

**An Alternate Vision for the  
Reformed Church in America—2006**

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*1. Short Statement*

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is Lord. The Holy Spirit empowers the Reformed Church to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ and the Sovereignty of God. We want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his suffering by conforming to his death that we may gain the resurrection of the dead. We preach and teach the Word of God, we baptize and break bread, and we make disciples of the nations, to be the firstfruit of the new humanity in the Reign of God, giving glory to God and enjoying God forever.

Like the Apostles, the Reformed Church is unconcerned with its statistical size and growth. It attends, rather, to its message and its practices. The church does not exist for itself, but for the Reign of God. The church is both secure and free, for God has elected it for witness, and God's Spirit makes the church the firstfruit, by the Communion of Saints and the Forgiveness of Sins. Though we have this treasure in earthen vessels, and sin remains in our flesh, and the powers of the world resist the Lordship of Christ, yet God is faithful, and God is sovereign.

The General Synod is called by God to serve and govern the classes and regional synods of the Reformed Church. It is both a meeting of the classes and a council of Ministers and Elders. It is responsible for Accountability, Correspondence, Discernment, Judgment, Relationships, and Stewardship. It governs and holds *Accountable* the various agencies, boards, and funds which the church creates in order to carry out specific aspects of mission and program, such as Church Buildings, Church Extension, Education, Missions, Pensions and Insurance, Publication, Theological Education, Worship, and so on.

The General Synod is the *Steward* of the denomination's greatest resource: its identity and integrity. It is the custodian of the Consitution. It is the medium of assemblies and officers serving each other with mutual *Accountability*. Through *Discernment* and *Judgment* it counters the erosion of Reformed identity occasioned by local pressures and passing movements. The local congregations and classes depend upon the General Synod to help them be Reformed.

The General Synod is responsible for *Relationships*: for cultivating communion within our diversity. It provides the forum and medium for engagement, dialogue, and mutual *Discernment*, by means of the mutual interpretation of scripture as applied to local questions and issues that arise. The interchange between the classes and the dialogues of the office-bearers should be the hallmark of synodical meetings. The synodical staff and officers should encourage and support this.

The General Synod *Corresponds* with other Reformed bodies throughout the world. This is very important. All churches risk too easy a loyalty to their own nation and culture. General Synod is the medium through which the World Alliance, for example, helps and challenges us in our witness to the United States and Canada. (For example, through the World Alliance we spoke very strongly to the churches in South Africa. After the Ghana Assembly, it's now our turn to be on the receiving end. Will we listen as openly as we once spoke?)

## 2. Sources

### THE GREAT COMMISSION

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto me. 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, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you, and remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.  
*Matthew 28:18-20*

### THE PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers . . . Daily they spent much time together in the temple, breaking bread at home and eating with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. *Acts 2:42, 46f*

### THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM'S DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

Q 54: What do you believe concerning the Holy Catholic Church?

A. I believe that the Son of God, by his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. Of this community I am, and always will be, a living member.

### FROM THE PREAMBLE TO THE GOVERNMENT

*The Nature of the Church on Earth.* The church, which Scripture represents with many images, is a gathering of persons chosen in Christ through the Holy Spirit to profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in order to embody God's intentions for the world. Gathered by the Spirit around Word and sacrament, the church fulfills its call within the expectation of the reign of God as it participates in mission, in calling all persons to life in Christ, and in proclaiming God's promise and commands to all the world.

### FROM HENDRIKUS BERKHOF'S SERMON TO THE 350<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY GENERAL SYNOD

The Church is the firstfruits of the Kingdom of God and the witness to the Kingdom of God.

