

A CONCISE HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TWO RELATED BUT SEPARATED DENOMINATIONS: THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA AND THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

The focus of this essay is on the interactions between two denominations whose roots in this country have different depths, but whose roots in the Netherlands extend all the way back to the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619; indeed, they extend back through John Calvin to the very beginning of Christianity. Some members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and most members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) are also rooted in the Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834, so they share a heritage of secession from established churches. The Reformed Church in America, known as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church (RPDC) prior to 1867, identifies 1628 as its date of origin, whereas the CRCNA views 1857 as its founding date. The latter date is the point at which our historical narrative begins, since the founding congregations of the CRCNA withdrew from the RPDC at that time. This account will reveal both tensions and collegiality between the denominations across the years.

Secession of 1857

Ten years after the Reformed immigrants from the Netherlands and Germany settled in West Michigan and Iowa, four congregations with approximately three hundred families and two ministers seceded from their kin to form a new denomination. The specific issues cited in 1857 were the use of hymns in formal worship services, the lack of consistent catechetical instruction for young people, and the practice of open communion. Ten years later the question of church members belonging to secret, oath-bound societies further divided the two, because the RCA left the question of membership to local consistories, whereas the CRCNA forbade it. The issue of Christian day schools added to the divide, with the CRCNA supporting such schools and the RCA historically advocating for and supporting public schools, although some RCA families do support Christian day schools and send their children to them. Other regional and local issues added to the separation of the two denominations.

During the century following the events of 1857, the question of which group was right was a frequent topic of discussion. Apologists from the two denominations attempted to answer this question, arguing in tones ranging from the very civil to the acrimonious, but, not surprisingly, those from the RCA (e.g., Albertus Pieters) made the case for the RCA and those from the CRCNA defended their denomination (e.g., John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* [Baker, 1949]). The answers simply pointed to the divide rather than resolving the question. During this period, tensions kept the two groups apart, in spite of their common geographic origins, ethnic traditions, religious heritage, and frequent proximity in the communities that they established in the United States and later Canada.

During the last several decades, however, scholars have moved away from trying to determine the validity of the separation, instead looking for factors other than concerns about church practices that contributed to the divide between two groups, often living as neighbors and on the same faith journey; they also questioned whether this divide could ever be crossed. Moving away from the earlier polemic exchanges, these studies agreed with the earlier scholarship that discord began when the immigrants in West Michigan voted to join the RPDC, whose colonial roots were in the Hervormde Kerk of the Netherlands, the same church that most of the immigrants had left in 1834. The immigrants and the RPDC/RCA, therefore, shared a common Reformed heritage: the same creeds, catechism, and doctrines. But the immigrants, heirs of the 1834 secession that was premised on the thesis that the national church had unwisely turned toward liberalism, disagreed over whether that RPDC/RCA had also taken such a turn.

Recent scholarship, however, has revealed that divisions among the immigrants went well beyond music in worship, catechetical instruction, and to whom the elements of communion were served. The immigrants were not united socially, politically, municipally, or economically. Although most members of both denominations moved toward the Republican Party once it was formed in the late 1850s, others stayed with the Democratic Party. In West Michigan, the settlements spread out across several municipal lines; some lived in Ottawa County, some in Allegan County, and others in Kent County. Each had its own center of government at Grand Haven, Allegan, and Grand Rapids, respectively, not at Holland, which had been envisioned as the center of the Dutch colony. Furthermore, because of this geographic spread in settlement, no central location of immigrant economic activity developed. Singapore/Saugatuck, Grandville/Grand Rapids, and Grand Haven drew the economic activity of the colony, not Holland. Contact with the larger community also differed. In Holland, the Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte, in addition to being the spiritual leader, served as the lawyer, land agent, and community booster. In Zeeland, there was a division in these roles, with the Rev. Cornelius Van der Meulen as the spiritual leader and Jannes Vande Luyster as the land agent, attorney, and community booster. In Drenthe, Michigan, the Rev. Roelof Smit would serve these roles after arriving in 1851. But in all the other communities, individuals—such as Gerrit Veldhorst in Graafschap, Jan Rabbers in the short-lived community of Groningen, and many more—had to do these things on their own. All of these circumstances worked against a centrally united colony.

