

The PFCC thanks the General Synod for allowing us to engage in these important conversations, and we look forward, if desired, to continuing our work together.

Respectfully submitted,  
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## **REFERRAL FROM GENERAL SYNOD 2015**

### **Response to *MGS 2015*, R-39, p. 181, Task Force on Interreligious Understanding**

#### **REPORT OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS TASK FORCE**

R-39

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Unity, to establish, for a period of three years, a General Synod task force on interreligious understanding and relations, in order to explore the challenges and opportunities of relationships and evangelism between Christians and people and groups of other religions, with the understanding that this task force should work closely with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work, both in North America and globally; and further,

to include in the mandate of this task force the need to make recommendations to the General Synod regarding where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing; and further,

to ask the task force to report annually to the General Synod for the duration of its work.

#### **Introduction**

The Interreligious Task Force met five times during the past three years. This was done in a cooperative relationship with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, with the chair of the EIRC serving on the task force, as well as in conversation with “other ecumenical partners already involved in interfaith discussions and work” with the aim of presenting to this year’s synod a report and recommendation as to “the challenges and opportunities” of interfaith relations and “where and how this work should be permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing.” What follows is a reflection on the deliberations of the task force, establishing the rationale for equipping our congregations for missional engagement with and among our neighbors from

other religious communities. A recommendation related to the findings of the task force follows this report.

### **The Missional Mandate**

The primary purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to God's saving grace and love in a world imbued with cultural and religious diversity. We are, in this sense, a missionary people, called by God to use our gifts in God's renewing and reconciling work in all its dimensions. This entails working with our neighbors to bring healing and hope to the many victims of poverty, injustice, and oppression while also embracing Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

Although the RCA has a long history of bearing witness to Christ's love in parts of the world where other faith traditions are dominant, we have not previously given careful and thoughtful articulation to what this means in terms of our missionary calling in our own society, where religious pluralism has become a defining reality. In a time when political and societal tensions are mounting as people develop polarized positions that drive a wedge between neighbors, it is especially critical to develop a better understanding of what it means to love neighbors of other religions with the transforming compassion of Christ. This report aims to serve the church by helping answer the question: "How do we give witness to the good news we have encountered in Jesus Christ while at the same time, sharing life and struggling with common issues more significantly and more sensitively than ever before with people of other faiths and ideologies, while also recognizing and resisting all those forces in the world that tend towards dehumanization and domination?" (Pittman, et al, *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective*, p. 27).

### **Rooted in a Rich Mission History**

For more than 200 years, the Reformed Church in America has initiated interreligious encounters and engaged in interreligious dialogue through our global mission program. Missionaries and the congregations who support them have, over the years, developed enduring and sometimes even multi-generational relationships of mutuality with people of other faith traditions. These relationships have allowed us to become acquainted with Buddhist and Confucianist traditions in China and Japan, Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Hinduism in India, and indigenous religions in North, Central, and South America, even though the filters through which we have viewed the religious "other" have not always been reflective of Christ's compassionate embrace of all who share God's image. A brief look at the missionary literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows evidence of racial and cultural superiority. Our missionaries were not immune to the temptation to embrace the imperialistic impulses of an era that too often tied the missionary movement to the colonialist spirit of the age.

Yet even while the prevalent cultural attitudes distorted relationships with people of other faiths, RCA missionaries were commended for developing positive models for interreligious engagement that are celebrated even today by the people among whom they lived and worked. This was especially true of medical missionaries such as Ida Scudder in south India, Wells Thoms in Oman, and Samuel Nordoff in Taiwan, all of whom are remembered with great appreciation by the people among whom they ministered in the name of Christ. Others are celebrated for their scholarship, which helped people understand the faith of our neighbors in a more appreciative and knowledgeable way. One thinks here of John and Dorothy Van Ess, Samuel Zwemer, and more recently, Harold Vogelaar and Lewis Scudder, with their expertise in Islam; John Piet with Hinduism; and Charles Van Engen with animism in Central and South

America. Our missionaries have learned both how to deeply love and respect the people among whom they minister while also witnessing in gracious love and truth to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Looking to our missionaries as examples, we are shown a way to bear witness to Christ's love in a respectful and compassionate manner.

These examples serve as positive dialogical models of interreligious engagement to a post 9/11 world. This paper draws on their examples along with the foundational testimony of Scripture read through a Reformed lens to offer a case for developing a positive model for interreligious engagement for twenty-first century RCA congregations.