## 3, *The Mission of the Church*

The Reign of God is the object and goal of the church's mission, not the church itself. The Great Commission makes the church God's uniquely chosen instrument for bringing the nations under the Lordship of Christ. The Great Commission is Kingdom language. The use of the word "nations" indicates that the Lordship of Christ extends beyond the salvation and health of individual persons to the arenas of culture, politics, economics, and the environment. Our Vision and Mission must give a major place to Kingdom theology, and to the role of the General Synod and its agencies in bearing witness to the Reign of God, in this world and the next.

The church has always been tempted to make an idol of itself. The RCA's obsession with its size and its numerical growth is idolatrous and unbiblical—never in the New Testament do the apostles show any concern for the church's size or rate of growth. They are fixed on the proclamation of the Reign of Christ within the Empire of Rome, and on the organization of communities where Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.

## 4. *How God directs the church*

We believe God speaks to the Reformed Church faithfully, though not exclusively, in the weekly dynamic of the ministry of the Word in the congregations. God speaks to the church so that the world might know, and that the Kingdom of Christ might be proclaimed. To speak to the Church (and thus to the world) God uses the careful and ordinary preaching of the scriptures together with the creative response of the congregations as the normal and effective means of prophecy. This pattern of prophecy is both gift and

obligation to the church, and was given at Pentecost, that great day of prophecy. *And they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and the prayers.* (Acts 2:42).

We believe that Sunday worship is a divine activity and a miraculous work of God to create faith in us (Heidelberg 65), to nourish and direct our faith, and to convert us (Heidelberg 88) into a “royal priesthood and a holy nation . . . that we may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Though Sunday worship can be carnal and empty, our weakness and disobedience does not nullify God’s promise and covenant, and the service remains, in principle, the weekly miracle by which God makes the church, teaches the church, reconciles the church, renews it, revives it, directs it, and empowers it for mission. Divine worship is augmented and enriched by the other activities of the church (such as chaplaincy and diaconal service) which also have their prophetic contributions, but ultimately these all draw from the same fountain of worship by Word and sacrament.

Since God leads us and directs us primarily from weekly worship and secondarily from the other kinds of ministry in the world, we also believe that we should seek our various visions precisely from this source. We believe that the visions for the Reformed Church come locally, from the dynamic of Word and response within our congregations and extended ministries. We hold this conviction to be essential to the Reformed Church. This conviction is the root cause of our opposition to episcopacy and any other hierarchical and centralizing forms of church leadership. This conviction is why we disagree with anyone setting a vision for the denomination as a whole.

### *5. How the church keeps accountable*

We believe that the weekly miracle of Word and response in our congregations and our extended ministries needs to be held within a structure of mutual accountability. This mutual accountability is the heart of the identity, purpose, and mission of the RCA. Whatever else our denomination might be, it is first and foremost a structure of mutual accountability. This is why we take our creeds and confessions so seriously, as well as our offices and assemblies. Our patterns of accountability reflect our desire to *devote ourselves to the Apostles teaching and fellowship*. This conviction is behind our opposition to congregationalism and Pentecostalism, and why so many of us put so much time and energy into the work of our respective classes. A vision for the RCA must include the vitality of our structures and patterns of mutual accountability, so that these structures and patterns balance biblical and doctrinal integrity with creativity and openness.

We believe that those who proclaim the Word within the congregations need to be held to very high standards of accountability. We take seriously the preparation and certification of ministers, for this is one of the chief functions of mutual accountability. Preaching and teaching are matters of life and death. The conviction of the RCA is that the public proclamation of the Word—in the congregation *for* the world—must be disciplined by the responsible use of the best tools of literary and historical exegesis, and the best possible understanding of the doctrines of the church. We do this for the sake of prophecy—so that the weekly prophecy might be both relevant and responsible, both immediate and apostolic. Any valid vision for the RCA must address furnishing our congregations with the best pastors.

### *5. The Biblical pattern of leadership and accountability*

We believe that it is in local ministry that God directs the church, and where visions and creativity are to be found. We do not believe that the purpose of a denomination is to provide the leadership and vision for the churches, but to provide a suitable structure of accountability and support for those engaged in local ministry. The primary purpose of the RCA is to provide a workable means by which the congregations and classes can together *devote themselves to the apostles' fellowship and teaching, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers*.

