

Report of the General Secretary

¡Buenos Dias!

Dear delegates of General Synod 2024, the Lord be with you!

It is an honor for me to address you this morning to share my report with you. It is always a joy to see you, to connect with you in person, and to worship the Lord with all of you. Pastors, I pray with many of you on Friday afternoons; we have been praying together for more than four years, and it is a real blessing to see many of you in person at this meeting. Elders, you are a great blessing to the congregations you serve and to the whole denomination. Thank you for your faithful service to God in the Reformed Church in America.

As you may have noticed in my previous reports to the General Synod, I always take this opportunity to give an update on the work of the RCA and to offer a pastoral call to the church. In the last several years, our beloved denomination has gone through some very difficult times but we are not alone on this. Many other denominations in North America have gone through rough waters also. I have been praying for them, and they have been praying for us. We just need to learn to navigate the uncharted territory we are living in these days.

I have shared with the staff many times that we need to see this decade of the 20s as a decade of deep change in the Reformed Church in America. The first half is going to be hard and very difficult—we have seen this already—where we will experience huge loss in many areas, but the second half of this decade is going to be great. We are in 2024, almost half way of this second decade of the 21st century, and we are about to turn the corner. I strongly believe that! In the first half, we needed to buckle up tightly because this has been a season of big changes. The second half is the time to experience new growth and ministry refocus.

God called me to serve this denomination in 2018. In the same meeting, General Synod decided to form the Vision 2020 Team. That was my beginning of service in the Reformed Church, to navigate all the years with the Vision 2020 Team, with COVID-19, and the restructuring team. Now, here we are with the final report of the restructuring team before us. I believe we are about to turn the corner as a denomination. Do you believe that?

In 2021, General Synod approved recommendation one of the Vision 2020 Team's report, affirming our existing polity and calling for a restructure of the denomination. This is the recommendation General Synod adopted then:

To direct the General Synod Council to appoint a team of at least 10 but no more than 15 people tasked with the specific work of developing a restructuring plan for the denomination with a view to optimizing the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health, in consultation with the Commission on Church Order and any other bodies it finds necessary. This team should be composed of several executive RCA staff members, and of representatives from around the RCA drawn from regional or local assemblies that have expressed an intention to remain in the Reformed Church in America, and should be representative of the racial, ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographic, and other forms of diversity present in the RCA. This team should consider the four principles stated above as it does its work and should bring any recommendations for restructuring that require General Synod approval, including any proposed changes to the *Book of Church Order*, to General Synod 2024 (*Minutes of General Synod 2021*, p. 94).

That recommendation references four principles that made some people uncomfortable. These principles are:

1. Classes are reorganized as affinity-based rather than geography-based.
2. Classes are responsible for decisions related to ordination and marriage.
3. Discipline of individual consistories occurs at the classis level
4. The viability, responsibility, and effectiveness of regional synods and General Synod is examined in light of the size, scope, and structure of the denomination that remains.

After some conversation, synod decided to add one more year for the restructuring team to bring their final report to the meeting of the General Synod in 2024.

You are here today in 2024 to discuss, in a godly manner, and to decide on the recommendations of the restructuring team's report. I am not going to tell you how you should vote on each of the recommendations, but I want to affirm that the team did an excellent work over the last three years on what seemed to be an impossible task. The process has been full of prayer and discernment. The team listened well over the last three years through the in-person meetings, emails received, and virtual feedback sessions.

Most of the team members are here today but some are watching online as they were not able to travel because of medical reasons. For those who are here, please stand as I call your name:

Dale Assink
Greg Brower
Michelle Chahine
Chad Farrand
Andrea Godwin-Stremler
Sung Kim
Micah McCreary
Sherri Meyer-Veen
Ina Montoya
Young Na
Andres Serrano
Gildo Vieira

Dr. Bob Logan served as facilitator, and Liz Brand did an amazing job supporting the work of the team. Friends, thank you for your dedication and faithful commitment to the Reformed Church in America. I also want to acknowledge the churches, classes, and regional synods that allowed this team to have the time to dedicate to this important work. Please join me in a round of applause for the dedication of this team in discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit for the future of the Reformed Church in America.

The team has finished its discernment work. Now, delegates, it is your turn. This week, you will consider the team's recommendations and seek to discern the guidance and the will of Christ together. As Reformed people, we believe that the Holy Spirit speaks through gathered assemblies. That is a unique distinctive of Reformed people. We believe that God gathers and guides through gathered assemblies. I ask each of you to enter into this discernment with hearts that are open to God's Spirit and to each other.

