

# The Chicago Invitation (with explanatory notes)

**We office-bearers within the Reformed Church in America**

## **Acknowledge**

that together we have become ill, and together by Spirit and Word we shall be healed; that we have abdicated true church governance and have allowed our assemblies to become mere administrative bodies.

"The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works." (Preamble to the Government)

Clearly, the church is to be about the gospel. But how shall the church remain true to its gospel mission? How are its lines of accountability delineated, so that we can be sure that we're keeping our eye on the ball?

A reformed understanding of the church sees governance as taking place in assemblies of officers. At the congregational level, three offices (Elder, Deacon, and Minister of Word and Sacrament) continue within the church the unity of the three-fold office of Christ. At all other levels, Elders and Ministers of the Word gather in broader assemblies, whose chief function is that of accountability.

The mission of the church is carried out at the local level, except in two cases:

1) where the local congregation is unable to carry out that mission on its own, and 2) where the broader assembly is necessarily involved (for example, ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, or judicial proceedings).

Over the years, we believe, the pattern has set in whereby the broader assemblies, rather than focusing energies on their proper tasks, have come to see themselves as service providers to the more local assemblies. The General Synod is envisioned as a body that "equips congregations" rather than as a gathering of Classes assembled to discern the will of God for the Church and society. Regional Synods, insofar as they exist at all, have also become congregationally oriented. Classes, composed of hard-working office-bearers who are often fatigued by their own struggles, have welcomed other bodies doing what should be their jobs. Indeed, many classes have complied in this arrangement by restructuring themselves according to the administrative structures of the broader assemblies.

The problem with this is that it is the Classis that is uniquely poised to "regularly consider the nature and extent of ministry within its bounds in obedience to Holy Scripture and in response to the needs of the world within which the classis ministers." In brief, the farther one gets from 'the needs of the world', the more difficult it is to 'minister to the total life of all people.'

This is therefore a gospel issue: when *appropriate* oversight is not being exercised; when the energy for the proper tasks of the Classes is being dissipated; and when as Classes have complied in allowing other assemblies to do their proper work, for a number of reasons; the gospel goes wanting, not only for those who have pledged their lives to proclaim it, but for the needs of the wide variety of worlds within which classes minister. In other words, in our attempt to become *more* "missional," we actually become *less* "missional!"

## **Affirm**

that the confessions, order and worship of the Reformed church have the integrity, vitality and relevance to be the sure guide in ministry and mission, and the means by which we can be faithful to one another;

### *What are the confessions of the Reformed Church in America?*

The first is the Belgic confession, written in 1561 by Guido de Bres, in an attempt to prove to the persecutors of the Reformed expression of the Christian faith that they were law abiding citizens who professed true Christian doctrine according to the Scriptures.. some of the characteristic notes of the Belgic Confession are its desire to define as many common beliefs with the catholic (Roman) church as possible, alongside its assertion of Reformation distinctives such as the unique authority of Scripture. The Belgic confession further stressed particularly 'Reformed' emphases on election, sanctification, church government, and the sacraments.

The second is the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563 by Olevianus and Ursinus for Elector Frederick of Heidelberg, who had requested an overview of beliefs of the reformers. It is most famous for its first question and answer, which, instead of asking in abstract terms about the nature of God or the purpose of humanity, poses the existential question that faces every Christian every day: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" Its poignant and surprisingly contemporary answer begins "That I belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. . ."

The third is the Canons of the Synod of Dort, which were formulated in 1618 by the Synod of Dort where synod of Dort where several churches of the Reformation met in order to state a clear position on the extent to which humanity cooperates in its own salvation. Contrasted with the Arminian position, which finds a considerable role for human initiative in salvation, the writers of the Canons said that, no, salvation is purely a gift of God's grace, appropriated by means of the coinciding gift of faith

### *What is the order of the Reformed Church in America?*

The order of the Reformed church is embodied in its Constitution, which is comprised of three parts: the Doctrinal Standards (listed above as the confessions), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, and the Government (commonly known as the BCO). Because our order includes the Doctrinal Standards, the RCA is a stable vessel and maintains freedom from the tyranny of winds that would threaten to capsize it. Because its order includes the liturgy, RCA congregations are free from the whims of the merely clever. Insofar as order in the RCA holds to account the minister, elder, and deacon working together to discern the will of God for the local congregation, it retains its cutting edge in ministering to the needs of the world.

## *What is the worship of the Reformed Church in America?*

The Reformed church's forms of worship respect the integrity of who we are as created human beings before a God who creates and recreates by Word and Spirit. We come together for a "service," the service of presence, adoration, confession, reconciliation, reassurance, praise, listening, proclamation, communion (in sharing offerings, statements of faith and sacrament), thanksgiving intercession and blessing), all done in prayerful reverence. Then we are sent out for "service into the world. The RCA maintains a limited model of common prayer, in that orders for services most closely linked to the Lord's Table are properly Constitutional, while other orders are optional.

we AFFIRM the particular contribution of the Reformed tradition to the entire church in our witness to the reign of Christ in all of creation and culture.