The Book of Acts gives us the pattern. After the stoning of Stephen and the resultant persecution the young church scattered outside of Jerusalem. God used this scattering to expand the mission to “nations” which the apostles themselves had not yet thought to reach. The first expansion was by Philip among the Samaritans. When news of this came to Jerusalem, the apostles sent Peter and John to consolidate the

work. This is the first example of the larger church providing support, connection, and implicit accountability to the local initiative.

The second expansion came with the Ethiopian eunuch. Again, this new stage in mission did not come from the planning or direction of the apostolic leadership. Rather, the Holy Spirit led Philip into contact with a man whose sexual condition was a test of the new community's standards of inclusion. Deuteronomy 23:1 excluded eunuchs from the congregation of Israel. The eunuch knew this, and he asked pointedly, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip made a quick decision about how to read the clear teaching of Deuteronomy under the new gospel of Christ. To make such an interpretive decision was precisely the apostolic function, and his interpretation and application became determinative for the larger church.

Peter did the same in the case of Cornelius the centurion. God told Peter in a dream to eat food which the Torah had forbidden as unclean. While Peter pondered this, the Spirit ordered him to go and visit Cornelius, who was uncircumcised. On hearing his confession, Peter baptized him. He made an apostolic decision in how to read the Torah's strong prohibition against admitting the uncircumcised into the congregation and letting them share in "the breaking of the bread and the prayers" (Exodus 12:47-49). Peter then went to Jerusalem to explain his action to the "apostles and brethren." He justified his action and received the approval of the assembly. This is how church government works: the larger church provides, through its assemblies, the accountability for the local church in its mission and initiative. This pattern is not just convenient — the Reformed churches have always held this pattern to be both divine gift and obligation.

This pattern is confirmed in Acts 15. Paul established new congregations of Gentile membership. He did not make them Jews first by requiring them to be circumcised. This was not taken for granted by the early church, and it had huge implications, including how to read the Old Testament promises to Israel and Jerusalem. When Paul returned to Antioch, his "sending" church, he was opposed by the pro-circumcision party. He and Barnabas, along with some others, were then delegated to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by a council of the apostles and elders. The council debated the issues. They examined the creative experience of Paul and Barnabas under the light of scripture and according to the precedent of Peter. They did theology in a very practical way for the sake of mission and ministry. They arrived at a common judgment, and they communicated their binding judgment to the church at Antioch and to the new congregations that Paul founded. The Council of Jerusalem is a source of Reformed polity. It provides the model for the General Synod's work of Accountability, Discernment, Relationships, and Stewardship.

A valid vision for the RCA must include a modern version of this dynamic pattern of governance and support. Classes and synods need to reaffirm their role as deliberative bodies of spirituality and theology, skilled in interpreting contemporary experience in the light of Holy Scripture and with the discipline of tradition, in order to make judgments and extend support that enhances mission in their regions and the ministry of their members.

The pattern of the Book of Acts is a decentralized pattern. Clearly the apostles and elders in Jerusalem are not the ones who are setting the agenda of growth and development in the church. By Acts 21:18 it is apparent that James has become something like the president of the church in Jerusalem, but his role is obviously accountability and security. The creativity and direction were coming from the growing edges of the church, from those who are engaged in actual ministry. This was presaged on the day of Pentecost itself, in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit spoke in 120 different voices and in as many languages as could be understood by the people on the streets.

