

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

Greg Alderman

Greeting

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! It is good to be with you here today as we have gathered to conduct the business of our Lord's church.

Since becoming an ordained pastor in the RCA, I have trusted that when we meet in assembly, we gather as those who have been called by the Holy Spirit to provide orderly governance to the church according to our rules of order so that the church might be about its most important work: the mission of Jesus Christ in a hurting and broken world so loved by God.

And so, as we gather, we stand together in a long line of those who have gone before us who take seriously the call of God to do and be about the work of the Lord's church, in an orderly and Christ-honoring way, to the glory of God.

Thanksgiving

Before I share my report with you, I must pause and give thanks first to my Lord and Savior for condescending to choose me for this task. I know that the Lord does not need me, but to be included in his work and his plan for the church is a blessing beyond description. I would also like to thank some others.

First, my wife, Veronica: It has been a long and at times difficult journey over the last two years of being a General Synod officer, and you have proved once again to be faithful to your promises to God and to me. I love you, and acknowledge you as a woman of God, my teammate, one who is 100 percent supportive of the church, and without a doubt worthy of double honor!

To my children, Erin, Gabe, Emily, and Ross, who have continued to do your thing, and have been patient and understanding of my frequent travel: I love you more than you know!

To my two close colleagues with whom I have shared this journey: Carl Boersma, the 2014 General Synod president, and Evan Vermeer, this year's General Synod vice president: You have each demonstrated to me a deep love of the Lord, a serious and abiding commitment to the crucial work of the church, and a humble and Spirit-led demeanor that is something I seek to emulate. Thank you!

To the GSC staff and Tom De Vries: Your love of the Lord and love of the church is passionate and inspirational. Your wisdom and professionalism will lead the church well for many years to come.

And finally, to those who have supported me—my close friends, and especially my staff colleagues, and the congregation of Christ Community Church: I thank you for your support and encouragement. You have lifted my spirit and blessed me more times than you will know.

My Call

When I started this journey, standing for nomination to be the General Synod vice president on June 24, 2013, in Pella, Iowa, I spontaneously and extemporaneously shared what was on my heart. I said: "I believe deeply that if God has called me to this place at this time, it's to continually and passionately remind the church that Jesus has called us for a mission. He is the sending God, and he wants us to reach those who are far from him... That would be my passion and my heart's desire, to continually remind this body, and the church at large, that we exist to share the good news of Jesus Christ."

I believe my calling is still to passionately and consistently keep the mission of Jesus Christ before the church. And to remind you to keep the light on for those who are far from God by being radically inclusive and then sharing the radically transformative message of Jesus with a hurting and broken world that he so loves.

Our Call

I was particularly inspired that 2013 was also the year that the Reformed Church in America adopted our current mission and vision statement, *Transformed & Transforming*, because it addressed the heart and need of every human being, each one on a journey, being changed and at the same time, changing. This vision statement was born of the hard work of *this* body listening to what the Spirit was saying to the church. And *Transformed & Transforming* is a simple, yet clear articulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its practical implications to be at once radically inclusive of all whom God would have us embrace and to proclaim the truth of radical transformation through Jesus Christ.

Transformed & Transforming did not describe something new. It identified and summed up what was already happening in the midst of the church at large under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It also did something else. It cast a distinct vision and reminder for all of our local churches to be about the *main thing*. *Transformed & Transforming* is a guardrail, and a healthy checklist, for what we know the Holy Spirit has identified as vital and faithful ministry. In other words:

We believe, as a fellowship of congregations, healthy churches will be about the business of cultivating transformation in Christ, equipping emerging leaders of today and tomorrow, and engaging in Christ's kingdom mission. This is the call of *Transformed & Transforming* to the Reformed Church in America.

And, people of God, I have seen it in action!

In the greater Columbus, Ohio, area is a network of leaders who are strategically working through their plan to bring a worshiping presence to every corner of the city through what they call the Center Point Vision. The first congregation, started as a church plant ten years ago, has now grown to being on the verge of launching, in coordination with the second congregation, a new, third gathering that will be missionally focused on its neighborhood.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, New Life Community is an amazing church in one of the most diverse cities in North America, led by a pastor born in India who has found his way into providing leadership in our family of churches. That church is showing the way into a future in the Reformed Church free from racism.