The Reformed church does not pretend to be the entire church, but only to be one of a number of voices in the choir that make up the church catholic. That said, the church, while it may sing praise to God, does not necessarily or always sing in unison. Its many parts sing one song, but with distinctive voices.

A contribution of the Reformed church to the entire church is its faith-filled conviction that there is no aspect in all of creation or culture that is beyond the reach of a sovereign God. God so loved the world, i.e., the cosmos (not just humanity), and the saving work of Christ includes, but extends far beyond, the reach of individual human souls. The church's witness, if it is to be true to its Lord, must speak to all that concerns the health and welfare of creation and the human situation. Matters of justice are no less on the agenda of God than are matters of personal redemption, because it is of the church's very nature to be concerned for justice. Reformed witness sees its work not only rooted in remembrance of Christ's saving work, but also in the living presence of Christ through Word and Sacrament, and the return of Christ in which all things -all things!--will be summed up in him. (Eph. 2:10) It is in light of that all-encompassing vision of history that the Reformed offer a bold witness to the activity of God in all of creation and culture.

### **Invite**

office bearers and assemblies to repent, rediscover, reclaim, and reform;

**Repent:** to repent is to turn around from a path one has taken, a path that is leading away from, rather than nearer to, God;

**Rediscover:** to rediscover is to open once again the riches of the faith that has been passed on to us, a faith for which our ancestors would have offered "their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire."

**Reclaim:** to reclaim is to pick up those gems from the tradition and to treasure them as riches that continue to provide a wealth of wisdom to address the world that all may believe;

**Reform:** to reform is to use material that is given, but to allow its shape to be transformed into vessels that carry forward the gospel for this day and time.

## we **Invite**

office-bearers and assemblies to join with us and engage the Reformed Church in America in this repentance and reforming;

Responses to the *call to repentance* will take many forms, but should include prayerful consideration of whether office-bearers and assemblies have become mere 'boards' and 'agencies' or whether they are truly fulfilling their roles as those who are called to discern God's will for the church.

Responses to the *call to reforming* will also vary, but will always be anchored in the Scriptures and in the creeds and confessions and worship as faithful witnesses to God's Word. It is by the Scriptures as our only rule of faith and practice, and by the standards of unity that we will be a church not only Reformed, but also reforming -- not according to our own will or according to the spirit of the age, but according to God's living and active Word.

office-bearers and assemblies to submit with joy, in their respective ministries and missions, to Reformed patterns of discipleship and discipline, and model with gladness a church which is "in unity with itself" (literal translation of Psalm 122:3).

'Submission' to 'Reformed patterns of discipleship and discipline' is by no means to be equated with 'antiquarianism.' What is at stake here is the nature of the faith that we have received and are entrusted with passing on. We say gladly that the church of 2005 cannot make up that faith as it goes along. Rather, its faith was shaped by those who in the past wrestled blessing from the Scriptures. To disregard the form in which that blessing was given conveys disrespect for the blessing itself. In no age is the church to be built upon the sand of gimmickry and the promise of success. Rather, its witness is to be founded upon the foundation of the apostles, Christ Jesus himself the chief cornerstone.

### **A Calling to Reformed patterns of discipleship and discipline**

1. We believe that the church does not exist for itself, but as a witness to the reign of God in all of life, and as the first fruit of the Kingdom of Christ. We believe that the validity and credibility of the church is not to be confined, bound or limited to its numerical size (Belgic Confession, Art. 27).

In what ways have your Consistory and congregation, working together, given witness to the reign of God, especially as your local church looks to God's future as its call?

What do you believe to be the most pressing problem facing the Reformed Church in America in the next 10 years?

Why do you believe that is a problem? Is there another way of defining the problem in light of the way the Belgic Confession defines the nature of the church?

2. We believe that the assemblies of the church are meetings of offices who seek God's will, and that these assemblies are conciliar (full parity, same standing of all offices), presbyterian (governed by the office of elder) and synodical ("joining-together-on the-path"). We believe that our assemblies of Consistory, Classis and Synod, are a gift and an ordered response to scripture, and that the way they function is a matter of

obedience (literally, "listening-walking") to God's will more than strategy (planning outcome before you embark).

Do you see equal standing of all the offices in your experience of the Reformed church? To what extent are elders and deacons trained to fulfill their callings?

How do you see the office of elder functioning in your local congregation? Classis? Regional and General Synods? How is spiritual care of your congregation exercised in a cooperative manner?

