

REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY
“People Who Live and Love like Jesus”
Tom De Vries

When I was six, I loved baseball. I would ride my bicycle the mile to Emerson Junior High School in Pomona, California, to go to baseball practice. I was too young to play Little League, so I played in the Parks and Recreation League with a rubber-covered baseball.

On one particular day in the spring of 1968, I arrived early. There were two eight-year-olds already there—we all played on the Giants team—wearing orange t-shirts and hats.

Somehow on that spring day we got talking on the subject of church. One of the eight-year-olds said he went to a Catholic church. I proudly stated that I went to Lincoln Ave. Reformed Church, and that my dad was the pastor there. The one eight-year-old turned to the other and said: “He goes to the deformed church!”

And they both laughed.

He must have thought it was the most hilarious joke in the universe, because he repeated the statement a half-dozen times: “He goes to the deformed church!” And they laughed and laughed and laughed.

To be honest, as a six-year-old, at that point and time in my life, I didn’t know what the word *deformed* even meant. I just knew that it probably wasn’t a compliment—and that these two older kids were laughing at me.

It would be a number of years later before I would become aware of the stigma sometimes faced by people with disabilities, and how dehumanizing that label can be. And it would take years before I would finally understand what they were laughing at, and why it had any meaning or importance.

I also realized that while they knew what *deformed* meant, they probably had no understanding of what *reformed* meant.

And this eight-year-old Catholic boy and I had no idea, standing on a baseball field in Southern California in 1968, that the convergence of our lives that day was influenced by an event 451 years previous in the town of Wittenberg, Germany—by a priest named Martin Luther.

I have reflected much on what it means to be reformed since then. That day in 1968 has served as a catalyst for greater understanding. Growing up in Southern California, there were few Reformed churches, given the size of the population. Even fewer attended an RCA church, or had any concept of what it meant to be reformed. So I have gone back and owned my “deformity”—or, if we were to identify it correctly, and with a more reformed expression, my depravity.

Yet, while we want the world to know today that we are a Reformed church, if we are honest with ourselves, we are deformed in a literal sense. In our humanity, much of what of what we purport, profess, and proclaim comes through as distorted, misshapen, and malformed. How we experience this is expressed by the apostle John’s statement in 1 John 4:4: “...because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (NIV).

The Holy Spirit in us empowers us and communicates to us so that we, as the people of God, can give witness and testimony to the reforming and transforming work of God in our lives. God takes what is depraved and deformed and changes us from old to new—from sinful to holy—and makes us into a new creation.

2 Corinthians 5:17

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

We are charged with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:21

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Now, being the Reformed Church in America, we are the transformed people of God, and we become God’s transforming agents in our world today. We must **live like Jesus**.

1 John 2:5-6

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.”

If we say we are Christians—that we are followers of Jesus Christ—we must live like Jesus. And we must **love like Jesus**.

A little later, in 1 John 3, the apostle John follows up by saying:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth (3:14-18).

What do transformed people look like? They become a transforming presence in the world around them—they live and love like Jesus. Becoming the hands and feet of Christ means being willing to pick up towels and basins and wash feet. It means serving the poor, feeding the hungry, helping the homeless, reaching out to the marginalized, and visiting the prisoner. It means sacrificially serving so others can experience life change. It means giving our lives away for the benefit of others.

We need look no further than the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 to discover how Jesus believed his disciples should live:

- Being salt and light (5:13-16)
- Being reconciled to our brothers and sisters and refraining from anger or murder (5:21-24)
- Refraining from adultery and lust (5:27-30)

- Speaking the truth honestly and authentically (5:33-37)
- Being kind and generous, rather than vengeful and returning an eye for an eye (5:38-42)
- Loving our enemies (5:43-48)
- Giving to people in need (6:1-4)
- Being people of prayer (6:5-15)
- Not judging others (7:1-2)

The apostle Paul also identified what those who belong to Christ look like, and how they live, in Galatians 5. He describes their spirits as being full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

There are so many ways that, as followers of Christ, we are to live like Jesus. When we say in Transformed & Transforming that our vision in this next chapter for our denomination is “Cultivating transformation in Christ,” it is recognizing that transformation is a work of God through the Holy Spirit. It is not something we are capable of producing. It humbles us and helps us to live for Jesus Christ, and not for ourselves. And we become disciples of our Lord—learning and then living out our faith.