Now let me turn my attention to give you an update about where we are in the RCA. In June of 2022, I shared that we had lost 68 churches. Last year, I reported that that number had grown to 222. And, as of today, that number is 248. This is a large number of churches for a small denomination like ours; 248 of our congregations have made the difficult decision to leave our family to form their own networks or to join other denominations. Most of these churches have already left, and some are still in process. I am sure that that has not been an easy decision for many of them to make. All of them went through a season of prayer, discernment, and difficult conversations. Not every congregation made a unanimous decision to leave the family and many of them continue to process their future. This has affected all of us: the ones who left and the ones who stayed. Our relationships have changed. Our covenantal vows have been broken and our unity has been torn. These departures have been more gracious than we have seen in other denominations, yes, but the loss of each other is real, and we lament.

At the same time, I am pleased to share that departures have slowed way down. It's no longer a rushing river or even a steady stream of departures; it's more like a drip. We seem to be turning a corner as we approach the midpoint of this decade.

We are also seeing great signs of hope in our midst. There is so much to be thankful for and to celebrate in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America. God is not done with the RCA! This is one more bump in the road. It's not the first one, and I'm sure it won't be the last. There are a lot of challenges in our history. I have been part of the RCA for 32 years and served in many different places. The reality that we're facing today is not going to be the last one. I'm not a prophet of bad news; it's just a reality of what it means to be human. We have faced challenges in the past, but God has been with us. I'm sure that God will continue to be with us, leading us into the future to do what God calls us to do. There is so much evidence that God continues to lead our denomination in mission. Let me share some highlights.

Women in the ministry of the RCA

Let me start by giving a shout out to all our women pastors. We in the RCA will always, unapologetically, bless and embrace all of our women leaders and pastors. Women of God, we need you! Thank you for responding positively to God's call in your life. We men are blessed to do ministry together with you. My prayer is that women will always flourish in ministry in the Reformed Church in America. Here are some pictures I want to share with you today:

At General Synod 2023, we celebrated five decades of women's ordination as elders, deacons, and ministers, and lifted up the importance of sisters and brothers leading side by side, **building God's church together**.

Over the past year, women's transformation and leadership has gone across the RCA, hosting connection and equipping events with classis and regional partners. I was blessed to attend one of those meetings at Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.

From New York City to Michigan, Sioux Center to Central California, the Cascades to the Poconos, we have been celebrating ordained women and the gifts of all women—past, present, and future—along with the brothers who support them. The RCA is intentionally leaning into this important work, especially as other denominations are expelling churches for having women in ministry.

We seek to equip leaders of all backgrounds and cultures, always embracing the Revelation 7:9 vision. One on-ramp is the Honoring Our Stories retreat, held with two new groups. Praise God!

In Classis of the Cascades, the event was hosted by Trinity Community Church in Kent, Washington, and attended by women of Samoan, Kenyan, Ugandan, and Anglo heritage who were eager to share stories and be encouraged in their callings.

The Hispanic Council's North East women hosted Honrando Nuestras Historias; it was a beautiful time of sharing, praying, and experiencing breakthroughs. The women were so catalyzed they asked for more, and now leaders from five congregations are being trained to facilitate the Ella Es Llamada Taller de Mujeres learning journey in their contexts.

We give thanks for the ways the Holy Spirit is on the move, calling the RCA to be a hospitable, healthy place for sisters and brothers of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to serve freely, fully together for the sake of the gospel.

Church Revitalization

In the area of church revitalization, we have a new partnership with Multiplication Network to provide training and coaching for Stronger Churches in the Reformed Church in America. We have scheduled an upcoming training of Stronger Churches for every Missional Network Group leader in the Great Lakes City Classis this summer.

In addition, we have started leadership cohorts to provide leadership training for pastors and congregational leaders in preaching, church finance, staffing, conflict resolution, and leading change. We have provided consultations for churches wanting to hire a new pastor or staff member, pivot to micro-churches, do strategic planning for revitalization, or re-plant an existing but declining church. We have also consulted on training consistories for effective governance.

Leadership in ministry has many challenges and many opportunities, and a conversation partner or support network can make a big difference. I encourage you to connect with RCA staff who are here to help.

Church Multiplication

In the area of church multiplication, we are also making great progress. We have a number of new churches started and/or adopted in the last year. I give thanks to God for the great work of our classes to start new churches, and the

work of our church multiplication team. Tomorrow evening you will hear a full report from the church multiplication team and will celebrate the newly organized or adopted churches in the RCA.

Global Mission

We have been engaged in global mission work for more than 350 years as a denomination. Our missionaries and mission partners around the world are awesome leaders making a huge impact in the places they serve, proclaiming the good news of the gospel with passion and boldness in many different ways. You will also hear a full report from the associate director of RCA Global Mission, Scott Engelsman, later this afternoon. For now, I just want to encourage you to make plans to attend Mission 2025. This important event will take place in Orlando in January 2025. Later today, Scott will give you more information about this event.

