA over the course of our work reflects a corporate commitment to and desire to preserve this part of the RCA's legacy—that of expanding and strengthening God's kingdom through global missions. When we think through the reality of declining numbers and what separation or a restructure may mean for the organization, this is one of the things no one wants to lose. Additionally, there are sometimes aspects of a denomination (often unrelated to missions) that make it difficult for external organizations to enter into a missions partnership with it. As a team, we wondered if there might be a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed our denomination in global mission and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their

decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy. We believe the following recommendation is the best way to accomplish this.

We recommend that a new non-profit mission agency be formed independent of the RCA (but in partnership with the RCA) to house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions. We can find inspiration for this idea from thriving para-denominational mission agencies like Wycliffe, New Tribes Mission (Ethnos360), Operation Mobilization, China Inland Mission (OMF International), Pioneers, SEND International, and Africa Inland Mission. This specific organization would carry on the legacy of Reformed missions, while the support of churches in disciple-making, leadership development, next-generation spiritual formation, and local missional engagement would remain in the RCA through initiatives like Transformed & Transforming.

The RCA has a rich history of forming agencies that serve the church well, including the Church Growth Fund and Board of Benefits Services. These agencies are structured to serve the broader church if local congregations choose to use them. Similarly, all RCA churches, as well as churches outside the denomination, would be invited to participate in and be equipped by the work of this new para-denominational mission agency. This could include general financial support of the agency, specific financial support of missionaries, prayer support, short-term trips, and project partnerships. We see this as a way to preserve and expand on the ways that God has blessed us and to invite even more people to take part in that work. We also see this as a way that everyone, regardless of their decision to leave or stay, could continue to be connected to that legacy.

While the leadership of this new missions agency would need to be determined by those tasked with forming the agency, we recognize that the skills and experience needed may be readily available in current RCA staff, so decisions about agency staffing would need to be made in consultation with executive RCA staff. Funding, too, would ultimately be the responsibility of the new agency's board, but the Vision 2020 Team imagines that the RCA might choose to seed this work with funds from the current RCA Global Mission budget. Future funding would likely be found through donations (primarily for missions and similar initiatives) as well as fees charged for services.

Faced with the hard truth that our denomination is shrinking and that global missions is not the only part of our work worth preserving long-term, we also see this agency as being a potential home for other RCA functions and initiatives, *should that be required in the future*. For that reason, we recommend that the agency's mission (as stated in the founding documents) be defined in broad enough terms so that absorption of other RCA efforts and services in the future would be

possible. We imagine that if both this recommendation and the restructuring recommendation are approved, the restructuring team would factor these things into their work.

## **Recommendation 2**

To form a new nonprofit mission agency independent of the RCA that will house what currently makes up the RCA's work in global missions; and further,

To direct the GSC to form an implementation team that will be tasked with incorporating the new agency as a 501(c)(3), drafting bylaws, and recruiting a board of directors, who would then be responsible for appointing an executive director for the new agency in the manner specified in the bylaws. The implementation team should work closely with the RCA Global Mission team to ensure diligent care for current RCA missionaries during the transition to the new agency. And further,

To instruct the general secretary to transfer a portion of the current RCA missions budget to the new agency as seed money (to be determined by the general secretary in consultation with GSC); and further,

To urge RCA churches and individuals that currently support RCA missionaries and mission projects through Partnership-in-Mission (PIM) shares to continue that support through the new agency.

A minority report on Recommendation 2 follows at the end of this report.

## **Forward with Grace (Recommendation 3—Mutually Generous Separation)**

Our hope is that both of the preceding proposals, once formally presented to General Synod, will be adopted by the denomination and that they will meet many of the needs that we have heard expressed. Some who had considered leaving the denomination may choose to stay and see the

restructuring as an opportunity to breathe new life into an organization they love. Others may leave but find ongoing connection with their former denomination through the new mission agency. Still others may decide to forge an entirely new path, to seek God's call on their lives through other relationships and partnerships.

Recognizing that some separation is inevitable, we believe the RCA has an opportunity to act in an exemplary way by providing a generous exit path for those churches which decide to leave and by inviting those churches to also act generously. While the process currently outlined in the RCA *Book of Church Order (BCO)* (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 3–6 [2019 edition, pp. 40–44]) allows a classis to be generous with a church petitioning for withdrawal from the denomination, it also allows a classis to deny a church's petition for withdrawal or to be less than generous in granting the withdrawal. Given that we are entering a period when there will likely be more petitions being put forth than has been typical, we believe it is the right time to revise this process such that generosity is prescribed rather than simply permitted.

