

## Report of the President

Good afternoon, General Synod.

My brothers and sisters in Christ: the Heidelberg Catechism defines our identity in this way, saying: “I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> And so we are. Thanks be to God!

For this time, I have had the honor of being Christ’s and walking in him and in the name of the RCA as the General Synod’s vice president and president over the past two years. I could not be more grateful to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before me, grateful for those who both assisted me in planning over these two years, and to the many who walked with me along the way. This is never a solo journey. I will be mentioning names and places during this brief report today because it is important that you hear them. I know also that I will forget some names of those who not only welcomed me but that had lasting impact, and for that, I humbly beg your forgiveness.

During 2023, then-president Dwayne Jackson was not only willing to invite me into some conversations in churches that he was invited to have in my hometown of Holland, Michigan, but he introduced me to his home turf as we attended the joint regional synod meetings of New York, the Mid-Atlantics, and Albany Synods together. It was also a beautiful introduction to Camp Warwick and the Warwick Conference Center where many of our RCA family have had their faith beginnings. In fact, one of my prayers at this point in the life of our denomination is that we don’t lose sight of the importance of our camps and conference centers in the midst of changing cultures, logistics, and financial obligations.

This initial trip east with Dwayne was eye-opening; here were brothers and sisters serving the church and one another with love and open hearts. They enjoyed one another, being together by choice and sharing in evenings of worship, fun, and food like I had not experienced at the classis or synod levels of leadership elsewhere in the past. They honestly seemed to welcome the work that they were called into during those days of meetings together. Preconceived notions that I had of the churches in the east fell away, and I was grateful to witness the work they were doing. I knew that visit would open the door for future conversations and healthy interactions, and it did.

On this same trip, I had the pleasure of being a guest of President Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary and his executive council at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. My perspectives were broadened around that table as we speculated concerning the work of the restructuring team, and we rejoiced together at the changing complexion of our denomination. I spent that afternoon visiting the RCA Archives housed at the seminary, and Rev. Liz Testa and I enjoyed the delightful and inspiring company of Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, the RCA archivist. This helped broaden my appreciation of this almost 400-year-old denomination and also gave me hope for its future.

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<sup>1</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1.

Through the gracious invitation of Elder Jidong Shan and Rev. Dr. John Chang and others, I returned to the East Coast in September of last year. I witnessed the beauty of faith expressed in the cultural diversity of our denominational churches in Queens Classis, New York Classis, and Brooklyn Classis. I was hosted by and visited with leaders Rev. Sally Ann Castle, Pastor Janet Cardillo, Rev. Dr. Pedro Agudelo, Rev. Dr. Young Na, and Rev. Dr. Micheal Edwards, and had the privilege of bringing greetings in various churches and giving the charge to ministry to Rev. Maudelin Willock in a celebration of ongoing ministry in Canarsie, New York. Signs of growth and hope were all over the place.

And, similar to the expressions of welcome I had received during my spring visit, I experienced the loving spirit of Christ in these churches working and serving in the hearts of bustling communities in the city and in business districts. They were doing the work of the church universal, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, praying for the sick, and encouraging lonely and hurting people, nourishing them physically and spiritually as they had been doing in their specific communities for years. I am grateful that even with the uncertainties and divisions in many RCA churches, the gospel ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ continues faithfully in many churches in the east.

The fall also found me visiting many churches on Sunday mornings and attending classis meetings in Kalamazoo, Muskegon, and around West Michigan, and joining as many restructuring roundtable meetings as possible to not only engage the presentations and be informed of the ongoing work of the team, but also to be available to listen to the concerns being brought forward. I'll talk more about the restructuring process in just a few minutes, but now I will say how grateful I am for the many church members who engaged with the roundtable meetings.

I also had the opportunity to attend the Christian Churches Together (CCT) forum in Savannah, Georgia, in October as an ecumenical guest. Ecumenism has always captured my heart, and I believe that it is part of God's plan for the redemption of the world. When I was invited to be a part of their Steering Committee, I said yes, and I will be proudly representing the RCA for a number of years into the future on that board.

In November, Rev. Liz Testa and I had the pleasure of traveling together to many parts in the western United States! Many of the connections we had were thanks to Rev. Phil Assink, former RCA General Synod president who is currently serving as the interim director of the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry. We had the opportunity to be blessed and welcomed into some of the few remaining churches in the Classis of the Cascades. We joined the leaders from Trinity Community Church in Kent, Washington, doing an Honoring Our Stories retreat, the first of its kind that gathered women and church leaders of Anglo, Samoan, Kenyan, and Ugandan heritages. They came together to be equipped and encouraged, to share their stories, and to embrace their God-given gifts for ministry. Along with Rev. Ock Kee Byun, who preached in Korean, we brought God's Word into Korean, Kenyan, and

Samoan churches that weekend in Tacoma, blessed to be a small part of God's diverse plan for the RCA.