Diversity and Belonging

I want to highlight several things from the Office of Diversity and Belonging.

Sankofa Journeys

Sankofa journeys explore the power of story by visiting places of oppression and inequality for people of color. Each Sankofa journey seeks to move participants toward healing the wounds and racial divide caused by hundreds of years of racial injustice in the United States of America. The first journey began in South Africa in October 2023, where the team visited several historical sites, including the Belhar Uniting Reformed Church. The second journey took participants to Los Angeles, California. The journey focused on the Hispanic/Latino experience and was a great time of connection and learning with Lisa Sharon Harper, Dr. Robert Chao Romero, and the folks from the Carter Center. I was able to join the latest journey that took place a little over a week ago to Idlewild in Northern Michigan, focusing on the pilgrimage of the African American diaspora to the North.

Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council

In 2022, General Synod voted to reinstate the racial and ethnic council for Native American and Indigenous Ministries. Over the last two years, leaders from our Native American churches have worked with staff to set up bylaws. The council elected new officers at its April meeting in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. With the bylaws and officers in place, we celebrate the official reinstatement of the Native American and Indigenous Ministries Council!

Disability Concerns

In the area of disability concerns, the team continues to provide support for church and regional disability advocates. This past January, we partnered with the Calvin Symposium on Worship held at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to lead a panel and workshop focusing on hospitality and ministry on the margins. In this workshop, we celebrated the diversity of many members in the body of Christ and the gifts and contributions of persons with disabilities.

Next Generation Engagement

We continue to support and equip young leaders for mission and to help congregations do the same. Here are some pictures I want to share with you today:

Last May, a group of young leaders traveled through Europe in partnership with Generation Spark and RCA Global Mission. This trip provided leadership development and connection with other churches and mission partners. From this group, two of these participants went on to join the RCA staff: Vanessa Funk and Grace Newhouse. This shows the goal of this trip: to promote connection so that young leaders want to step into deeper church leadership.

This past fall, a Generation Spark event provided training for congregations, helping them to strengthen faith-based mentoring relationships across generations. The event included storytelling, playtime, and team time to help congregations determine next steps to be more intergenerational.

The next picture is from another equipping event. Ruth Langkamp and Annalise Radcliffe lead a next gen training about listening to the voices of all generations. They taught both why it makes a difference to listen to one another, and how to begin listening well to one another.

The last picture is from this spring's Regional Synod of New York Generation Spark gathering. The classes and the regional synod offered great support for the team to bring Generation Spark to the region. It was a great time of forming relationships and helping congregations feel connected.

God is certainly doing a beautiful thing in our midst, but we cannot do everything we do without the important work of the support staff who often work behind the scenes. Today, I want to give a special shout out to all our staff. All of these wonderful people are fully committed to the work of mission in the RCA. I'm blessed to serve God and the pastors and churches of the Reformed Church in America alongside a wonderful group of people.

Pastoral Call

I want to conclude my report by offering a pastoral call to the Reformed Church in America. I want to speak out of my heart to you. The book of Acts talks about the church in the first century filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit to transform the world.

The book of Acts begins in chapter 1 with the resurrected Jesus inviting his followers, a group of people who were confused and didn't know what was going on. Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem because they were going to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes, that they were going to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The only way they could change the world was through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. To be a witness for Jesus, we need the anointing and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. That's the presence of God among us.

Jesus said he'd be with us forever. So how is Jesus present in the church today? Jesus is present through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God among us. Reformed Church in America, let's hear the voice of the Spirit as we decide how we are going to live together in a world that is broken, a world that needs Jesus. We need the guidance and the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. We need to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

In his commentary to the book of Acts, Peter Wagner called it the Acts of the Holy Spirit. I wholeheartedly agree with this statement because what we see in this book is the story of the early church empowered and anointed by the Holy Spirit to transform the world with the power of the gospel, beginning in Jerusalem and extending to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!

That is what we see in the book of Acts—the work of the Holy Spirit. If you continue to read the book of Acts, you see God at work. In chapter 1, Jesus tells his disciples, "Stay here because you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes." In chapter 2, you see the coming of the Holy Spirit. Everybody is confused and they don't know what to do with the languages they are speaking. In chapters 3-5, you see the work of the apostles, healing people and blessing people. And people don't understand. In chapter 6, God is doing an amazing work. The apostles needed some other leaders to help because you begin to see the divisions. In chapters 7-9, you see the experience of the apostle Paul receiving that power. In chapter 10, you see the story of Cornelius and the connection with Gentiles. In chapter 13, you see the expansion of the church and the conflict between the church of Jerusalem and the church of Antioch. And then a lot of people were coming to the faith. In chapter 15, there's the question of "what do we do with Gentiles?" and they have a special meeting because these people were different and not following

the established rules. But now the Holy Spirit is doing something new and inviting these people to become part of the family. If you continue to read the book of Acts, you continue to see how God was at work.