Furthermore, it is doubtful that these immigrants shared a common heritage that would have held them together. They came from various provinces in the Netherlands, as well as from Germany. Many of the immigrants previously had never been more than ten miles from their birthplace. To Groningers, folks from Zeeland were as remote as people from France or Spain. The Friesians and the Germans spoke entirely different languages from the Dutch. Not surprisingly, therefore, when they settled in the United States, they grouped themselves according to kinship: Groningers settled with Groningers, Zeelanders with Zeelanders, Friesians with Friesians, etc. The names of the rural communities attest to this pattern, as do distinct neighborhoods in the cities: Chicago had its Groninger Hoek (neighborhood of Groningers); in Grand Rapids, the Groningers tended to settle in the southeast section of the city, Friesians on the west side, and Zeelanders more in the center. Their commonality was religion, but little else.

Moreover, the experiences of the immigrants pushed the new settlers apart. During the very difficult early years, this diverse makeup of West Michigan colonists survived by acceding to the strong leadership provided by the Rev. Van Raalte. But once those difficult years were past for the early settlers and with later arrivals, such strong leadership was neither needed nor welcomed. Differences rather than unity defined the immigrants. Soon after the immigrants voted to join the RCA in 1850, those unhappy with this union began to leave. Within months Roelof (Ralph) Jacobs Schepers (Scheepers) and Geesje (Tijms Tingen) Schepers and their two daughters with their husbands left the Zeeland congregation for the Presbyterians. In 1851 ten families left to organize a Presbyterian church in South Holland (now the intersection of Washington Avenue and West 32nd Street in Holland, Michigan), as did most of the Drenthe congregation in 1853. And then three hundred families left in 1857.

Initially the 1857 seceders attempted to join with their religious kin in the Netherlands. But distances were far, communication slow, and those in the Netherlands did not understand what was happening in Michigan, so they declined to have the immigrants join their fellowship. Consequently, the seceders formed their own denomination, the Hollandsche Gereformeerde Kerk (Holland Reformed Church). The name proved to be too similar to that of the RPDC (RCA

after 1867), so in 1861 the name was changed to Ware Hollandsche Geerformeerde Kerk (True Dutch Reformed Church); the implication was that the RCA was not the true church. Thus, lines were drawn and polemics about denominational purity followed.

Duplicate Institutions

The two denominations, often living side-by-side, created a formal divide, each with its own institutions that duplicated the other, such as periodicals, colleges, and seminaries. Because of articles in *De Hope*, the CRCNA began *De Wachter* to publish its contrary points of view, and the polemical discussions were able to move forward. Families came apart when a child from one denomination married someone from the other. There are stories of parents not attending the wedding ceremony of a child, or grandparents not attending the baptism of grandchildren, because these took place in “the other denomination,” a phrase issued almost as an anathema. Words spoken by members of one denomination caused pain for members of the other, and often this was done deliberately. In fits of pique, members left one denomination for the other. Business principles reflected denominational affiliation. Customers deliberately chose merchants based on denominational affiliation. These actions, and many more, caused the divide to form and deepen.

Curiously, however, in specific circumstances, the divide was crossed, even bridged, from both directions. There are cases of members from one denomination joining the other in locations where there was only one congregation. In Iowa there are stories of RCA, Presbyterian, and CRCNA pastors traveling miles through harsh weather to conduct services in vacant congregations, without regard for denominational affiliation. For instance, in 1914 the RCA minister in Conrad, Montana, willingly conducted the funeral for a member of a small group that was worshipping independently. There were occasions when ministers, congregations, or both together changed denominations. In a sense it was as though both denominations simultaneously worked to keep the other at arm’s length while also finding opportunities to embrace each other.

Freemasonry Controversy

In 1865 the RCA became embroiled in a debate over the church membership of those who also belonged to the Freemasons. For Dutch immigrants such dual membership was unacceptable, due to the anti-Christian nature of Freemasonry in Europe. But in the United States this anti-Christian nature did not develop. The debates within the RCA lasted almost two decades, with the newer immigrants opposed to dual membership but members along the Atlantic seaboard open to it. The CRCNA, always opposed to the dual membership, was spared the painful twenty years of wrangling. When the RCA decided to leave the decision of such memberships to local boards of elders, some RCA members, pastors, even entire congregations left for the CRCNA. Perhaps the most painful of these departures from the RCA involved the Pillar Church congregation in Holland, which had been founded by the Rev. Van Raalte and his followers in 1847: the majority of the congregation left the RCA in 1882, but kept the building and joined the CRCNA in 1885. Soon afterward some individuals returned to the RCA. Reports indicate that in both cases these members were warmly welcomed.