It is no coincidence that the day of Pentecost was also the celebration of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The contrast between the two events is by design. At Sinai God spoke from the mountaintop in a single voice instead of through many voices. At Sinai the people were terrified, unlike the 3,000 in Jerusalem who were baptized. At Sinai Moses went to the mountaintop to receive God's vision for Israel as symbolized by the tabernacle and its ritual. It was Moses' job to teach it the vision and establish it, and it was the Levites' job to model it. This is a centralized pattern, and it is obviously Biblical. It was appropriate for Israel, and it may be appropriate for non-profits, para-church organizations, and hierarchically organized denominations. But for the Reformed church, such a centralized pattern

represents a reversal of the Spirit's forward movement, from Exodus toward Acts. We are now living in the dispensation of Acts.

#### 6. *The priority of relationship over agreement as the form of unity*

When Classis Holland suffered a schism in 1857 as the cost of its membership in the RCA, it paid a great price for defining unity in terms of relationship rather than agreement. This attitude and commitment was one of Albertus Van Raalte's greatest contributions to the RCA. When Classis Holland stayed its course, it set a standard that has remained essential to RCA identity: the priority of relationship. This was no easy thing in a Calvinist denomination. Classis Holland did not discount doctrinal integrity; but it sought its doctrinal security in the stated loyalty of the other classes to the *Constitution* of the RCA. Assuming the integrity of the *Constitution*, Classis Holland was willing to endure great pain in order to maintain a relationship with the other classes, even though it strongly disagreed with them on costly issues, and even though it had a foreign culture and experience. By 1857, the priority of relationships clearly part of the RCA identity.

For the next century the RCA was a carefully maintained coalition of the East and the Midwest. Leaders were successful in the RCA if they worked this coalition. Both sides of the coalition kept each other honest, and both sides were enriched by the coalition in different ways. The cultivation of this coalition was a long exercise in "mutual affirmation and admonition," to use a later term. It is therefore not surprising that the RCA should have had a strong ecumenical commitment, for this was simply an external application of its own internal habit.

There is a direct parallel to the experience of the primitive church in the Book of Acts. In this case the coalition was between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. The Bible is candid about the tension and even dissension between the two groups, even between their leaders (cf. Galatians 2). Their church councils had the task of maintaining the coalition in a way that had doctrinal integrity. Not only did their councils give rulings and direction, they also served to foster inter-personal relationships. We notice what emphasis the New Testament churches placed on their face-to-face meetings in spite of the expense and difficulty of travel.

Our denominational character has produced a certain kind of leader—someone who is good at relationships, who can be trusted by different sides, and who is typically open and transparent. This kind of leader had a key role in fostering unity by maintaining trustworthy relationships with those groups in the denomination who had strong disagreements with each other. The leader was the mediator of unity. In great part, the two sides were able to tolerate each other because they all felt comfortable with the leader. They had reason to feel that they were understood. They felt empowered without having to disempower those with whom they disagreed. This role of the leader is not to be dismissed as mere politics or the art of compromise. It is nothing less than the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18) which is so important in the church, especially whenever there is an increase in diversity.

The defining coalition is no longer the case in the RCA, despite some remnants. This fact is less to be mourned than understood or even celebrated, if it indicates greater diversity. The variety of viewpoints and experiences in the RCA is precious to us, and our differences stimulate us, provided we all hold ourselves accountable to a common *Constitution*. The devolution of the coalition, however, has affected our priority on relationships in that the dynamic of our relationships is now more complex and more difficult to master. It requires an even greater premium on the ability of our leaders to cultivate and maintain relationships within the denomination. Relationships are essential for the kind of trust involved in the constant reconciliation of differences.

Indeed, the working of relationships may well be the most important job of our denominational leaders, especially as there are now a variety of different groups within the denomination, in ever-shifting coalitions, all seeking to hold each other more to mutual admonition than mutual affirmation. Since 1968, for example, we have seen the development of the minority councils and the commissions on women and on race and ethnicity, all of which are charged with mutual admonition to some degree. One might also point to the voices for and against the written Liturgy, those for the NAE versus those for the NCC, those

who stress Church Growth versus those who stress Christian Action, those in favor of the conscience clause and those against it, those in favor of gay inclusivity and those against it, and so on.