An evening meeting with a group of women from First Reformed Church of Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island culminated our time in the Pacific Northwest. This continues to be a church in transition as they wrestle with issues of women in leadership and remaining a part of the denomination while so many of their classis churches have made other decisions. It was an evening of honesty, heartbreak, joy, and encouragement combined.

From there, I traveled to California to visit churches and classis gatherings in the Central California and City Classes. Spending time with many concerned and engaged leaders in these areas rounded out a trip that included thoughtful conversations and times of lament, wonder, and deep communion. A particular highlight was seeing the leadership and energy of Deacon Hellen Harvey at Oakland Community Church and their food ministry as she served alongside 96- and 94-year-old saints committed to this weekly outpouring of love and life. It was truly inspiring and yet another testimony of God's people serving "the least of these."

The continuation of my travels in November took me back to New York, New Jersey, and Long Island into Greater Palisades, Nassau-Suffolk, and Delaware-Raritan Classes. There I was able to once again minister alongside Rev. Liz Testa as we joined Rev. Dr. Donna Field and Rev. Ellen Balk for a day of renewal for women. I was also able to attend two more restructuring roundtables, one at the church of Vice President Rev. Joshua Scheid in Massapequa, Long Island, and one at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, with each of these discussions adding to my understanding of how different regions were engaging and understanding the process. I'm thankful I was able to attend those.

Joining with a delegation of women from our women's transformation and leadership team, I experienced profound worship at Friends to Friends Community Church, a ministry for those differently abled, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Joanne Van Sant. That trip culminated with encouraging a friend who was an interim minister at North Branch Reformed Church in Bridgewater, New Jersey, and having the opportunity also to spend time with Rev. Dawn Alpaugh, classis coordinator of Delaware-Raritan Classis. So many people and places to be grateful for and to learn from.

In February, Vice President Joshua Scheid and I had the opportunity to travel west together, flying into Denver and enjoying meals with several RCA church pastors. Their stories held many contrasts to the stories of churches on the East Coast; these pastors have to travel hours by car or by plane to visit the nearest Reformed church or to attend classis meetings. Glimmers of connectivity were hopeful, but we could sense the singularity of the ministries and ministers. From Denver, we traveled by car, south to Dulce, New Mexico, to visit the Jicarilla Apache Reservation where Rev. Brad Kautz has pastored for over 12 years at Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church. It was the weekend of the Jicarilla Festival, celebrating the anniversary of the Jicarilla Apache tribe receiving its land. The powwow we attended was colorful and fascinating, but more impressive was watching Pastor Brad walk among the crowds of people, greeting so many from the community and asking them for updates on family

members and their well-being. The Sunday church service was warm and filled with inspiring testimonies. Thank you, Pastor Brad, for continuing to minister with courage and steadfastness in a place where few of us have visited! Your humility and support of your people are a testimony to God's faithfulness, and we give God thanks.

As an outcome of this trip, it would be my advice to all future General Synod presidents and vice presidents to travel together by car for nine hours in blinding snowstorms on treacherous curves over mountainous roads to develop deep bonds of trust, increased faith in our God above, and certainty of the other's continued calling in what felt like death-defying conditions! It was good for us, right, Josh?

In late April and early May, I had the tremendous privilege of traveling to Europe to visit with and witness the work of our RCA mission partners and church planters. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Rev. Dr. Doug McClintic for the planning and coordinating of all of the moving parts of my visit. It was rich, full, and fast and allowed me time to worship and fellowship with those I would consider some of RCA's finest!

Sitting in the presence of RCA missionary Hannah Kummer in Rome, who works jointly for the RCA and the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, I heard about the ecumenical work being done by the various faith organizations that make up the FCEI. This group has a membership of churches ranging from The Waldensian Church to the Salvation Army, from the Italian Apostolic Church to St. Andrew's—churches and organizations working together to offer medical and humanitarian help for refugees crossing the Mediterranean, resources for housing and resettlement, collaboration with NGOs, services for pregnant moms and small children, as well as resourcing people in need of emotional support and trauma counseling. These faith leaders also involve themselves at governmental levels promoting initiatives to lobby for new rules that respect human rights and the dignity of migrants and refugees—all this in the light of unity for the sake of Christ. Each person I met in Rome had overly full plates, but also hearts full of the love of Christ to sustain them in their day-to-day work. And they were regular people with everyday lives filled with husbands and wives and busy children. It was lovely to walk beside them, listening and caring for one another in the few precious days we shared.