These losses for the RCA over Freemasonry were a gain for the CRCNA: the CRC saw its membership increase at a faster rate following the Freemasonry controversy. In addition to new members, the CRCNA also gained church leaders: the Rev. Lammert Jan Hulst and his Coldbrook (Grand Rapids) congregation left the RCA in 1882, and less than two years later he was elected president of the CRCNA synod; he also served on the curatorium (board of

trustees) of the Theological School (now Calvin Theological Seminary) for a number of years, helping set the tone for theological instruction in the CRCNA.

Beginning of Interdenominational Cooperation

Yet even while the RCA was dealing with this internal debate, congregations in Grand Rapids were cooperating in providing programs for young people. As a result, the Rev. Gerrit Boer, the instructor at the CRCNA's theological school and editor of *De Wachter*, called the RCA a sister church in 1879. Protests followed during the CRCNA synod that year; one classis called this description a "slap in the face." Boer was required to explain at synod and in *De Wachter* that he meant that the two denominations held the same confessional documents but that the RCA was not as diligent in putting these confessions into practice and went too far in associating with other church fellowships. Just five years later, however, the CRCNA synod welcomed a fraternal greeting from the RCA and delegated a committee to return the greeting.

During the last few years of the nineteenth century a grassroots effort in inter-denominational cooperation began in Orange City, Iowa, with the beginning of the *Missionary Monthly* (originally *De Heidenwereld*). The Rev. Matthew Kolyn of First Reformed Church and the Rev. Evert Breen of First Christian Reformed Church in Orange City decided that Reformed efforts in response to the Great Commission superseded denominationalism and that both denominations should know about the outreach efforts of the other. For a century Zwemer, Beets, Van Der Werf, and Vander Wagen, to name just a few of the early authors, kept RCA and CRCNA readers informed about mission work around the world.

By 1900 official relations between the two denominations had warmed so that fraternal delegates were seated at synods with advisory votes (CRCNA *Acts of Synod 1900*, art. 21). But this was the extent of the cordiality. That same CRCNA synod also decided that RCA ministers could be called to the CRCNA, but only if they changed denominational affiliation (art. 71). In 1914, the Rev. John J. Hiemenga, the accredited delegate from the CRCNA, "dwelt upon the fact that we are essentially one in faith and doctrine, and are separated only by minor differences" (RCA *Acts and Proceedings of General Synod 1914*, p. 150). And in 1926, responding to Dr. Henry Beets, the fraternal delegate from the CRCNA, the General Synod members "were glad to give assurances of Christian comity and co-operation on [their] part, and welcome every evidence of the crumbling wall of partition between these two branches of the Church in the West" (RCA *Acts and Proceedings of General Synod 1926*, p. 256).

Living and working, but not worshiping, side-by-side was the rule. In Chicago, the churches were in close proximity to each other and the congregants worked together, recreated together, and traded at the same shops, leading Dr. Robert Swierenga to describe the Chicago Dutch Reformed as a "Covenant Community." The Windy City Dutch became teamsters who hauled both goods and waste. To ensure their mutual well-being the waste haulers joined together, without regard to denomination, to set rates and routes and deal with competition from non-Dutch haulers. Later as the independent haulers consolidated, this was all done without regard to denominational affiliation, but to insure that all received a fair price for their business.

Nor was this cooperation within the community limited to business. In 1947 the Rev. William Masselink from the Englewood neighborhood of southwest Chicago was unable to find a school that would accept his son, Paul, who had Down syndrome, as a student. His wife, Mary, began teaching Paul and another boy in the parsonage. The Masselinks, along with the Rev. William Kok, approached the Principals Club of the Chicago Christian schools with the need for Christian special education in the area. Quickly a school began in the basement of Second

Englewood Christian Reformed Church; it later moved to an eight-acre parcel of land in Worth, Illinois. There a special education school developed with leadership and support from CRCNA and RCA members. This effort has blossomed into Elim Christian Services.