Wisdom is necessary for leaders to know when it is that such coalitions can be maintained, as in the past, or when the issues need to be brought to some new resolution. If the Book of Acts is a model, the very issues which divide are often the growth areas of the church. The gift of the leader is to model the strengthening of relationships precisely through working through the issues. The task of the leader is to enhance the conciliar process, by showing ways to bring out the worst things and the hardest, so to speak, and dealing with them in a truly miraculous way. The assumption must be that the truth is already out there, and the conciliar process, always including a great emphasis on Biblical exegesis and the discipline of theology, is necessary not only for the maintenance of unity but the solving of problems and the development of the church towards new realities of mission and obedience. This cannot happen without real leadership, and a leadership invested in not just one person, but in many. This cannot happen without an appreciation for the “ministry of reconciliation” as a powerful kind of leadership

A valid vision for the RCA must feature a vision of the General Synod as a modern version of a Biblical church council, with all the status, authority, and responsibility thereof. The vision must honor the annual meeting of the General Synod as the RCA’s chief celebration and renewal of its on relationships. Recent attempts by the GSC leadership to reduce the Synod’s frequency demonstrate either a lack of understanding or a lack of commitment to this priority. We want the RCA to be the kind of denomination in which the General Synod meets annually.

### *7. The counterproductivity of centralization and the renovation of the boards*

The status, authority, and character of the General Synod are best served by a renovation of the pre-1968 board system for program, taking new realities into account. Also to be served by this are the values of creativity, open communication, wider empowerment, and more room for our varieties of interest and expertise. The trend towards centralization of the RCA structure, including the merging of governance and program, has given no evidence of increasing the RCA’s general effectiveness in mission or church extension or social witness. It is entirely possible that this centralization has actually contributed to the denomination’s gradual shrinkage. It is certainly true that this centralization has come at the cost of wide participation in and broad ownership of denominational program.

In 1968 the RCA began the experiment of the centralization of its boards. The first stage was the consolidation of the boards into one General Program Council (GPC). Governance and program were kept distinct. The second stage was the merging of governance and program with the consolidation of the GPC and the GSEC into the General Synod Council (GSC). Unfortunately, the short history of the General Synod Council has not been happy or smooth. Its internal structure was idealistic but unwieldy. It proved too large for some functions and too small for others. It could not decide whether to act like an assembly or like a board. (Governance prefers an assembly, and program prefers a board.) Its organization has undergone continual adjustment and even radical change. The original six area committees which corresponded to the six staff units are gone. This has been accompanied by a continual reorganization of the GSC staff, along with (in an open secret) low staff morale. For the GSC to go through so much change in only ten years is both evidence and cause of constant frustration. The 197<sup>th</sup> General Synod approved the most radical change in the GSC so far, which includes abandoning the original idea to represent each classis. There is no doubt that the GSC was too large to be effective, and its numbers had to be reduced, but the consequent reduction in representation is a huge cost to pay and potentially dangerous one when it comes at the same time as the increase of the power of the GSC.

The GSC has decided to be more like a board and less like an assembly, as it indicated by its new nomenclature at General Synod. Yet it is still the General Synod’s executive committee and is responsible for governance. It remains to be seen how it balances the functions of governance and program. If it emphasizes governance, then program will necessarily be staff-directed. If it emphasizes program, then staff will have to handle governance. If it acts like a GSEC, yet with all the prerogatives of a board of directors, it cannot help but compromise the status of the General Synod. At the same time, there will be a necessary decrease in the wider denomination’s ownership of program, as fewer people are either involved in or empowered for its direction.