And they showed me Rome! My trip felt complete with a visit to the Vatican, the Coliseum, the Pantheon, the Olympic practice grounds, and so much more, and I ate all three of the pastas of Rome (Carbonara, Amatriciana, and Cacio e Pepe) for good measure!

Sharing about my time in Rome would not be complete without telling of the privilege of spending a short morning coffee and time of prayer with the Anglican Archbishop Ian Ernest, who serves as the director of the Anglican Centre in Rome. I was honored as I sat with this holy man, realizing by his questions to me that he had read a lot, not only about my tenure as RCA president and what was important to me, but about some of the challenges facing the RCA in our season of restructuring.

Before we parted, I had the extreme honor of praying for him and the meeting of Anglican Primates he was hosting during the five days following our visit.

I traveled from Rome to Hanover, Germany, the home of RCA church planter Gretchen Schoon-Tanis and her husband, Phil, and their family. Phil is currently ending a ten-year executive appointment with the WCRC—the World Communion of Reformed Churches. I saw the many sights of this ancient city, marveled at the fact that most people in the city don't own cars, ate at a proper German beer garden in my clergy collar, and worshiped at and brought a greeting to the congregation of RELISH.

Pastor Gretchen felt called by God over seven years ago to shepherd this church into being to meet the needs of a wide variety of believers whose common language was English. The name of the church reflects that: RELISH is an acronym for Reformed English Language International Service of Hanover. Fellowship with the believers there reflected the uniqueness of their diverse heritages and the beauty of oneness in Christ. As we remember this ministry in prayer, it's important to know that later this year, Gretchen and Phil and their family will be returning to the states, and Reverends Jeff and Chelsea Lampen and their family will be moving to Hanover, answering the call of God to serve at RELISH as the Schoon-Tanis family moves on to God's next call on their lives here in the states.

From Hanover, I traveled by train to Apeldoorn, Holland. I may be one of the few in the room who had not yet visited the motherland of our Reformed denomination, and it was a thrill to do so. I will admit also that the privilege of seeing the tulips in the Netherlands at the Keukenhof Gardens, while the Tulip Festival in Holland, Michigan, was being coined the "Stem Fest" for another year, was not lost on me. I was extremely grateful and appreciative for the opportunity and for my hosts' willingness to take me there.

My hosts in Apeldoorn were church planter Christiaan Van Dijk and his wife, Cecelia. They became the pastors of the Filadelfia Church ten years ago and started with fifteen adults and four kids, three of the four being their own. They started with prayer and knew that they were called to reach out to secular Dutch people. Slowly, as people became believers, they trained them to reach out authentically, loving, serving and investing in people and allowing guests to wonder about what life in Christ was like. Many of the curious people were provided with mentors in the faith, and that is how their church continues to grow today.

Another way their church has grown is by what Pastor Christiaan described as "becoming a part of the community" by means of a street front coffee bar, as we might call it. It is called the Koffiekamer, meaning "coffee house," and it is the lower level of their apartment-type home that opens onto the sidewalk. By opening during some daytime and evening hours and providing a safe place for anyone to enjoy coffee or tea and conversation if it is wanted, many have come and responded to offers of friendship, becoming interested in what inspires people to live like that. The Koffiekamer recently started opening for "pop up" activities for children on days off school, and many new friendships and relationships are being built. Brothers and sisters, I have chosen the Koffiekamer street ministry to be one of the recipients of

the General Synod offerings this week. I hope this story and these pictures inspire you to give generously. Our dollars will help to supply coffee and tea, as well as supplies for children's activities and other necessities that make the Koffiekamer a comfortable and welcoming place as they become more and more a "part of the community." I'd be happy to answer any questions about this ministry anytime later in the synod if you have them. Upon leaving the Netherlands, I realized too late that I did not ride bikes in either Apeldoorn or Amsterdam, so I guess I will have to return again to the "motherland" for the fuller experience.

My last few days in Europe were spent with Doug and Dianne McClintic in Budapest and Debrecen, Hungary. They may be well known to some of you. Doug has served the denomination in many capacities over the years and now serves the RCA as coordinator of church planting throughout Europe. They live in Debrecen, a city that is recognized as the center of Reformed faith among the Hungarian-speaking people. From their home base there, they help mobilize the global church to assist emerging church planting movements in Europe.