At the time of Elim's beginning, interdenominational support for "institutions of mercy" was already four decades old. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Dutch people suffering with tuberculosis looked to the dry climate of the American southwest for relief. In 1895 a group of immigrants and their pastor, Idzerd Van Dellen, settled near Maxwell, New Mexico, and opened a tuberculosis sanitarium called Bethesda. The effort in Maxwell lasted just over a decade, but the idea then took root near the larger community of Denver. In his history of the Bethesda Hospital Association, Meindert Bosch credits the work by both the RCA and the CRCNA for the hospital's growth and development. Ministers from both denominations served on the Bethesda board, participated in fundraising efforts, and provided support for the hospital (which is now closed). In addition to the Rev. Van Dellen (CRCNA), the Rev. Clarence Van Heukelom (RCA), Bethesda's first full-time chaplain, provided leadership to the hospital.

At about the same time that Bethesda was established outside of Denver, what is now Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services began in West Michigan. Jacoba Breuker Robbert became acquainted with the needs of the mentally ill and those with special needs while her husband served a congregation near the state hospital for the mentally ill in Kalamazoo. Due to her indefatigable efforts, in 1909 members from the CRCNA formed the Christian Psychopathic Hospital Association. The association soon bought the Cutler dairy farm about six miles south of Grand Rapids in the rural community of Cutlerville. Slowly the hospital grew as members from both denominations provided support. In the late 1920s the RCA's Particular Synod of Chicago expressed its official support for the hospital. Over the years this two-denominational support for Pine Rest was most evident during the annual fundraising sales days, which were run by women's groups from RCA and CRCNA congregations in the greater Grand Rapids area, and in the fact that both CRCNA and RCA served on the staff, including the CRCNA's Adrian Hoolsema, the baker, and Arend Hoff, a member of the RCA who moved from Orange City, Iowa, to operate the hospital's pharmacy in the early 1960s. Hoff's wife, Mildred, was part of the women's group from Hope Reformed Church that supported Pine Rest.

Shortly after the founding of Pine Rest, fourteen deacons from RCA and CRCNA churches met in Paterson, New Jersey, to discuss the need for treatment of mental illness in their community. Determined to provide for such needs within a Christian setting, they set about raising funds, and in 1917 were able to open a sanatorium in a renovated farmhouse. As was the case in Denver and Grand Rapids, the Christian Sanatorium "San" (renamed the Christian Health Care Center in 1986) slowly grew during its first three decades, but programs were added as needs arose. After World War II the growth increased, additional property was acquired, and new buildings were erected, so that today a range of Christian mental health services, psychiatric care, elder care, and nursing care are provided.

Even more directly within the religious sphere, the denominations were able for a time to bridge the divide. On April 6, 1917, the United States formally entered World War I, and young men were drafted for military service. Due to governmental policies at the time all the positions for military chaplains were filled, so volunteers from the Reformed denominations came forward to serve the military camps either individually or through the offices of the YMCA. Generally, classes gathered funds to pay the expenses for these services, since the need to provide for the spiritual care of the young men in service arose prior to the next synodical meetings. The process was simple: the minister, or lay worker, and spouse located near an induction or training camp daily visited the camp to ask for the lists of new arrivals. From these lists, those

with Dutch names were visited and invited to services and social activities. This proved to be an effective means to contact Reformed young men: it, of course, did not distinguish between RCA and CRCNA men. Since there was generally only one such Reformed worker per camp, it was decided to minister to all the Reformed personnel, regardless of their denominational affiliation.

During World War II, the denominations were more experienced and had more time to prepare, so each had its own chaplains' corps. Although discussions were held around working together since the military had quotas for chaplains from a particular denomination, this effort toward a closer working relationship did not bear fruit. In the field, however, chaplains served the spiritual needs of troops without denominational distinction.

World War II and Beyond

By World War II, the two denominations were oriented in different directions. The Christian Reformed Church in North America was still oriented toward the Netherlands. The Reformed Church in America was oriented toward the American scene. Theologically, the RCA had closer ties with Princeton Theological Seminary than with any theological school in the Netherlands. The CRCNA printed the minutes of its synod either solely in the Dutch language or bilingually until 1936. English, however, was the language of the Reformed Church in America's General Synod throughout its entire history. The last regular worship service in Dutch at First Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, was in 1938. Dutch remained a required or highly recommended language, however, for all students at Calvin Theological Seminary until 1994. At the beginning of World War II, few formal ties remained between the RCA and Reformed denominations in the Netherlands. The CRCNA, however, maintained close ties with the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands (GKN).

At the conclusion of World War II, the Reformed Church in America renewed its ties with the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK). The Reformed churches on the eastern seaboard of the U.S. had been congregations in the NHK until they formed as an American church in 1792. The RCA retained its affection for its mother church throughout its history, even in the era of Van Raalte, who was one of the leaders of the Secession of 1834. Throughout the nineteenth century the RCA also sought to maintain its ties with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk.