The book of Acts ends with chapter 28 but you can clearly see that this is an unfinished book. We must continue to write the story! The story is not finished yet. Reformed Church in America, I believe that God is calling us to write the next chapter. We must write the book of Acts 2.0. My pastoral call to you today is for the Reformed Church in America to become the church of Acts 2.0. The church of Acts 2.0 is a church that is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to transform that world with the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is the kind of church God is calling us to be. There are so many things I can say to describe the kind of church we need to become, but I'm only going to highlight three important things.

The church of Acts 2.0 is a humble church

"I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-6).

This passage is about the unity of the church. For way too long, we in the Reformed Church in America have been divided, and it is time to start living in a manner worthy of the calling we have received from the Lord. In order to do that, we need a lot of humility. We need a lot of humility to walk with people who look different from us. We need a lot of humility to walk with people who think differently than us. We need a lot of humility to embrace the reality of the messy world in which we live. We need to follow the example of Jesus. Jesus was always hanging out with the wrong people. You read the Gospels and you see Jesus hanging out with the Samaritan woman, meeting in the houses of tax collectors, and having conversations with people who he was not supposed to be doing that. We need to live in a manner worthy of the calling we have from God. The unity of the church can only happen when we become humble, gentle, full of patience, bearing each other in love.

I began my journey in the RCA in Canada as a pastor and a leader. I was ordained as a pastor in Ontario. I was a pastor before going to seminary. I planted three churches. Then I asked the classis, how can I be ordained? So I went to Western Theological Seminary, graduated, and then went to California, to a whole different context and saw people doing ministry differently. I had to learn and experience and put into practice the things that

allow me to connect with people who look different, speak a different language than me, and also believe differently from me. That's the calling that God has for us as we continue to move into the future. This passage of Ephesians for me is foundational as I try to be faithful to God's calling in my life. Reformed Church in America, let's start to live worthy of the calling we have received from the Lord, living in humility and bearing with one another in love.

The church of Acts 2.0 is a global church

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10).

This passage of Revelation 7 describes the global church. This church is made up of people from all the nations of the earth. They speak in different languages and belong to different ethnicities. The beautiful picture presented here is what God wants the church to become.

The Reformed Church in America has always been a global church. It started on a different continent from the denomination it belonged to in the Netherlands! For centuries, our missionaries and mission partners have been actively engaged in the work of mission, sharing the message of the good news of the gospel in many different ways everywhere. Today, God is doing a new beautiful thing. Many leaders in the Global South are connecting with several classes in the RCA. Classis de las Naciones has churches in the Dominican Republic, Portugal, Brazil, Romania, and in several other countries. Classis of the Americas has churches in Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, and in other places. The new International Classis of Texas has churches in Chile, Argentina, Mexico, and in other countries. God is certainly doing a new, beautiful thing in our midst.

I invite you to watch [this testimony from Pastor Dan Beyer](#), a delegate to this General Synod. Dan came along with me, the RCA's director of Advancement, and other RCA leaders to Chile and Argentina in our most recent visit to South America.

With everything going on in the U.S. and Canada, it is easy to lose sight of what God is doing around the world. The Acts 2.0 church is a global church. Let us embrace the new beautiful thing that God is doing in our midst.

The church of Acts 2.0 is a disciple-making church

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Great Commission found in Matthew 28 is the most foundational passage about discipleship and disciple making. This is Jesus’s most important call to the church. However, the church in North America has lost the art of making disciples. Churches today do many good things but fail to make disciples. Reformed Church in America, let’s regain a new passion for disciple making. Let’s embrace a new passion to develop those people to follow Jesus, to be faithful followers of Jesus.

We need to focus our future work on making disciples who make disciples. The vision of the restructuring team’s report is for the RCA to become a denomination that makes disciples of Jesus who participate in God’s reign everywhere. Within the staff, the Strategic Leadership Team has developed a strategic plan to support disciple making in churches. This is what the plan looks like:

Core Focus

Our Purpose (What?):

To help our churches make disciples who grow disciples

Our Strategy (How?):

- (1) Working in partnership with classes,
- (2) with a special focus on smaller churches,
- (3) grounded in Revelation 7:9 vision of all God’s people.

10-year target

- 1,500 churches on mission
 - making disciples who make disciples
 - engaged in the work of RCA Global Mission
 - intergenerational and multiethnic
 - contributing financially and spiritually to the life of denomination

Dear friends of the Reformed Church in America, God is up to something great in our future. God is doing a new thing. Let us become the church God wants us to be. We are Reformed and always reforming!

Madame President, this concludes my report.