In Pompano Beach, Florida, Christ Community is a small church going through pastoral transition and rediscovering what it means to be a transformational force for the gospel in its neighborhood.

In Paramount, California, Emmanuel Reformed is a church rooted in the ground in which it was planted, orienting itself toward the heart of Los Angeles, and seeking to partner with other kingdom-minded believers in planting transformational communities in every square block of that city.

In Dyer, Indiana, Faith is a church with a vision to create an organic network of gospel-centered congregations focused on reaching out to the lost and hurting and proclaiming the hope of salvation and life transformation through Jesus Christ.

In Sacramento, California, Iglesia Cristianna Emmanuel is the daughter church of the congregation I lead and is under the leadership of pastor Jose Bautista, who will lead our devotions tomorrow morning. Pastor Jose's congregation is focused on ministering to the immigrants and first-generation Hispanic families not being reached by anyone else in our area.

In Holland, Michigan, Maple Avenue is a church that has experienced rebirth by a ministry couple focused on revitalizing a neighborhood in the name of Jesus. Their passion is to be a vibrant worshiping community that lives out the full implications of the teaching of Jesus with everyone they meet.

In Sioux Center, Iowa, there is a missional engagement ministry called ATLAS that was launched through a cooperative effort of CRC and RCA churches to help the hurting, to equip the body of Christ, and to unite the community for the sake of the gospel.

And in Temecula, California, Rancho Community is a church led by a dynamic commissioned pastor that is ministering to the total life of the community by engaging every aspect of culture: faith, family, education, business, arts, government, and media.

None of these celebrations have mentioned the incredible work of our Kingdom Enterprise Zones, the Ridder Foundation, or the thousands of other missional engagement agencies being spearheaded by called-and-sent RCA members, nor have we counted the amazing ways our global mission engagement is impacting the world.

There are exciting things happening in the Reformed Church in America!

Concern and Anxiety about Homosexuality

Of course, a companion of this excitement and growth is shifting realities—things change, requiring us to constantly be listening, talking, and evaluating. As I have traveled and listened, from New York to Vancouver, from Grand Rapids to Chicago, from Dyer to Sioux Center, and from Pompano Beach to Paramount, there has been one consistent topic voiced over and over again to me, and usually within the first several minutes of every conversation: What is the church going to do about homosexuality?

I know there are some who would prefer that I simply did not address this topic in this forum. But the truth is, I believe that this is the single greatest divisive issue challenging the unity of our church today. And historically, it is the threat of internal division and disunity—not external pressure and opposition—that has always been the greatest threat to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am not alone in my assessment. Chris Ferguson, the general secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, has drawn the same conclusion in regard to the global

church, saying that the single most important issue facing us today is: What will we do about homosexuality? Friends, this is what I know from listening and dialoguing with so many of you around the RCA: that the great majority of the church is eager to engage this issue and work toward clarity in our practices.

This is not to say that we haven't been talking about it. We have. The RCA has been talking about this topic going back to at least the 1960s. We have drafted papers and taken positions. We have gone through a General Synod trial, and we have had more dialogue. We have had task forces, and we have had study groups. But, in all this, we have not gotten closer to being clear where we stand. Instead, we have become cloudier.

And now, we seem to have come to a place on the question of homosexuality that would be described by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings? (1 Corinthians 3:3-4, NIV)

It seems to me that we too easily forget Paul's reminder to us that this is the Lord's church and Jesus is the One to whom we are to be loyal to above all others, and above all agendas. As Paul reminds us:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11, NIV).

My friends, we must not settle for our divisions. We must not resign ourselves to being defined by lesser things. We must rise above those earthly allegiances and simple definitions at this gathering to remind the entire church and ourselves that there is one name that we are to be united to and defined by. And we must set the example for the church at large on what that looks like.

You see, I believe that the church at large longs for the General Synod to provide leadership, not just in discussing and learning about what homosexuality is and how it affects us, but in making it clear where we stand as a church. Many are not sure where we stand, and they have good reason not to be sure, because we must admit that there is a definite lack of clarity on where the RCA stands on the question based on the practices of many in our fellowship. While it is true that our position is fixed in the minds of many, it is also not fixed in the minds of others.