A new chapter

Living and loving like Jesus will require three things from us as we enter this new chapter of ministry. The first is that we are called to:

1) Think Different

The year was 1997. Apple was a computer company looking for direction and trying to reverse course away from ineffectiveness and lack of profits and productivity. Steve Jobs had just returned as an interim CEO after almost a decade-long absence. A new marketing campaign was launched, and a new chapter in the company’s history began.

The campaign kicked off with a television commercial showing some of history’s most significant visionaries—people like Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Amelia Earhart, Martin Luther King Jr., Maria Callas, Pablo Picasso, Martha Graham, Muhammad Ali, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Rob Siltanen, a creative director on the project, wrote the first draft of the commercial, with actor Richard Dreyfuss narrating over the visionary pictures. In this draft, which differed only slightly from what was eventually used on television, Siltanen wrote:

To the crazy ones.
 Here’s to the misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers.
 Here’s to the ones who see the world differently.
 They’re the ones who invent and imagine and create.
 They’re the ones who push the human race forward.
 While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius.
 Because the people who are crazy enough to believe they can change the world
 are the ones who actually do.

The screen faded to show the Apple logo and two simple words: “Think different.” It was a bold vision—a bold declaration—that would mark a remarkable turnaround for the company.

For 387 years the Reformed Church in America has journeyed a loyal and faithful course. We have been marked by:

- A traditional heritage.
- Ethnic roots.
- A continuous history that complemented our culture.
- Doing things decently and in order.
- Academic institutions that have perpetuated the faith.
- Faithful servants of God who have declared the gospel locally and globally with conviction and commitment.
- Influence near and far from the halls of power to the palaces of sheikhs and kings.
- Intelligent thinkers, authors, educators, and instructors who reflected theologically in ways that provided for both a reformed worldview and reformed foundation—out of which we have flourished denominationally for centuries.
- Creative preachers and artists who have produced sermons, liturgies, and litanies that have captured imaginations, deepened faith, and called many into ministry.
- Influencers of the gospel who served as Sunday school teachers, consistory members, volunteers, women's guild leaders, missionaries, and ministers.

We have been faithful with little and God has multiplied our efforts to be a far greater influence around the globe than we ever could have imagined. And yet, the twenty-first century has brought us to a crossroads:

- The age of Christendom is over.
- The tall steeple church at the center of town is no longer the social center of the community, and, in many places, may no longer be the spiritual center.
- Educated clergy no longer hold the positions of influence in a town or city as they did in previous generations, and may be viewed as holding a more ceremonial position rather than being the spiritual leader, influencer, or decision-maker.
- The socialization process that sent many RCA young leaders from the pews of our churches to our academic institutions and back into our churches to serve and lead has become a mere shadow of what it once was, and produces a small fraction of what it once produced.
- Our culture has changed so that what we hold dear as the reformed people of God may not even be known in the communities in which we live and do ministry—especially on our coasts, both in Canada and the United States.
- The millennial generation is growing up with very little, if any, spiritual connection and heritage, and the place of the church in their lives is less existent. A relationship with Jesus Christ is almost a foreign concept—many mark their religious affiliation or commitment as “none.”
- Christians in society are marginalized and stereotyped for judgmental attitudes and hypocritical lifestyles.
- The twenty-first century in North America more closely parallels the first century Greco-Roman world of the New Testament than the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century ones that we have journeyed.

We are moving into a time where followers of Jesus Christ are being challenged to **think different**. Living and loving like Jesus—marked by sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation—provides us with an opportunity to influence our world.

Are we crazy enough to think that in our world today Jesus Christ matters? To think that as followers of Christ we have something to offer? That through the power of the Holy Spirit, the hungry can be fed, prisoners can be set free, the blind can see, and the oppressed can be released? To think that we can actually change the world?

“The people who are crazy enough to believe they can change the world are the ones who actually do.”

Living and loving like Jesus is going to require us to **think different**. But this is not the *only* challenge—merely the first.

The second challenge, if we are to live and love like Jesus, calls us to:

2) Act Different

If you are like me, you have tried to change certain things about yourself—bad habits or characteristics, to name a few. We’ve learned that it is often easier to act our way into a new way of thinking, rather than just think our way into a new way of acting.