The accelerating consolidation and centralization since 1968 has been motivated by a desire for increased effectiveness, greater efficiency, and tighter coordination. Doubtless there were real problems which each centralizing step was intended to address. But as often happens, and despite the best advice and the best intentions, the general solution to these problems has proven counter-productive in addressing the problems. Indeed, such scholars as Jacques Ellul, Wendell Berry, and Jane Jacobs have argued persuasively that centralization, mergers, consolidation, standardization, rationalization, and the pressure for efficiencies have tended to inhibit flexibility, stifle creativity, and weaken the very institutions which have sought by these means to strengthen themselves and increase their effectiveness.

Take the case of education, which in principle will have to be a priority for any Reformed denomination. The RCA has both a governmental and programmatic interest in education. Local boards of elders are responsible for the governmental interest in the education of members, and classes are responsible for the governmental interest in the education of pastors. The programmatic interest is the one assigned to General Synod. For many decades the Synod invested this interest in a board of education. This board was consolidated into the General Program Council, where it continued as a program unit, and the program unit was more or less maintained in the initial consolidation of the General Synod Council. Gradually, however, this unit was subsumed under the broad nomenclature of “congregational services,” and educational programming lost its high status in denominational structure and commitment.

But the natural interest of the denomination in education generated some dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. As a result, there was recently created a General Synod Commission on Education, similar to the commissions on theology, Christian unity, and Christian action. But here is evidence of the problems which result from mixing governance and program. Commissions of the General Synod are best fitted for governance and not for program. Commissions can't raise money, they can't hire staff, they can't initiate projects, and they can't maintain projects for the long term. These are all programmatic functions. The interest of the General Synod in education is one of program, not of governance. Assigning it to a commission misses the point. It locates a programming need in a body which is not designed for programming, and yet this move can be taken to absolve the GSC of its programmatic responsibility. The only real way for a commission to strengthen education in the RCA is for it to act in a governmental way and to recommend to the General Synod that it instruct the GSC to recommit to education programmatically.

A much better alternative would have been to return to a renovated board of education. A board can raise money and hire staff. A board can include in its own membership a variety of persons—those appointed by the Synod, those who have expertise, those who have passion, and those who have access to resources. A board can develop a vision for education in the RCA, while a commission is unlikely to, and, at present, is not going to be invited to (because visioning is the prerogative of the GSC). A board is the kind of group that can start projects, see them through, and foster creativity. By reporting to and being accountable to General Synod, a board allows the synod to do what it is best at: governance.

Of course, to choose this alternative would reverse the centralizing trend. It would reverse the trend that all denominational staff be part of a single hierarchical structure under the General Secretary. In a board set-up, the staff are accountable to the board. This set-up may be considered risky by senior staff because it allows RCA staff to take different points of view in public, which is not permitted now. It would actually encourage them to do so, as the expression of different interests, so that the General Synod can exercise its proper gift of judging between them or finding a way to balance them. A little bit of competition between the boards can be a good thing, provided the General Synod does its job of governance.

During the 1950's and '60's the Board of North American Missions had a notable record of activity, initiative, promotion, and support. The two boards of foreign missions could make similar boasts in earlier decades. In the 1950's the Board of Education published graded catechisms for use in the congregations and kept them available through the '60's. The boards were doing good work. One can only wonder what might have happened if we were still working with a variegated board structure during our recent attempt to develop a major urban strategy. Judging from the minimum attention paid to urban ministry at the most recent General Synod, compared to the great fanfare of 1997, the whole thing can only be regarded as a huge flop. What if the programmatic decisions had been made by a board of urban missions which was close to the actual work instead of by a generalized church body responsible for both

governance and program? What if the staff were hired by and responsible to such a board, instead of to a denominational hierarchy? Of course these are leading questions, and one cannot assume greater success, but it is likely that had a board of urban missions been organized six years, urban ministry would have not been so ignored at the 197<sup>th</sup> General Synod. Its board would not have allowed it.

#### *8. Return to the structural distinction between governance and program*

There are a multitude of reasons for the structural distinction between governance and program, and some have been mentioned already. Another reason is the principle of “the separation of powers” which has informed our civic structures for the last two centuries. Historians have pointed out that the civic principle reflects the hard-headed general Calvinism of the founders of the American republic (and later Canada as well). Was the RCA too idealistic when it thought that it could move away from this?