And, what this has sparked—the lack of clarity from the General Synod—is a wide variety of responses. I am aware of a classis setting aside the acceptance of a demission from the 1980s and re-ordaining an openly gay person so that he could serve another denomination. I am aware of several office holders revealing after their ordination that they are in a gay lifestyle. I am aware of pastors who are performing same-sex weddings. I am aware of a few churches who have left our fellowship in part because of our lack of clarity on this matter and the open and affirming acceptance of homosexuality by some in the RCA. These are all examples that have contributed to strain our unity, and without clarity I see this strain continuing and worsening.

The one thing all of these responses have in common is that they all have made the assumption, or reached the conclusion, that the RCA has either changed its view on homosexuality already or will inevitably change its view. Indeed, there are efforts to change the historical and liturgical view of the RCA on homosexuality, but any careful consideration of the

historical and liturgical position of the RCA would remind us that our view is and has always been that sexual expression outside a covenant commitment of marriage between a man and a woman is sin.

Practically, this means that there is no room in our current understanding for blessing same-sex unions or for ordaining homosexuals. However, it also means that there is incredible room for all to be ministered to in the total life of the church.

We are, after all, by definition a group that seeks to be radically inclusive. And we currently stand on the call of the 1990 General Synod, which adopted as the official position of the Reformed Church in America “that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings” (*Minutes of the General Synod 1990*, R-11, p. 461).

This statement is a call to implore the church to find ways to minister to homosexual persons and their families. For some, this might mean making space in their membership for people regardless of their personal lifestyle. For others it might mean more creative ways of reaching out and sharing the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Regardless, we are called to minister to all through the power of the Holy Spirit. On that, I know we all can and should agree.

As I have listened, there are four broad categories of views on homosexuality within which the great majority of the people in our churches would align.

- Historical and liturgical: Those who believe that the historical and liturgical position of the RCA is that sexual expression is meant only for a covenant relationship between a man and a woman, and therefore any sexual expression outside marriage between a man and a woman is sin. They may or may not allow membership of homosexual persons in their fellowship, but they do not allow for officiating a marriage or ordination.
- Open and affirming: Those who believe the RCA should change its official position to be fully inclusive of LGBT people, not only in membership, but in the blessing of same-sex unions and ordination to church office. This category includes those who might believe this is an issue of pastoral concession and those who have a theological justification for their views.
- Disputable matter: Those who believe, regardless of their position, that they will not divide and break communion over the issue and that our fellowship should tolerate those who are open and affirming and those who hold to the historical and liturgical view.
- Ostriches: Those who want to put their heads in the sand and hope this simply all goes away. These are the people who ask, “Why are we (still) talking about this?”

I have always heard, and have believed, that polity is our friend. In order for the polity to work properly, everyone in our fellowship must trust that we are doing things in a way that maintains good and proper order. Therefore, in order to preserve the integrity of our fellowship and practice as churches in the RCA, we also need to trust that we are following our current rules of order. Thus, I offer:

P-1

To implore the congregations and members of the RCA to exercise a season of restraint where we will allow for a constitutional process of potentially changing the RCA’s position on homosexuality to be

determined and followed. This call of restraint includes refraining from performing same-sex marriages, ordaining homosexuals, and separating from the denomination over the issue.

I trust that if the church describes a new pathway forward, and we approve that pathway constitutionally, then everyone will know that we have indeed changed our position and are free to exercise within the greater framework of our fellowship according to our new rules of order.

Now, if, as many in the church suggest, it is high time to change the official position of the RCA, then it should definitely be done in an orderly way. We should not just set aside or ignore our historical and liturgical position easily. Therefore I suggest, as I know many have considered, that the church get serious about addressing this question in a constitutional manner through a council of the church specifically charged to address this matter.

I must digress a little and point out that tension on this issue has created a constitutional crisis in our fellowship already. While our historical and liturgical position has never changed constitutionally, there are those within our fellowship who have now reinterpreted that position by questioning the constitutional authority of the marriage liturgies and by thwarting attempts to clarify this matter in the *BCO*. My assumption is that those who do this believe that the church has either been silent on the matter, or has never truly spoken on homosexuality as we know it in the twenty-first century. However, I know that most people I have dialogued with believe—regardless of the side of the question they are on—that the church has indeed spoken, and desire that we speak again on this matter in order to clarify our stance.

A Church Council

In light of the fact that I believe this is ultimately a constitutional issue, I humbly suggest to the General Synod that a council be formed specifically to address the matter of where the church actually stands on homosexuality, and that if there is to be an actual change in our official stance and practice, that this council then be charged with providing a framework for that change to happen through a constitutional process.