After some sightseeing in Budapest, our next few days together were spent enjoying the company of young chaplains and church planters who Doug has been mentoring. These seven young pastors spend most of their time on the campus of the University of Debrecen. They are employed by the Reformed Church of Hungary, and Doug has helped them grow their vision and mission to include ministries on three campuses at which they now serve. We attended the Urreti Church my last day in Hungary, and Doug and Dianne look forward to the launching of an English-speaking church plant in Debrecen in the coming year.

As I am still processing all the sights, sounds, learnings, and "wow" and "hallelujah" moments that I witnessed in all these places, I am reminded of Paul's words to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." It all comes down to the faithfulness of God, and church planting is his work. We are partners in this work, but any growth that we witness is because of God's goodness and generosity.

Friends, I am so thankful for the continuing witness of the Reformed Church in the world in all of the places I have been privileged to experience this year. God is certainly not done with us yet!

With that in mind, I want to turn our minds for a few minutes toward the work the restructuring team has been doing over these past two to three years. At every step along my presidential journey, I was asked about the restructuring plan. My first response was always, "I am not here as part of that team, but I will answer your questions to the best of my ability." With that in mind, I tried to carefully read each of the drafts of the report that came out, and as you heard earlier in this report, I was a part of as many restructuring roundtable discussions as I possibly could be.

I see the value in the final recommendations and feel I have some understanding of how each could help us continue to function together as a smaller and more diverse denomination. It is my hope and indeed my prayer that many of you sitting at tables today have also leaned into this process whenever you could. My hope is that the recommendations are not brand new to you, and that you have supported the restructuring team with your interest and attendance at meetings either virtually or in person as you have been able to. In case you haven't been able to, now is NOT the time to close yourself off and decide to look back instead of forward; we don't have that choice, brothers and sisters.

I urge you to seize the moments while you are here in this beautiful setting. Please take the time to listen well in our plenary sessions and in your breakout groups, and invest time in between meetings if need be to read the recommendations and the fine print. My suggestion is consider, pray, process, discuss, repeat. This is our time, friends; let's do it well! I believe it is the time to together decide that we can optimize the RCA's sustained spiritual and organizational health through moving into the suggested directions of the restructuring team.

Needless to say, I appreciate the time that the restructuring team has taken to get us to this point, and I also understand how much time it can take for each of us to feel prepared for these discussions, yet it is well worth doing.

Indeed there is a time and a season for every purpose under heaven according to Ecclesiastes 3. Perhaps this is the time that God will make many things beautiful and our church might flourish in ways that we only can imagine once again.

Speaking of the church flourishing, I know that many of you were here at General Synod last year as we celebrated five decades of women being ordained to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America. You may remember that we did this even as other denominations were casting out churches and church leaders for that same reason. We have much to be grateful for, including that as we have grown or diminished through the years, God has developed in us the desire for healthy ministry partnerships that honor men and women serving together.

This past March at Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, we celebrated this landmark again as hundreds gathered for an evening of worship and recognition. This is an historic church, so many older saints were present and honored, and the beauty and diversity of the current and future church leaders were on display as musicians, dancers, and speakers, and we celebrated God's faithfulness as we continue building God's church together.

Of importance as we consider the varied ministries that God has called us to in the RCA, I want to talk a little bit about the ministry of chaplaincy as I walk amongst you as one who served as a corporate chaplain for eight years at Tyson Foods. I am also the first chaplain to serve as president of the General Synod. This unique ministry with its varied facets reminds me of the quote from a sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which says, "For Christ plays in 10,000 places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in

eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men's [and women's] faces."<sup>2</sup> I'm sure you recognize this also as the title of one of Eugene Petersen's brilliant books by that name, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. A quote from this book beautifully elucidates the call to chaplaincy as well, and I quote, "God's great love and purposes for us are all worked out in the messes in our kitchens and backyards, in storms and sins, blue skies, the daily work and dreams of our common lives. God works with us as we are and not as we should be or think we should be."<sup>3</sup> That is the call to chaplaincy, being present to people where they are. I'd like to share with you [this short video made by RCA chaplains](#). It is for this ministry, their continued education and credentialing, that I have designated a part of our General Synod offerings. I hope that you will be generous as you think about the places and spaces your offerings will be used.