When we are invited to follow Jesus Christ, he lays out what obedience looks like. Throughout Christendom, it has been referred to as the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40, Luke 10:27):

- Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.

To love God with everything you have is to love God with reckless abandon. It is to take a radical approach to faith, and to living and loving like Jesus. The dictionary defines “radical” as “departing markedly from the usual or customary” or “favoring or effecting fundamental or revolutionary changes in current practices, conditions, or institutions.”

When we look at how much Christ loved his heavenly Father, he went to the point of giving up his life on the cross in obedience to God. That was a radical move. And it is that level of radical that inspired the actions of the 2013 General Synod when they—as one body and as an assembly of the church—affirmed Transformed & Transforming by a vote of 211 to 18. Their affirmation included the statement, “Radically Following Christ in Mission Together.” They wanted to ensure that being transformed was not just thinking different—they wanted to make sure it meant that as a denomination moving forward we would act different.

We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (**think different**). But we also need to be transforming—living and loving like Jesus means we **act different**. It means we are radically loving God, radically loving each other, and radically loving our world that God so dearly loves. To act different means we begin to look at our understanding of being the church together and how we do church in the future.

As we increase our love for God, it must impact our love for each other. In my journeys throughout the RCA this past year, one pastor asked me, “Tom, are we addicted to conflict?” Similarly, I wonder, does the RCA know how to function without drawing lines in the sand, trying to define winners and losers, or a perpetual power struggle for whose agenda controls and influences most?

There are historians, cynics, and institutionalists who believe that unity—a commitment to harmony and moving the tent stakes to accommodate all—will prevail. That’s because unity is our highest value and conflict is one of our *modus operandis*—maybe not quite an addiction—that we will once again find a way to agree to disagree, or disagree and still remain connected, or just move the tent stakes out a little further.

However, the ropes on our tent stakes are becoming tighter, and our capacity for extension is hitting its limit. And while unity is an important value (and may be the motivation for our ecumenism and our sense of community as a denomination), it may not reflect what it means to love another very well.

Isn’t there something more in our relationship than continuously drawing up sides on controversial issues, identifying the compromise position, and then figuring out how we can get along with our differences rather than loving one another, embracing each other, and truly serving one another?

What does it mean in this environment, at this time, in this particular situation to **act different**? What does love in action really look like? How do we live out the unity we hope for for the RCA?

It means:

- Setting aside our own preferences for the greater purpose to which we are committed.
- Putting the interests of others before our own.
- Becoming part of the change we desire to see.
- Being willing to talk to people, not talk about them.
- Finding consensus in the *what* and *why* of our mission—not focusing our differences on the *way* things are implemented.
- Recognizing that a denomination will not be united if the churches and people within it are not committed to loving one another and making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- Together seeking the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.

The apostle Paul’s words to Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians were words of pleading, urging, requesting, asking, appealing, exhorting, and (not to leave the KJV out) beseeching: “I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn’t want his children holding grudges” (The Message).

Being “of the same mind in the Lord” is to **act different**. It is to function out of love, over our dysfunction and depravity.

This General Synod will test our thinking and our actions.

- Not only are overtures coming that ask for a hands-off policy regarding the action of classes, but a church order change embracing freedom from the will and statements of our past assemblies will be proposed.
- We will also face a judicial decision that has the capacity to usurp the direction of previous General Synods and enact a new direction without the benefit of assembly process or discernment, through a single action.

We have recognized that as reformed Christians we value the moving of the Holy Spirit in assemblies, and not in quickly decided judgments that do not encompass the convictions and values of all (especially those who may be marginalized or disregarded).

Let us embrace a posture of interaction and involvement that continues to reflect the importance of our life together—a posture that is consistent in how we have lived in the RCA for centuries. Let us not sacrifice our values on the altar of expedience or impatience.

You are the ones who stand at a significant point in our history together—seeking the same mind in the Lord and seeking to act differently in ways that direct love toward those within the RCA and those who are not yet part of the RCA.

What I am grateful for, as one born into and embracing the reformed tradition, is an emphasis on both personal salvation and redemption, as well as a commitment to seeing redemption permeate society in a transformative way. Our understanding of redemption and transformation has motivated us to engage in difficult conversations, discussions, and decisions in the past.