There is significant historical precedent for this call. Many times in the church's history it has needed a council to bring clarity to issues facing the fellowship of its congregations. I have spent time reflecting with many across the denomination on the first church council as we find it in Acts 15. In that instance, the church was in desperate need to come together and deal with their differences, and the leaders needed to bring the key players to the table so that they could discuss and debate and even argue. Yes, argue! I love the way this is rendered in the New King James Version:

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute... (Acts 15:6-7, NKJV)

Another version says "after a long discussion" (New Living Translation), and still another says "after there had been much disputing" (Authorized King James Version). Those who have gone before us have shown us that when we have division, we need to come together and dive into the matter. We are not to fear it, or act as those of the world do by devolving into our little circles. Instead, we gather the leaders and we work it out—together.

From the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, which dealt with key Jewish/Gentile issues, to the Synod of Dort, which articulated our faith in the face of severe persecution, to our General Synods of the 1860s and '70s, which dealt with tensions that ultimately birthed the Christian

Reformed Church, we have many models in our history that remind us that we need to come together and deal with this in an orderly and constitutional way. Therefore, I propose:

P-2

That the General Synod form a special council to meet in spring 2016 for the express purpose of describing a pathway forward for the Reformed Church in America to address the question of human sexuality as it relates to ordination and marriage.

This council should focus its work on developing a way forward so that the church may see a path or paths toward coming to a settled position. It should have General Synod 2016 and 2017 in mind to put its proposed pathway before the church. This meeting should be substantial in its preparation and time commitment by asking that each classis send its best leaders and representatives and that everyone come prepared for the duration of the meeting, which should be between four and five full days.

P-3

That 83 delegates who will represent Jesus Christ above all be sent to the special council from the following bodies in the following proportions: five past presidents of the General Synod (5), one person from each classis (44), the presidents of the RCA's two seminaries and the director of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (3), one at-large General Synod professor (1), and thirty at-large RCA members (30).

These leaders should represent not only who the RCA is, but also who we are becoming and hope to be, living into the next era of our history.

P-4

That all current studies, work, and other information of interest be made available to inform the work of the council in spring 2016.

P-5

That a "Wise Council of Five" be formed from among past General Synod presidents. This council will have the following responsibilities:

- **Select 30 at-large delegates, ensuring that the full counsel of the Holy Spirit is present from the church, with special attention to making sure that the entire delegation includes diversity of gender, age, race, region, and expertise.**
- **Set the time for the meeting.**
- **Prepare the meeting.**
- **Prepare the delegates.**
- **Officiate the meeting.**
- **Inform the church of the results.**

The suggested membership of this council is Brad Lewis, Carol Mutch, Irving Rivera, Chuck Van Engen, and Tony Vis.

P-6

That the cost to attend this council be incurred by either the individual delegate or the sending classis; and, in the event that a

delegate could not provide his or her own funding, that the General Synod set aside \$50,000 to ensure that all people called to the event would be able to attend.

We must have a council that brings together those who have worked on this issue and those who can speak for the church.

A Good Result

A good result will be clarity for all.

If the council brings potential constitutional changes to either the *BCO* or the Liturgy, or introduces a new creed, then the church will know where we are headed together, as things will be done out in the open for all to see.

If the council gathers, dialogues, and then adjourns without suggesting any changes, that too will signal to the entire church that we have indeed a desire to affirm our current and historical position, and that any future attempt to change the view of the church on this matter should be done in a good and orderly manner.

Either of these results will speak clearly to all.

Benediction

As I close my report, I want to implore the General Synod to take this call seriously and to act in a way for the benefit of all in our fellowship. We must remember as we talk about this that we have an elephant in the room that everyone already knows is there. The question before us is: How will we deal with it? I hope and pray that we will do so in an open and orderly way so that we as a larger church can trust in the manner our decisions are made. Someone needs to provide leadership, and I think it is this group that needs to initiate that leadership.

As I have traveled throughout the denomination, and on the occasion I have had the opportunity to give a benediction, I have repeatedly turned to Numbers 6 for that blessing. I love this blessing in particular, because Moses was told that when Aaron and the priests pronounced it, they would put the name of the Lord on the people. Therefore,

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
And be gracious to you,
May you always experience the Lord turning to you,
Both now and forever,
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!