Would you describe the Reformed Church as being closer to 'joining together on the path' or closer to a group which has some leaders far out ahead, some stragglers far behind, and many small groups sharing the path but not clearly related to the others?

Have you seen actions of assemblies that arise more out of strategy than obedience? How might the two be creatively and faithfully melded?

3. We believe that the vision for the church should be sought in the faithful revelation of God through the work of office-bearers in their congregations, chaplaincies, and missions, and through the deliberation of office-bearers in assemblies.

How does your congregation or classis seek vision for its ministry? On what sources does it draw? To what extent is vision-seeking performed by called, ordained, and equipped office-bearers?

4. We believe that we must be eager to honor the confessional nature of the Reformed church. We believe that when our assemblies address issues, we need to engage our creeds and confessions as faithful and historic witnesses to scripture. We are charged, in our decision-making, to give an account of what we believe. We believe that what we say and do in our assemblies must always be directed toward unity with, and faithfulness to, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.

How familiar are you, or your fellow office-bearers, with the creeds and confessions of the RCA? How might their insights guide the current ministry of the church? To what other 'witnesses to scripture' have assemblies turned in an attempt to address the issues of the day?

In what ways have you seen the RCA, or your congregation, work toward unity in the whole church? How does it live out its belief in the communion of saints? Can you think of ways in which unity and communion are being neglected or even disdained?

5. We believe the offices of minister of Word and Sacrament, elder and deacon to be both gift and task for the church. The formation, education, and support of these offices is a primary responsibility of the General Synod.

How have you experienced the church's calling to office as a gift? As a task? To what extent have you experienced the General Synod as forming, educating, and supporting the offices? Can you think of ways in which the General Synod could further exercise such responsibilities?

## **Rejection of errors**

In the history of the Christian Church it has been a tradition from the earliest beginning (Nicene Creed) until recently (Barmer Theses, Belhar Confession) to not only to hold forth affirmations, but also to state the negatives. Please note, again following tradition, they are placed at the very end of this Invitation. As elders and as ministers of Word and sacrament, these declarations are made in faithfulness to Scripture: "teach and admonish one another" (Col 3:16) and "declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority" (Titus 2:15).

1. We reject our denomination's habit of disavowing its doctrine, forms of worship, and form of government. We reject the substitution of any document, declaration, or statement in the place of creeds and confessions as the basis for unity and direction in the church.

2. We reject those parts of the RCA Statement of Vision and Mission that contradict our confessions.

We reject the identification of the Reformed church as a "fellowship of congregations" and "the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world." We reject the disavowal of the three marks of the church inherent in calling for "a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing" and in vowing "we will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business."

We reject the conversion of staff into leadership and the innovation of staff establishing a vision for the denomination as a Reformed body.

3. We reject in our assemblies (consistories, classes and synods) a process of deciding matters primarily on the basis of expediency and anticipated consequences, and apart from scripture and doctrine as witnessed to by our creeds and confessions.

We reject in any of our assemblies the pressure of rubber-stamping programmatic goals coming from officers, staff or from other assemblies.

4. We reject our denomination's preoccupation with its size, and any sort of goal-setting and decision-making directed toward statistical growth. We reject the spirit of fear under which we disavow our full message and testimony as a denomination. We reject the subversion of social witness, of ecumenical advance, and of the free exercise of theological deliberation in our assemblies for the sake of goal-setting.

5. We reject the redefinition of our offices and assemblies according to models derived more from secular culture than from scripture and doctrine.

We reject both the arrogation (assumption) and the abrogation (surrender) by the General Synod, or Classis, or Consistory, of its own proper authority.

We reject a hierarchical centralization of our structures for governance and program.

6. We reject the revolutionary distribution of authority and direction in the church as a People of God on account of "board-style" and "policy-governance" models that sidestep the Church as the Body of Christ and disempower our assemblies as freely ordered manifestations of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We reject the elevation of staff to the place and function of governance.

7. We reject the confusing of assemblies and boards, and the conflating of governance and program.

We reject the loss of transparency in decision making and the inhibition of the free initiative of the assemblies by fashioning agendas for the sake of efficiency or convenience.

8. We reject the sacrifice of true deliberation and clarity for the sake of superficial unity or unanimity.

9. We reject initiatives and strategies replacing the Word of God as the heart of the church. Such marching orders cause a devolution of ministers and consistories into leaders, managers, and spiritual entrepreneurs.

10. We reject the veiling of fiduciary information and the removal of structures of financial accountability which result in the lack of opportunity to deliberate aspects of denominational budgets because of inadequate transparency or limited means of accountability in matters such as salaries, travel and legal fees incurred. We reject our denomination's preoccupation with assessments as a means to safeguard our future.