This has led us to take action on issues like apartheid, slavery, racism, triumphalism, liberation theology, abortion, divorce, paternalism, capital punishment, gambling, immigration, mass incarceration, gun control, women in ministry, alcohol and the temperance movement, Christian Zionism, and war. Each of these issues have had advocates and dissenters, and if it didn't go a particular direction, there were plenty of malcontents.

Those who have gone before us, as well as those who sit here today, have had to discern how to balance grace and truth. Some of us default to grace, while some of us default to truth. And all of us have an unassailable apologetic for our decision and our position.

How did Jesus walk this line? Perfectly! Unfortunately, that option is not available to us, as we fall short of Jesus' standard and are reminded daily of our deformities and depravities.

But what if our default position was a different way?

What if we were to default to love? What if our default was to love one another? To follow Jesus' command, to recognize the embodiment of grace and truth—the place of balance—is the place where we love one another, just as Jesus loved us.

Jesus called us to a higher level so we might **act different** in how we treat one another. That will be the proof that we are followers of Jesus Christ: we are people who default to love.

Two years ago, General Synod Council staff and regional synod staff gathered together for a time of learning, growth, and reflection together. We had a friend and pastor of a missional community in Colorado, Hugh, come to talk with us about what missional really means, and how we make the kingdom of God tangible. During one of his presentations, Hugh asked a very simple, relevant, twenty-first century question: Would Jesus bake a cake for a gay wedding? It was a question from the front page of *USA Today* at the time; since then, it has become an issue with the adoption of a controversial law in the state of Indiana.

Now, simply asking the question here will probably make people in this room feel uncomfortable. For some of you, your response is, "Absolutely; no question." For others of you, your response may be "Absolutely not; no question." And then there are those who might want

to answer the question with another question: “If Jesus bakes this cake, is he condemning or condoning the wedding?”

Jesus came full of grace and truth; he did not come to condemn. John 3:17, the verse after the most famous verse in all Scripture, tells us God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but to save it. And yet, Jesus was also known to tell people, “Your sins are forgiven” and “Go and sin no more.”

As one who did not condemn or condone, Jesus earned the title “a friend of sinners,” given to him by Matthew (Matthew 11:19). And Luke records these words from Jesus: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32, NIV). Jesus said he didn’t come for the healthy—they don’t need a doctor—but for the sick.

When discussing issues of sexuality, there are some in the RCA who take a certain position and want the RCA to adopt a stance that would declare, *we are not welcoming, and not affirming*.

On the other hand, others hope to see the RCA adopt a stance that would declare, *we are welcoming and affirming*.

The RCA, as a denomination that has had a big tent for decades—and a view toward both redemption and transformation—has stated that we have desired to be *welcoming, not affirming*. Most of the statements that have been decided at the General Synod-level have worked hard to be pastorally sensitive and scripturally and historically faithful.

That may change with this General Synod.

Our General Synod president is coming here with a proposal that recognizes the value of assemblies in our reformed tradition and the biblical precedent for dealing with conflict and contradictory perspectives.

We find these case studies in Acts 15:

- When it was an issue of doctrinal importance—extending salvation to the Gentiles—it required the Jerusalem Council, and the Holy Spirit working in an assembly to bring a united judgment:
 - It should not be difficult for Gentiles to turn to God.
 - They should also abstain from food polluted by idols, the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.
- When it was an issue of personal preference—such as including John Mark on the next missionary journey—it was a disagreement. It was a *sharp* disagreement, but one that could be dealt with at an individual level.

Both decisions brought encouragement and strength to the church, and the church continued to grow.

The result of the Jerusalem Council and what followed was to deeply respect particular cultural contexts—trusting in the Spirit and the truth of the incarnation rather than imposing a rigid conformity.

The church in the first century should impact the church in the twenty-first century in the way we act, in response to our own divisions and our call to mission.

How can we pursue a similar way forward?

We are not at a simple, individual disagreement level, but at a place where a united judgment is necessary. Our president will bring a proposal that reflects a commitment to being of the same mind in the Lord. It is an invitation to **act different**.

The RCA has been a denomination that has highly valued *process*: we desire to do things decently and in order. We also have desired to honor biblical principles; the Reformation conviction of *Sola Scriptura* guides our decision-making and our actions. For centuries, these values have directed our forebears. Today, as we look to discerning the Holy Spirit's leading for the Reformed Church in America, they need to guide us. Let us not be the group that throws out reformed process for the purpose of advancing our agenda or promoting our preferences. Let us try to reflect God's desires through the difficult work of seeking the mind of the Spirit together in assembly.