#### *9. The role of the General Secretary*

The first responsibility of the General Secretary is to support and enhance the General Synod, especially the character of its meetings. The General Secretary is responsible to have a vision, not for the denomination as a whole, but of the General Synod and its vitality. The Synod is first and foremost a meeting, and it is a meeting of the classes and offices. We seek a return here to the original vision of the General Synod in the Reformed Church. The General Synod is meant to be where the classes and offices come together to hold each other accountable and to discern God’s will through scripture and experience..

In the RCA, the classis is that assembly which is directly in touch with the local church. As each local church engages in ministry, it encounters issues and problems to which it responds in creativity, and such responses require the wisdom and accountability of the broader church. The mission of the classis is to be the broader church in relationship to the local church. In the same way, each of the classes requires the wisdom and accountability of the synods. The responsibility of the General Secretary is to serve these meetings, and to enhance their continuity from year to year. The General Secretary needs to own the original vision of the General Synod.

The second responsibility of the General Secretary is to be responsible for the staff. The General Secretary is responsible, again, to have a vision, not for the denomination as a whole, but for the staff—how they interact, how they serve, and how they model what the RCA stands for. It is our conviction that the General Secretary should be responsible only for the staff in governance, not for program, which we believe should be responsible to their own boards.

The most important skill of a successful General Secretary is excellence at relationships. This is simply a matter of the RCA’s peculiar character. The second most important skill is a feel for the RCA’s deeply rooted tradition and native structures, and the ability to interpret them to those who already know them “from the trenches” in such a way that they can be kept relevant and vital. In this regard, it helps, though it is not necessary, to have real experience in such mundane things as consistory meetings and classis committees, for these structures tend to set the patterns of behavior for participation in the broader assemblies and their committees. It is simply a fact of the landscape that, since the RCA is not a hierarchical church, most pastors and elders will see *the* Reformed Church as *a* Reformed Church. In other words, what they know and have experienced locally they will naturally extend denominationally. It is important for the denominational staff to be at home in these realities.

#### *10. Staff morale*

The current staff set-up requires the discipline that no staff disagree with the head of staff in public on issues before the church, even if they are pastors in a peer relationship. This makes some sense for our current set-up, but it violates the basic RCA principle of the parity of officers, and it prevents pastors from exercising their prophetic responsibilities in key situations. In other words, their staff disciplines contradict the implications of their ordinations. This has to have a negative affect on staff morale. It sets up an unhappy boundary between the staff and the rest of the church. At the same time, since staff are human, and are so thoroughly integrated into the RCA fabric, they tend to find intimates with whom they

can blow off steam and voice their disagreements and frustrations. They have little choice, but the word eventually gets out, and breaks down trust. This is one of the many reasons why we advocate moving away from a centralized hierarchical staff. We welcome the vigorous diversity of opinion and input which must come from a renovated board structure.

### *11. The secondary officers of the General Synod staff*

We believe that a valuable precedent has been maintained in the case of the Associate for Ecumenical Relations: a General Synod staff position is assigned to a pastor who remains serving in a congregation. We don't know the cost implications of such arrangements, but we believe it has many other benefits. In the case of the ecumenical associate, we saw him take positions of strength and authority in ecumenical negotiations. We believe his being a pastor in a congregation enhanced his effectiveness on staff. We would like to see this model used far more frequently for those who carry out the offices of the General Synod.

### *12. The size of the denomination*

We believe that our God has equipped the RCA with everything good that we may do God's will. We have everything we need. We believe that our only shortages come from disobedience and doubt. We believe that our denomination is exactly the right size, right now, perfectly to obey God's will for us. We believe that obedience to the great commission lies first in doing what is before us, and in caring for what God has given us, and not in dreaming of what we shall be. We believe that we ought to start measuring our success (and obedience) by how we do what is in front of us.