At the conclusion of World War II, the differing orientations of members in the two denominations took various forms in dealing with Canadian immigration, confessional loyalty, and ecumenical partnerships. The two denominations served alongside each other in meeting the needs of Dutch immigrants to Canada between 1945 and 1965, without establishing programs of cooperation with each other. They developed differing policies and relationships during this period when a number of Dutch immigrants settled in Canada. An unofficial "gentlemen's agreement" was in place, according to which the RCA related to members of the NHK and the CRCNA related to those of the GKN. The RCA Board of Domestic Missions reported in 1951 that many of the immigrants "are coming from the Hervormde Kerk. Our Reformed Church is the logical church to service them."^{*}

The NHK emigration bureau was also ecumenically in favor of relationships with the United Church of Canada. Therefore, no attempt was made to steer immigrants to places of settlement. The policy of the RCA was to minister to the immigrants in the places where they arrived. Although RCA immigration directors in Canada wanted to develop a strong RCA presence in Canada, the RCA Board of North American Missions was financially stressed due to

^{*} Board of Domestic Missions report, *Acts and Proceedings of the 145th General Synod*, 1951, p. 17.

overwhelming opportunities and calls for establishing new RCA congregations in the American suburbs. By 1960 the RCA had about thirty congregations in Canada and was forming the Classis of Ontario.

The CRCNA, however, enjoyed much closer cooperation with the GKN. Its policy included assistance in locating immigrants in areas where new CRCNA congregations were being formed. Its Immigration Committee for Canada reported to the 1949 synod that “our men have set out to investigate new fields, always bearing in mind that dispersion should be prevented and that settlement must only be encouraged where conditions of soil and climate are such that natural development of a nucleus can be expected.”[†] Its policies resulted in rapid numerical growth and a denomination in which one-third of its congregations are located in Canada, with a continuing strong relationship with Dutch churches and culture throughout the twentieth century. As a result, the Christian Reformed Church in North America is more involved in matters of Canadian life and culture than is the RCA.

On the subject of confessional loyalty, the two denominations diverged. Strong confessional loyalty to the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort were sustained in the CRCNA through the decades following World War II. This loyalty was maintained formally by requiring all ministers, elders, and deacons to sign the Formula (later, Form) of Subscription (Covenant for Officebearers) to the confessions. The RCA required formal subscription of only its ministers of Word and sacrament. In 1973 it changed its Form of Subscription to a less stringent reading: “I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God.” Although the CRCNA synod has received overtures calling for a revision of its Form of Subscription in the direction of the RCA reading, it retains to the present a Form of Subscription that dates back to the Synod of Dort.

Two important recent developments are noted at this point. First, the RCA General Synod and the CRCNA Synod adopted a common translation of the three Standards of Unity in 2012 and include that translation on their websites and in new publications. Second, the RCA has adopted the Belhar Confession as its fourth confessional statement. The CRCNA has not voted to give full confessional status to the Belhar Confession, but did vote in 2012 to authorize a formal category called “Ecumenical Faith Declarations” and to include the Belhar Confession in this new category (*CRCNA Acts of Synod 2012*, art. 56, pp. 766–767).

Ecumenical Partnerships

The RCA and the CRCNA have engaged in differing ecumenical partnerships since World War II. The RCA enjoys a long history of ecumenical relationships with other American denominations and denominations on other continents. It was a strong participant in the nineteenth-century Reformed and Presbyterian Alliance and in the Councils of Foreign Missions and North American Missions from the beginning of their existence. It was one of the founding members of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1970. It was also a charter member of the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCC), as well as of the World Council of Churches.

These relationships are consistent with the stance of the RCA throughout its history. RCA foreign missionaries went out under the directions of the American Board of Foreign Missions from 1819 until the RCA formed its denominational Board of Foreign Missions in 1832. The RCA cooperated with the New York Bible Society and American Bible Society from the beginning of

[†] *Acts of Synod*, CRCNA, 1949, p. 324.

their existence. After 1857, it no longer established RCA churches on mission fields, but always worked in cooperation and union with other mission agencies and indigenous churches in the land.