## **The Call**

We are a missional people called to be instruments of God's saving purposes in the world. To embody the fullness of God's mission, we are called to focus on two elements constituting a singular call: first, we are called to join with the renewing and reconciling work of God in creation; and second, we are called to bear witness to the gospel and nurture disciples in the way of Christ. Craig Ott and Stephen Tennett, in their book *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, speak of two seamlessly interwoven biblical mandates for mission: the *creation mandate* and the *gospel mandate*, both of which are necessary to participate fully in God's mission in the world. The first speaks of a compassionate involvement in the maintenance of divinely instituted "underlying ethical values such as protecting human dignity, stewardship of the environment, justice and compassion," the second of the proclamation of the good news of God's redemptive purpose in Christ answering his call to make disciples of all nations. In the holistic renewing and reconciling work of God, we stand ready to work *with* all those who side with good versus evil, the oppressed versus the oppressor. And in word and deed, we seek to bear witness to the gospel that is *to* and *for* all people. This is what distinguished the witness of those early RCA missionaries who embodied the call of Christ in their ministry and lives—the recognition that the division between proclamation and dialogue, word and deed, is a false dichotomy in the economy of God's redemptive work in the world. Both are required to give holistic witness to the gospel of grace. The Christian Reformed Church in North America, in its document "Reformed Christian Engagement with People of Other Faiths," reminds us that this is an essential message of Scripture:

Our Christian identity ought to be visible in all that we do. This does not mean, however, that evangelistic witness is our only calling in life. We are also to be generous, practice hospitality, bless our persecutors, live at peace with everyone, feed our hungry enemies and give our thirsty enemies water, honor civil authorities and pay our taxes, and do no harm to our neighbor. (Rom. 12:8–13:10, *passim*) The prophet Jeremiah put it this way to the Babylonian exiles: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jer. 29:7) As we think about our relationship with neighbors who do not share our faith, we must always remind ourselves of what our Lord taught us: "Love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:37-38) He also reminded us in the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37) that we should be prepared to be surprised about the answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

## **The Urgency of the Task**

The grounds for interreligious dialogue lies here—in the recognition that the creation and gospel mandates both arise out of God's compassion for all who have been made in the divine image.

Dialogue in this case is not attempting to find a common denominator for a supra-religious ideology or avoiding the difficult topics that arise out of religious differences but rather a commitment to the kind of respectful listening and learning that marks the best human friendships. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves if we do not take the time to get to know them. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves if we shun respectful dialogue. It is Christ's love that compels us to build these kinds of relationships with our neighbors.

This is an especially crucial point given that too often the motivation for a missional engagement with people from other faiths is fear, often incited by their growing numbers, not only in urban settings but increasingly in smaller towns and rural settings. A fear-based reaction in this case is contrary to the spirit of Christ as it is driven not by love for neighbor but by preservation—of the self, of our immediate community, and of our nations. This is a fear we need to examine as we consider what it means to enter into Christlike relations with our neighbors. We must confess how that fear, individually and collectively, too often has led us not into positive relations with our neighbors but into an isolation that allows dehumanizing stereotypes to take root in our lives and distort our relationships.

One result of this fear, arising from continuing trends of migration mixed with North America's sordid history of racism and xenophobia, is anti-Muslim fervor that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to meet our Muslim neighbors as neighbors, much less love them with the love of Christ. Sadly, Christians have been among those fostering distorted stereotypes, often without realizing that doing so is a violation of the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). This is a principal reason why the call for developing a positive plan for interreligious relations is such an urgent one: to counter the relationship-destroying fear that hinders our ability to live with Christlike love for our neighbors—*all* of our neighbors.

This Christlike love includes the biblical theme of hospitality, which is rooted in the character of God and revealed in God's desire for the flourishing of all people in relationship to God and others. The Old Testament contains themes of God's call for special care for the alien and the stranger, such as the command to "love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). The example of the early church and the teachings of the New Testament in passages such as Romans 12 reinforce this theme by calling Christians to welcome the stranger as we also have been welcomed in Christ. Our Reformed tradition teaches that the act of loving is born of the Holy Spirit working within us to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus leads us to pray for our enemy, love our neighbor, and to move toward the margins where the most vulnerable to dehumanization and harm live and to befriend them.