At this historic moment, let us not be tempted by impatience or expedience. Let us recognize the importance of this moment and realize an issue of this significance requires extraordinary process—actions done decently and in order—to bring resolution. We are best served by continuing to be reformed in our process, recognizing the biblical and historical precedents that provide direction in the days ahead.

In Acts 15 the church came together in a council for the sake of mission. It was in the carrying out and expanding of the Church's mission that conflict arose—conflict that was capable of devastating and dismantling this mission. The church chose to seek unity so the mission could continue. They took the time to discern and pray and listen to the Holy Spirit.

It is this biblical model and precedent, coupled with our reformed understanding of assemblies, that offers us direction at this time—to follow biblical principles and reformed process. Let us not, in a single General Synod, do away with the wisdom of those who have come before us, or forget the example of the apostles that gave us a foundation and vision for how we can move forward.

The third thing we must do to live and love like Jesus is to:

3) Stand Faithful

Ministers of Word and sacrament, when we read the declaration and make our vows to seek the things that create unity, purity, and peace, the next line is equally important:

Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I pledge my life to preach and teach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God (*Book of Church Order* Formulary 3).

While how we think and act may be changing, how we believe continues to remain the same. It is why we value Scripture and our creeds and confessions. It is why we state that God's Word is our only rule for faith and practice. It provides a confidence and commitment that we will trust Jesus Christ for our strength—that we will preach and teach the gospel, the good news of salvation. And we will engage in ministry that transforms.

That is what is going on in the RCA right now. Some churches have been engaged in transformational ministry for decades. They have been faithfully living and loving like Jesus—prophetically, tangibly, personally, and effectively. They are full of Christ-followers who have showed up not just for an hour on Sunday mornings, but also on Saturday mornings, Monday nights, Tuesday nights, at the other end of a phone, across the plexiglass in the county jail, and at the funeral home.

Because of our journey of discernment together—through Conversations, 24 different Discovery events throughout Canada and the United States, and the guidance and counsel of three General Synods—some churches are now moving from the sidelines to “get in the game.” Over the next week, you will hear stories of churches that are now making discipleship and personal transformation a priority. They are developing new pathways for how leaders can grow in their ministry context, and focusing on leadership in the next generation that thinks different and acts different.

You will hear stories of churches that are taking the focus off of themselves and their church as a building, and working to move missionally, with sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation that is being lived out locally and globally. The missional imagination of RCA churches is increasing, and our missional footprint is growing. Mission teams are serving in Highland Park, New Jersey; Compton, California; Dulce, New Mexico; Chicago, Illinois; Brazil; Niger; Oman; and India. You can find the RCA in 50 different locations throughout the world and growing, with hundreds of participants, young and old, making a difference and having their own hearts and lives changed.

As we stand faithful, we know that the Holy Spirit will work in and through us. We are **transformed**—the redeemed and reformed people of God who have been changed by the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We are **transforming**—changed people who are now becoming agents of change in our world, living and loving like Jesus.

Our commitment to love and serve others flows out of our commitment to love and serve Jesus Christ.

In the RCA today:

- Gang members are putting their faith in Jesus Christ; you’ll hear their stories.
- RCA college graduates are hearing the call of God to become the next generation of RCA missionaries; you’ve already heard Olivia Holt’s story and her call to rural Nicaragua.
- An RCA congregation is repurposing their facility to reach youth in the Bronx; you’ll hear Mott Haven’s story.
- An RCA church in Canada has been transformed and used by God to bring transformation into the lives of others through addiction and recovery ministries that are having a significant impact on parishioners and participants; it is a wonderful testimony of God’s spirit in action.
- A church in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, has become part of an RCA leadership community and has been touched with a vision for their city to bring 10,000 blessings to be shared in the name of Jesus Christ.
- New churches are being started from California to Florida (and many places in between); you’ll get a glimpse of what it is like to be a church planter in the RCA today.

Each of these stories is an example of transformation that is part of Transformed & Transforming. They are testimonies of what can happen as God's people in RCA congregations begin to move out and live and love like Jesus.