In the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century prior to World War II, the RCA did not develop its own society for youth, but was a strong supporter of the Christian Endeavor Society. RCA women were engaged in cooperative women's mission societies before they formed denominational societies. Its Sunday schools used the Bible studies calendar of the American Sunday School Union as the basis for expositions of lessons in Reformed Church publications. After World War II, the RCA sensed the need for giving more support to its own denominational identity and established its own departments of youth work and women's work, and supported an RCA Men's Brotherhood.

The CRCNA, on the other hand, was oriented toward maintaining its specific Reformed identity in loyalty to the three confessions. It promoted the Young Calvinist Federation, whereas RCA congregations at times hosted Boy Scouts troops. Its foreign missions program was conducted in loyalty to the three confessions, and it carried out a policy of planting Christian Reformed churches in countries outside the U.S. and Canada. Nor did it cooperate in comity policies with other denominations related to the NCC in deciding where to plant new congregations in the U.S.

The CRCNA, together with the GKN and the Reformed Church in South Africa, formed the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES; later renamed Reformed Ecumenical Council [REC]) in 1947 rather than join the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In the United States it held membership briefly in the National Association of Evangelicals, but then withdrew its membership.

The Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches merged to become the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010. The RCA and the CRCNA both are members of the new body. New ecumenical initiatives that incorporate historic Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Catholic, and Orthodox expressions of Christianity have also drawn the two denominations together; both denominations were founding members of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., and both participate in and support the Global Christian Forum. Moreover, both continue to participate together in the official Reformed-Catholic theological dialogue in the United States.

Synodical Interactions

Interaction between the synods of the two denominations was limited between 1945 and 1969. The CRCNA Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Correspondence invited a number of Reformed denominations to enter into specific forms of official correspondence. The RCA agreed to an exchange of fraternal delegates, but judged the terms of agreement on correspondence to be too sweeping. Thereafter the CRCNA related to the RCA as a "sister church" but not as a "corresponding church."

In 1962 there were overtures in the RCA suggesting conversations with the CRCNA, but at the time the RCA was engaged in discussions with a Presbyterian denomination, and nothing further developed until 1966 and 1967, when the interchurch committees of the RCA and the CRCNA met at Calvin College and Hope College. At that time the RCA was moving toward a decision on merger with the Southern Presbyterian Church, so no action was taken until the RCA action in 1969 not to proceed with that merger. The CRCNA Synod in 1969 took action

saying that they did not want to close the door to future conversations with the RCA and did not want to interfere in the internal problems the RCA was facing after the failure of the merger. In 1971 efforts were being made to hold meetings to discuss possible means of CRCNA–RCA cooperation.

There were other internal issues in the two denominations that were potential sources of friction. One was the ordination of women. As the women’s suffrage movement gained strength in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the issue of the role of women also arose within the RCA. Shortly before the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed in 1920, the Particular Synods of Albany and Montgomery overtured General Synod to omit the word “male” from the *Book of Church Order* to allow women to be ordained as elders and deacons. The overture was “not entertained since it would mean friction and division out of proportion to any possible good that might accrue to any portion of the church” (*RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 1918*, pp. 477–478 [Schuppert 1982, p. 194]). The issue of the ordination of women as ministers first appears in the minutes in 1942, when the idea was rejected because women were not yet allowed to be ordained as elders. The debate continued over the years, with synodical decisions repeatedly rejected by classes. Theological and biblical issues were settled in 1958 (*RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 1958*, p. 328), but classes did not approve ordination of women as elders and deacons until 1971 (*RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 1971*, p. 289 [Schuppert 1979, 82]). The debate on the ordination of women as ministers continued apace until the end of the decade, when on June 13, 1979, the General Synod voted 150 to 115 to uphold “the actions of three classes, who had either ordained or had decided to ordain a woman to the Gospel Ministry,” after the president of General Synod, the Rev. Harvey T. Hoekstra, ruled in support of the general secretary’s interpretation that “the matters before the Synod were complaints, not appeals, and that the Synod would deal with the complaints as an assembly, not as a judicatory,” and his ruling was sustained by the delegates (*RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 1979*, p. 64; cf. *RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 1978*, pp. 28, 110).

The previous year, the synod of the CRCNA had voted to open the office of deacon to women, but it was not until 1995 that synod voted to “recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist”; they further decided that an individual classis may “declare that the word *male* in Article 3-a of the Church Order is inoperative and may authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist” (*CRCNA Acts of Synod 1995*, pp. 726–736; quotation from p. 727). There was, however, a conscience clause that placed limitations on the full implementation of this decision until Synod 2007 ratified the decision of Synod 2006 to delete the word *male* from Article 3 of the Church Order and changed the regulations to the Church Order Supplement to allow that “all duly elected and ordained officebearers may be delegated to synod” (*Acts of Synod 2007*, p. 610). That same synod left some room for those who object to the ordination of women, but the issue has been for the most part resolved.