All of this speaks to the need to act with urgency to pursue dialogue, love, and justice for and with our neighbors of different religions, particularly those who are threatened with insults and violence and narrowed into categories where their humanity is ignored. Jeremiah 29 reminds us that seeking the good of our neighbors rebounds in good for us as well. It also allows us to live in that space where God wants us to live—the space where love for God and neighbor represent a seamless whole.

### **The Benefits of Interreligious Engagement**

God's call to the RCA is no different from what it has always been; it is a call that has compelled hundreds of RCA doctors and teachers and pastors and evangelists and social workers to offer their gifts to the ongoing call of God to share his love with the world, a compulsion that has

driven many to leave home and family to engage foreign cultures and peoples with a holistic ministry, touching body, mind, and spirit. Today, one can often go across the street to meet the very same kind of people and challenges those nineteenth-century missionaries crossed oceans to find. In a society that is growing more multicultural and multi-religious every year, the ability to listen carefully, articulate one's beliefs without antagonism or coercion, and explore differences is more than a matter of social etiquette. It is the call of the gospel and the call to the church.

Interreligious dialogue and action is today's response to living and loving like Jesus. Far from compromising our faith, interfaith work invites us to live into a greater fullness of who we are as Christians. We bring our full selves to the table, even as we invite others to bring their full selves to the table. And we need not see that as something to fear. Iron sharpens iron. Dialogue with persons of other faiths invites us to know our full selves as Christians, not unlike our missionary forebears knew.

Even apart from the benefit of living at the center of God's will, we gain benefit from having our identity as Christians enriched and deepened by an interaction with those who are outside our sometimes spiritually insular enclaves. In building relationships, tearing down stereotypes, and pursuing justice, we learn from others and live out commitments that come directly out of our deepest biblical values:

- Meeting human need.
- Working for social justice.
- Embodying mission and evangelism.
- Resolving human conflict.
- Strengthening families, communities, congregations, and workplaces (These are the spheres of relationships identified in "The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).").

For surely, God said, "... I know the plans I have for you ... plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). This is the bedrock of dialogue that we believe to be God's calling to us at this *kairos* moment in our history, a calling captured well by the RCA's vision statement ([www.rca.org/ourmission](http://www.rca.org/ourmission)), which could be reimagined in the following way:

Imagine the witness of a faith community with a passion for reconciliation, compassion, and justice, reaching out, meeting others, and playing an active role in its community.

Imagine a congregation with an intentional mission action plan, a vibrant volunteering program, a global awareness, and a local commitment.

Imagine the body of Christ with a faith commitment as deep as those nineteenth-century missionaries, reaching out to the "other" with the gift of reconciliation and grace.

Imagine living and loving like Jesus, where all God's children make a difference.

The task is urgent. The blessings are manifold. The call can no longer be ignored.

## Recommendation

The Interreligious Task Force offers the following recommendation to facilitate the RCA's ongoing interreligious relations work:

### **RF 18-4**

**To direct the general secretary to authorize and fund a half-time position, designated as the coordinator for interreligious relations, to facilitate the RCA's interreligious relations work, including equipping congregations, leaders, and students for missional interreligious engagement; and further,**

**To conduct the RCA's interreligious work through a joint committee with the CRCNA, consistent with the Reformed Collaborative. The committee will be comprised of the RCA coordinator for interreligious relations, the RCA ecumenical associate, CRCNA staff, and practitioners and experts in interreligious relations from both the RCA and CRCNA. The joint committee will report its work to the General Synod each year through the Commission on Christian Unity.**

**Both the position of coordinator for interreligious relations and the joint committee shall be funded for a period of five years, at which time the effectiveness of structuring the RCA's interreligious work in this manner will be evaluated and the Commission on Christian Unity will bring recommendations to the General Synod regarding whether to continue this structure for interreligious work.**

### Reasons:

The recommendation adopted by General Synod 2015 (*MGS 2015*, p. 181) states that this work shall be "permanently lodged within the RCA structure and staffing." Making this a staff position ensures that. The staff position would simply make permanent the responsibilities of the missions appointment designated "coordinator for interreligious relations and refugee support ministries" (created in 2017 but not yet funded) that are concerned with interreligious engagement and education.

Connecting the RCA's interreligious work to the Commission on Christian Unity makes joint endeavors with the CRCNA more structurally aligned. Our ecumenical partners (including the CRCNA) facilitate the work of interreligious and ecumenical relations through the same office or committee (for the CRCNA, the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee).

Respectfully submitted,  
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