The RCA Ministry Plan brochure on your tables will help you to see how the vision and dream of Transformed & Transforming will hopefully become a reality. And in there you'll find the metrics and accountabilities that guide us, as well as action plans for the next year and the next five years.

There is also a Next Steps brochure provided so your congregation can examine how you might corporately and personally get involved in Transformed & Transforming. It is a way to see the multiple on-ramps and delivery systems that are helping this vision come alive, as well as pilot groups and experiences that are already underway. It is an exciting transformational vision that offers hope and help to individuals, congregations, and communities where RCA ministry is present.

In living out this vision, we do it personally, we do it together, and we do it in partnership with missional partners, ecumenical partners, Formula of Agreement partners, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Last year, General Synod 2014 affirmed the Pella Accord, stating our commitment to the Lund principle and moving more deeply into our covenant with the Christian Reformed Church, declaring to *"act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately."*

What does our acting together look like?

In Disability Concerns, we are moving to a combined website and have had a number of combined training events from California to Canada this past year for local churches and local church leaders to help their congregations reach out and embrace all people with the love of Christ. This coming year we will be launching a new learning community with RCA and CRC churches that desire to engage more fully with ministries that reach people with disabilities.

In Church Multiplication, we continue to value one church multiplication system between our two denominations. Fifty percent of RCA and CRC classes are either engaged in church planting directly, or in strengthening their church planting efforts. This map shows the many places, in both Canada and the United States, where we are working together in mission and church multiplication.

The combining of our individual insurance programs has now been completed with the forming of the new RBA, Reformed Benefits Association. This action has created a larger participant pool that spreads the risk so insurance premiums can be controlled, and also provides more opportunities for us to be able to better care for RCA pastors and their families.

Our partnership with World Renew allows us to provide greater response to disaster relief in North America; it is increasingly becoming more effective. There are currently 17 locations and projects where we are engaged in together, from Alberta to Florida. RCA and CRC volunteers are working side by side, renewing hope, reconciling lives, and restoring creation.

We are also helping RCA and CRC churches become healthier through our efforts with Ridder Church Renewal. This partnership through Western Theological Seminary saw 56 churches

complete the most recent 30-month cycle this past May, with 25 percent of the participating churches coming from the CRC and 75 percent from the RCA. As we expand in the coming year, we anticipate moving closer to a 50/50 ratio. Both denominations contribute to Ridder. And in January, Chris DeVos was brought on as the new associate director of Journey to oversee Ridder Church Renewal, so we now have an ordained Christian Reformed Church pastor at an RCA seminary who coordinates this effort!

What's next? We are looking forward to a collaborative leadership priority, the Reformed Leadership Initiative. With a generous grant from the DeVos Foundation, the Reformed Leadership Initiative will bring RCA and CRC congregations from diverse ministry and geographic contexts together to form leadership networks. These Congregational Leadership Learning Networks will serve as the first step in developing a distributed network for congregational leadership equipping that will be part of the Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow priority of Transformed & Transforming.

Another next step is a more formal evaluation of how we can reduce redundancies and increase efficiencies in other areas, resulting in, hopefully, greater collaboration and increased missional impact.

If you would like to discover more about the Reformed Collaborative you can check it out at www.rca.org/togetheragain.

We stand faithful.

We believe that Jesus' prayer for the unity of the church in John 17 was a prayer that continues to be answered as we work together with all the partners God provides, so the world may know and love Jesus Christ, and may know that God loved them first.

We stand faithful.

Knowing that it is not our church—it is Christ's church—and Christ is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, we are engaged in a spiritual battle. As Christ builds the church, we seek to put Christ's purposes first—in how we think, renewing our mind; in how we act, radically loving God and each other; and in how we believe, confident that he who began a good work in us will complete it.

We live together into a new future—a future that is connected to our past biblically, historically, and faithfully. A future that is accomplished in our present as we live and love like Jesus today, tomorrow, this week, and in the days ahead. A future that is founded on faith, and confidently recognizes that faith is our foundation, past, present, and future.

We live our mission as an outgrowth of our beliefs—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

We declare our trust in a sovereign God who is over all, through all, and in all.

We serve as one body, empowered by one Spirit, and that gives us hope.

And the apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 4, the ones that precede those I have just stated—I pray these words may be the convictions and the commitments from which we care for one another as we care for our world, living into our transformational future together: "Be completely

humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:2-3).