Growing Closer through Cooperation and Collaboration

We can date the present era of cooperation between the two denominations to October–November 1972, when representatives of the CRCNA and RCA held conversations at Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan. The meetings signaled a renewed desire for cooperation that had been growing for a number of years. Following that meeting, a number of conferences between members of both denominations were held in areas where there are both RCA and CRCNA

churches. In 1976 the RCA and CRCNA officially entered into a new fraternal relationship of cooperation.

That action opened the door to greater cooperation in program relationships. The CRC–RCA Joint Committee on Evangelism produced an “Evangelism Manifesto” that was adopted by both denominations. Programs of cooperation were underway in ministries in Detroit and campus ministries as well as in the older ministries of Pine Rest, Bethany Home, and Bethesda. The RCA became a distributor for NA Publications in 1987 and the CRCNA cooperated with the RCA TRAVARCA audiovisual distribution center. In 1988 the RCA cooperated in the design of an entirely new core curriculum to replace Bible Way and located an RCA staff member in the CRCNA Grand Rapids office to work together with CRCNA staff on the project. That effort paved the way to close cooperation between the RCA and CRCNA in developing resources for worship, including the periodical *Reformed Worship*.

A major step forward took place in 1989 when both synods met simultaneously on the campus of Calvin College. The delegates met jointly for worship. The RCA service included the celebration of Holy Communion in cooperation with Woodlawn Christian Reformed Church. In 2002 the two synods voted to enter into dialogue on exploring ways of moving into greater unity in their ministry and mission. In 2005 the denominations moved to amend their church orders to facilitate the orderly exchange of ministers between the denominations.

Since the year 2002, a rapid increase in the number of cooperative relationships between the RCA and CRCNA has been taking place. The index of the CRCNA *Acts of Synod 2012* alone has twenty-two references to relationships with the RCA. Without attempting to be comprehensive, we note a number of efforts indicative of a new spirit of cooperation and longing for unity, including nearly fifty cooperative projects or programs that have been identified in a recent report.

Several RCA–CRCNA congregations exist as united (or “union”) congregations, which are listed in the addendum to this report. A notable recent example is Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, the church building and congregation of A. C. Van Raalte before it divided over the Masonic Order issue in 1882 and became Christian Reformed in 1885. Since 2012 it has been a union congregation of both denominations. The church is submitting an overture to the 2014 CRCNA Synod to amend the church order to allow for “Churches of Dual Affiliation,” i.e., single congregations that seek affiliation with two denominations.

The RCA and CRCNA have cooperated in producing and distributing Christian education, youth, and worship material for more than three decades. The RCA placed a member of its Christian education staff in the CRCNA offices on Kalamazoo Avenue to assist in developing the Faith Alive curriculum in the 1980s and 1990s, and cooperation in developing new resources continues to the present. There is close cooperation in developing new material for Reformed worship, including the new Psalter hymnbook and the hymnbook, *Sing! A New Creation*.

The Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC), recently renamed World Renew, and Reformed Church World Service (RCWS), recently renamed RCA CARE Network, have worked in cooperative projects and sharing of personnel since the 1980s in Malawi, Mali, Mexico, the Philippines, and elsewhere. In the 1990s they carried out a joint program in hunger education. In 2007 the CRCNA and the RCA developed a formal agreement on volunteer services. In 2005 they formulated an agreement on cooperation in providing disaster response to Hurricane Katrina. A formal agreement of joint response for domestic disasters went into effect in 2012. At the CRCNA Synod on June 11, 2013, CRCNA executive director Joel Boot

and RCA general secretary Tom De Vries signed “a partnership agreement between the CRC’s World Renew and the RCA’s Reformed Church World Service agencies” in the presence of all the delegates (*CRCNA Acts of Synod 2013*, art. 44, p. 575). They engaged in a similar public declaration and signing a week later at the RCA’s General Synod in Pella, Iowa (*RCA Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod 2013*, pp. 18–19).

Representatives of the CRCNA and RCA developed the Friendship curriculum in the 1980s for people with disabilities, and the two denominations continue to collaborate in promoting ministries among people with disabilities. A formal working agreement was approved by both denominations in 2008.