We also want to recognize that the timing of this proposal is difficult; with the General Synod 2020 meeting postponed, it will be 2021 at the earliest before the proposal can be voted on, and at least 2022 before these provisions can become part of the *BCO*. This means that in those cases where a church may wish to leave prior to full implementation<sup>[4]</sup> of this proposal and its classis does not treat it generously, that church may feel forced to wait until the new provisions are in full effect. Even then, if the guidelines are adopted as proposed below (including a period of ongoing financial responsibility to the denomination) that church would then face another waiting period before its ties could be fully severed.

For these rare cases, we think it is important that the proposal also include a provision for retroactive generosity. For example, let's imagine that a church declares its *intent* to leave the denomination in July 2020 but is not granted a generous exit by its classis and so decides to hold off on separating. Assuming that the proposed changes are adopted by General Synod 2021, are approved by the necessary percentage of classes, and they receive a final declarative vote at General Synod 2022, which makes it possible to officially update the *BCO*, the changes would be retroactive for that church to the date the church communicated its intention. Any time-based requirements would therefore be considered against that church's date of intent. In the hypothetical case considered here, the payment of assessments for two additional years would be fulfilled by the payments made from 2020 to 2022 (for example). We feel this is the best way to both encourage communication about a church's intent (to the classis's benefit) and to ensure protection for those churches facing a challenging separation from their classes.

In the time between now and General Synod 2021, we will seek the assistance of the Commission on Church Order both to determine what portions of the following provisions will require *BCO* changes and to write these proposed changes in order to develop specific language of the recommendation that will be submitted to the 2021 General Synod. Our recommendation will include the following provisions:

1. That any exit from the denomination would be done by churches or individual ministers of Word and sacrament from their classes. If entire classes and regional synods wish to leave, they must do so one church at a time, as already provided for in the *BCO*.
2. Regarding a church's financial relationship with and commitments to the RCA,
  1. that churches which decide to leave would be allowed to retain their property and other assets and would be solely responsible for any liabilities. This provision will include proposed changes to the *BCO* to make this possible.
  2. that classes would be required to allow exiting churches to leave the classis and/or the denomination with their property and other assets if they are in compliance with requirements. That regional synods would not impede churches from moving into a different regional synod. No classis or regional synod can keep a church or its assets in that classis or regional synod if the church would like to leave the denomination or move to another classis. This provision will include proposed changes to the *BCO* to make this possible.
  3. that churches which decide to leave would be invited to continue support of RCA missionary personnel and Global Mission partnerships (mission persons and initiatives to which they have already committed financially) and asked to give **two years'** notice before severing these supportive relationships.
  4. that churches which decide to leave would be required to continue paying all assessments for a **two-year** period of time to General Synod, regional synod, and classis, starting from the time that they express their written intent to leave the denomination (as provided in *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 10, Section 4 [2019 edition, p. 41]). In cases where this written intent is expressed prior to final ratification of the recommendation, and where the church submitting its intent wishes to wait for the final ratification before completing its exit, this provision would be applied retroactively to that date of notification. In such cases, churches must submit their written intent at the classis, regional synod, and General Synod levels.
  5. that where applicable, churches, classes, and regional synods would maintain their savings certificate investments with the Church Growth Fund (CGF) according to the existing terms, and when investments are maturing or if they become able to redeem the

funds, would consider renewing and continuing their investments for a period of at least **two years**.

6. that where applicable, churches would be required to continue paying off loans to classes, regional synods, and the Church Growth Fund (CGF), as agreed upon by those organizations and in accordance with the rules and bylaws of those organizations. Further, that CGF bylaws be changed to allow churches leaving the RCA to continue their borrowing relationship with the CGF.
7. that consistories fulfill any and all outstanding obligations they have as adopting employers to properly fund all accounts maintained for their employees in retirement plans (i.e., the Board of Benefits Services or the Regional Synod of Canada plan), as promised in the provisions of the call form (*BCO*, Formulary No. 5 [2019 edition, pp. 134–135]) and outlined in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 7 (2019 edition, p. 15) of the *BCO*.
3. Regarding the treatment of and provision for denominational, regional, classis, and local church employees, we encourage the General Synod Council, in its capacity as the executive committee of the General Synod, in cooperation with the general secretary, GSC human resources team, and legal counsel, to continue to conduct a compassionate and orderly evaluation of staff structuring, including the continued provision of fair salaries and benefits packages when possible, and appropriately generous severance packages should budget constraints require downsizing. Further, we will encourage the same consideration at the regional synod, classis, and church level for staff at those levels.

## Final Thoughts

In closing this report, we wish to offer a few final reflections to you, our beloved colleagues and friends. Foremost, that it has truly been a privilege to serve together in this work. None of us emerges from this two-year journey unchallenged or unchanged. While we confess to being weary from the road, we also find ourselves better for having walked it together. We have sharpened one another, iron against iron, and will carry the marks of our learning with us in gratitude, to God's glory.