As I stepped into this role last year, I heard the refrain, "This is the time for a chaplain," many times. I agree with that statement wholeheartedly and during my travels this past year, that has proven itself to be true time and time again. However, I also know that alongside compassionate care goes clear-eyed observations and exhortations. This type of clarity is kind and also needs to be fleshed out in how we move forward. Therefore, I must name two important realities before I end my report. I am compelled to speak to faithfulness and unity.

As I ask these questions, I urge you to search your own hearts even as I search mine. Are we losing a sense of faithfulness in our world today in the midst of the pressures of upheaval and change? Are we placing such an enormous emphasis on short-term results and returns that we have forgotten the virtues of being faithful over longer periods of time? Are we tempted to buy into the ethic that is emerging around us of getting rid of someone who is no longer useful to us? Canceling them is the new, expedient solution. Have we bought into constantly positioning ourselves for better opportunities, even in the midst of seeking God's kingdom so that opportunities to be faithful to one another are forgotten? I pray this is not so. God, beyond all things, is faithful to us and he calls us to be faithful to him and to one another. Faithfulness brings freedom and peace to our spirits. I will be so bold to say that an absence of faithfulness brings darkness, sin, and endless entanglements to our souls, every time.

At a very human level, we are all longing to be loved, understood, and nurtured, and no one provides that better for us than God through Christ. And, in return, God calls us to be faithful to him, our spouses, families, friends, ministry coworkers, and neighbors. Brothers and sisters, we must treat others like God treats us, with forgiveness and mercy. For our churches, and indeed our denomination, to succeed and impact the world for one more day, let alone for 400 more years, we must practice forgiveness and mercy when a faithless, selfish act has occurred. The book of Lamentations reminds us "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies

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<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame" (1877, Public Domain).

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, Eugene H. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2005).



never come to an end, they are new every morning; great is God's **faithfulness.**"<sup>4</sup> Friends, grace is the oil for any relationship to function well and to flourish. Let us be faithful and grace-filled as we engage one another during this General Synod. May this be an agreed upon proposal of our hearts as we walk through these next few days together.

I'm compelled to ask one more question: does being grace-filled bring forth unity?

I think that we can each look into our own hearts and agree—no, it doesn't. So, the question that looms over us all is, "What is it, then, that unites us?" I'd like to suggest that unity happens when we remember our identity, when we call to mind who we really are.

But even that answer has some irony to it, doesn't it? We sit here in a room mainly all representing the RCA denomination, yet we are all wearing nametags, which serve to differentiate us. Our names, our churches, our cities, our regions... furthermore, our gender, our age, our race, our culture, our life stage... all of these serve to differentiate us.

And yet, many of us are elders and ministers. Does that create unity? Lots of us are from churches in the east or Midwest. Does that do it? We are parents, young people, Michigan fans (well at least a few of us), introverts, extroverts, losers, outsiders, any number of identifiers that have been assigned to us by the world around us. Does unity come from being united to any of these groups?

No. In the letter to the Galatians, chapter 3, Paul is instructing this young church to a greater identity, one that is more powerful than the divisions and the identities that are pulling on them from outside and from inside the church. As important as even our denominational practices are, we must be united by the person of Christ through our baptism into Christ. Paul reminds us that our identity is by nature of our baptism. Through it, we have been invited and pulled into the life of God, pulled out of the waters and into the mutual overflow of the love of the Trinity. We are now partakers of the divine life, says Peter. This is something that we did not earn, but now it is the deepest part of us. End of story! And *this* is how we can move into somewhere, something, really, really good. This is what makes church possible!

Can we hold our identity in Jesus Christ in such a way that my allegiance and love for you and yours for me supersedes all other status symbols that the world offers us to divide us or reward us? We have an opportunity like the church in Galatia to say our unity in the body of Christ is powerful and compelling, more so even than the individualism and separatism that the world offers each one of us every single day.

Perhaps we are here this week determined to make sure that we identify with a certain group, or to make sure that we are in certain conversations. Friends, I would urge us otherwise. Let us not tear the Body of Christ here but walk in unity because of the work of Jesus Christ. We have all emerged from the beautiful waters of baptism. We are in Christ. Let us live in Christ in such a way that all other identifiers

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<sup>4</sup> Lamentations 3:22-23, NRSVUE.

come in at a distant second. That's the kind of community that can embody the fruit of the Spirit. That's the kind of community that can show the faithfulness of God to a dying world around us, living and loving in an alternative and radical way, as Jesus lived and loved. Brothers and sisters of the General Synod, remember your baptism and live in unity in the bond of Christ, to the glory of God.

This ends my report.