One pastor recently offered the following analogy from his pre-marital counseling. Every couple says they want their marriage to thrive their whole lives long. What he tells them is that you don't get a long-lasting marriage by simply focusing on having a long-lasting marriage. You get a long-lasting marriage by learning certain competencies of marriage. If you learn these basic competencies and keeping working at them, they will usually result in long-lasting marriages. If the RCA seeks to grow, it should stop its recent fixation on its size. Rather, it should return to its basic competencies, and the growth that God intends will naturally result.

Queen Juliana of the Netherlands once addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations in the early 1950's. The Netherlands had lost its colony of Indonesia, and its navy had been utterly destroyed. The Netherlands could no longer consider itself a world power, and it had to face the new reality of its relative insignificance. Queen Juliana said this to the General Assembly: "The Netherlands shall be a great country in those things in which a small country can be great." What if the Ten Year Goal of the RCA had nothing to do with size or numbers, but was something like this: *By the end of ten years every RCA congregation will become expert in the Holy Trinity*, or this: *Within ten years every RCA congregation will be known as a lighthouse of justification by faith*, or this: *In ten years every RCA congregation will be known in its locality for the power of healing and intercessory prayer*, or this: *In ten years every vacant RCA congregation will be able to locate and call a superbly qualified pastor*

### *13. Funding and assessments*

We believe there would be a substantial reduction in assessments if we return to a renovated system of program boards. There would also be a transitional period of some financial instability, but the risk might well be worth it in the long run.

14. *“A thousand churches in a million ways all doing one thing.”*

The above quotation is one of the catchy lines in the Mission and Vision Statement. This is a slogan, and it can hardly be taken seriously, and it offers poor guidance. The RCA cannot do things in a million ways. First of all, our doctrinal standards and church order prevent such. But do we even want to do things in a million ways? Is that wise? Are there not some five to ten ways which are recommended to us by our history, tradition, doctrine, and current locations? An alternate vision must take such matters seriously..

### **Appendix: Stewardship of our Reformed identity**

We are an historic denomination, rooted, with a rich tradition. We have an unbroken succession of offices and assemblies across four centuries. Our history is part of our mission. We also represent a worldwide Reformed movement, a global fellowship, where there still live on many Reformed distinctives which we have forgotten in North America. The General Synod is the steward of something entrusted to us, something which is bigger than ourselves.

Stewardship is not the same as Conservation. We are not the collective curators of a museum. But the evolution of our identity must always be done in the context of Catholic accountability.

The General Synod has a special responsibility for this on behalf of the classes and congregations, not only because it has custody of the Constitution, but also because it has the broadest perspective, and is in correspondence with other denominations.

*The General Synod is a steward of Reformed doctrine.* We are Biblical but not fundamentalist. We are orthodox and progressive, catholic and evangelical, traditional and personal. We emphasize the doctrines of the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, justification by faith, and the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls and also in the larger world. We are unapologetically Biblical and theological. We are open to complex truths, as the Creeds and Confessions require of us. We want to think Christianly about culture and society, and see this as part of our mission, but we want to do this in a churchly way, which starts from doctrine. We are not political specialists, but doctrinal specialists. We contribute our own special expertise to the issues of our day, and our expertise is an interest in the claims of the Lordship of Christ. We tend not to be activist, but we shelter activists among us. As a matter of policy and discipline we base our preaching on the responsible exegesis of Scripture, and not on current events or even the needs of our programs. We make joyful use of the Ecumenical Creeds and the Reformed Confessions.

*The General Synod is a steward of Reformed worship.* We are responsible for the *Liturgy* of the RCA and for its adaptation in diverse situations. We give guidance on hymns and music that harmonize with our doctrine and scripture.

*The General Synod is a steward of Reformed church order.*