As a denomination, the RCA is standing at a crossroads. Having sent our team as scouts to explore different paths, the task before you now is to decide which paths to take. Perhaps surprisingly, our advice in the end has been "take all of them." None is without challenge or loss, but all of them also hold opportunities. For those who decide to stay in the RCA, there is a path that holds the potential for the renewal and strengthening of a denomination they love. For those who choose to go a separate way there is an opportunity to provision them well for their journey, knowing that the work they go to do is for the kingdom we all call home. And before moving on from this crossroads,

we have the chance to build something new together in the form of a mission agency, as a place for us to work together, and to preserve some of our best work as a celebration of our shared journey.

May the grace of God go with us all on the roads ahead.

*Throughout the process of this work, the Vision 2020 team came to understand that they could have unity without necessarily achieving unanimity. In the case of the team's second recommendation, that of forming a new mission agency, two of our team voiced strong concerns for the impact of this recommendation on the denomination. Valuing transparency and believing that we are only at our best when everyone can be fully seen and heard, the team agreed that it would be fitting to include a minority report written by these members.*

## A Minority Report

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the 2020 Team has labored two years together as a diverse group of RCA leaders. As we close our work, two of us strongly oppose Recommendation 2, the formation of a new mission agency. At the request of our team, we now share these objections that prevent us from endorsing this recommendation.

### **We believe we are part of God's covenant community**

When we are baptized into the church, we enter into covenant with God and one another to Christ's mission: "By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work."<sup>[5]</sup> We believe Recommendation 2 does not assume a covenantal foundation. Its structure is voluntary and pragmatic. By design, the agency would be extra-ecclesial, existing outside of the connection and accountability of a covenant community. We believe assigning RCA global missions *to function* within a separate para-church organization weakens our Reformed practice of keeping covenant promises to each other.

### **We believe that God's mission has a church**

As was stated and celebrated at the recent Mission 2020 event: "God's church does not have a mission, but God's mission has the Reformed Church in America." The mission of God and the identity of the church are as inseparable as the person of Christ and the work of Christ—indeed, the church and its mission flow from Christ's person and work. Further, our covenant identity and accompanying mission requires us not to separate global and local mission. Recommendation 2

enacts a formal separation of global and local mission, which implies that Christ's presence can be divided. In fact, Christ moves among Christ's body, within every geography.

## **We believe that the church is called to courageous dialogue**

Because Christ is Lord, we need not fear difference. Being connected to one another is hard work, and it is exactly what belongs within God's covenantal community. This community, nourished by the Word and the sacraments, is the location that makes us able to engage in very difficult conversations. It is precisely in deep relationship with those whom we might not agree that the church must wrestle with our understandings of the gospel's call, our differing hermeneutics, and their implications for human sexuality. Recommendation 2 avoids confronting the very real divisions among us and pushes these hard conversations into other communities that do not have the support of covenant bonds.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of a new mission agency is not the answer to what divides us. What is urgently needed is a robust theological rationale for how the church exists in difference. What holds us together? How do we remain connected to and in covenant with one another?

As the Preamble of the *BCO* states, "The church is the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head" (2019 edition, p. 2). And one of our Standards of Unity, the Belhar Confession, confesses: "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)" Especially in light of our deep divisions, we must hold fast to our union with Christ by the power of the Spirit.

In Christ, all things hold together and Christ is the reconciler of all things who makes peace through the blood of his cross.<sup>[6]</sup> It is in this hope—that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and that Christ will come again—that we submit this report.

## **Footnotes**

<sup>[1]</sup> *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994* by Lynn Japinga, Eerdmans Publishing, 2013. ^

<sup>[2]</sup> George Bullard serves as president and strategic coordinator with The Columbia Partnership [TCP]. TCP is a community of Christian leaders seeking to transform the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain vital Christ-centered ministry. Bullard has years of consultative experience within the RCA and has written extensively on the history and future of denominations in North America.

<sup>[3]</sup> Drawn from *Loyalty and Loss*, Japinga

<sup>[4]</sup> Including being drafted, presented, and adopted by a General Synod at a stated session, approved by the requisite number of classes, and then declared effective by a subsequent General Synod.

<sup>[5]</sup> RCA Baptism / Profession of Faith Liturgy

<sup>[6]</sup> Colossians 1.



## Vision 2020 Facebook Live discussion

Tune in to a Facebook Live panel discussion to hear members of the Vision 2020 Team give a behind-the-scenes view into their process and share their perspectives: Tuesday, July 14, 1:00 p.m. Eastern time on the RCA Facebook page.

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