There are also many areas of cooperation by institutions supported by one or both of the denominations. All six colleges affiliated with the CRCNA and RCA (Calvin, Central, Dordt, Hope, Northwestern, and Trinity Christian) joined together in 1969 in the establishment of the Chicago Metropolitan Semester Program, with Trinity Christian College as the agent college. This program continues to the present day. In 1982, Hope and Calvin established a joint nursing department, which operated for nearly two decades before they decided in 2001 to establish independent programs. Both colleges also joined together to form Creative Dining Services, which provides food service not only for both colleges but also for numerous other colleges and other entities in multiple states in the Midwest. They may compete on the athletic fields, but they can find common ground in other areas.

This report is by no means exhaustive, but it certainly is illustrative of a long and storied history of two denominations that are “divided by a common heritage”—the title of a joint publication by a team of sociologists at Calvin and Hope in 2006.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard H. Harms, PhD, director, Heritage Hall, Calvin College and Seminary

Eugene Heideman, BD, PhD, RCA pastor, missionary, professor, chaplain, and RCA secretary for program, retired

Jacob E. Nyenhuis, PhD, professor of classics and provost, emeritus, Hope College, and director, A. C. Van Raalte Institute at Hope College

Addendum to “A Concise History of Relationships between Two Related but Separated Denominations”

CRCNA/RCA union churches known to us:

Battle Creek, Michigan – River Walk Community: 1933– (union with Christ Community, RCA, 2013)

Grand Rapids, Michigan – City Hope Ministries (emerging, joint ministry with RCA): 1999–
Highland, Indiana – First: 1908– (union with Faith RCA, Dyer, Indiana, 2013)

Holland, Michigan – Maple Avenue Ministries (CRCNA/RCA union congregation): 1999–

Holland, Michigan – Pillar Church (First Reformed Church): 1847–1882; joined CRCNA, 1885;
CRCNA/RCA union congregation, 2012–

Shafter, California – New Hope Community (CRCNA/RCA union): 2010–

Quasi-union church:

Kalamazoo, Michigan – Immanuel: 1962–2013, merged into an outreach ministry with Vanguard (RCA)

CRCNA churches that joined the RCA:

Firth, Nebraska – Firth: 1890–1918, discontinued, members joined RCA congregation
Lake Worth, Florida – Comunidad de Fe ICR (emerging): 1993–2003, joined RCA

These CRCNA ministries have used or do use RCA staff:

Ames, Iowa – Iowa State (campus ministry): 1966–
Big Rapids, Michigan – Ferris State (campus ministry): 1966–
Chandler, Arizona – Christ's Community: 1985–
Chicago, Illinois – Hope Christian Fellowship (emerging): 1985–1996, discontinued
Grand Rapids, Michigan – Cascade Fellowship: 1952– (both current pastors have RCA credentials)
Grand Rapids, Michigan – Sunshine Community: 1919–
Harrison, South Dakota – Harrison: 1884–
Hudsonville, Michigan – EverGreen Ministries: 1993–
Indianapolis, Indiana – Hope Community: 1958–
Ionia, Michigan – Celebration Fellowship (emerging): 2009–
Kentwood, Michigan – Vietnamese Reformed Christian Church (emerging): 1978–
Lake City, Michigan – Lake City: 1956–
Leighton, Iowa – Leighton: 1893–
Luctor, Kansas – Luctor: 1885–
Orange City, Iowa – Living Water Community (emerging): 2007–
Sioux Center, Iowa – Bridge of Hope Ministries: 2003–
Zeeland, Michigan – First: 1862–

These CRCNA ministers have served or currently serve an RCA charge:

Paul Bakker, Moses Chung, Donald Cowart, Tobin Cowart, Anthony Holmes Curran, Marshall Holtvluwer, Ronald Peterson, Katrina Schaafsma, Duane Vanderlaan, Peter VanElderen, and Trent Walker.

Anthony Holmes Curran serves Hope Community RCA in Shelby, Michigan, 2011–, jointly with his wife, Jennifer S. Holmes Curran, who is credentialed in the RCA. To our knowledge, they are the only married couple where each partner has credentials in different denominations.

Note: The CRCNA added provisions for union churches via 1998 Synod, Acts Art. 30. Over time, 54 RCA pastors joined the CRCNA (11 returned to the RCA) and 163 CRCNA ministers joined the RCA.