



*The **vision** of the Regional Synod of Mid-America is healthy classes, congregations and leaders following Christ in mission.*

*Our **mission** is to create and strengthen classes through relationships, mutual accountability, and equipping leaders.*

*Our **values** are: casting vision, cultivating trust, building partnerships, sharing resources, demonstrating mutual accountability; all through open and honest communication, while exercising flexibility and creativity, and being available in crises.*

**The Synod Assembly is charged to spend significant time in these areas of responsibility: Be responsible to see that the Mission of the Synod is carried out, to establish policy to realize the Vision of the Synod, and to continually evaluate the progress towards realizing the Vision of the Synod. Be responsible for long-range plans and goals of the Regional Synod.*

Delegates Present:

Chicago Classis (3): Christopher Poest (M - 2018), Rich Schuler (E - 2019).

Illiana-Florida Classis (3): Dale Buettner (M - 2018), Aaron Klein (M - 2019), Stu Swenson (E - 2019).

Illinois Classis (3): Dawn Bird (E - 2017), Bob Hoffman (M - 2018), Scott Stephan (M - 2019).

New Thing Classis (4): Jason DeVries (M - 2018), Glenn Sterrett (E - 2017), Dennis Colton (M - 2019), Jerry Singer (E - 2019).

Wisconsin Classis (4): Bill Flavin (M - 2017), Ken Hoogstra (E - 2018), Lyle Zumdahl (M - 2019).

Officers and Staff: Bob Wierenga (P), Vacant (VP), Edie Lenz (PP), Chad Schuitema (SC/T), Wayne Van Regenmorter (VL)

Ex-Officio Members/Representatives: Laura Vroom (Manitoqua Ministries Executive Director).

Delegates with Excused Absence: Pedro Windsor (CHI; M - 2017), David Venard (WI; E - 2019).

Guests: Ray Tilstra (IL), Judy Bury (CHI), Marge Vander Wagen (CHI), Tony De la Rosa (WI), Albert Vander Meer (I-F), Rich Van Swol (CHI), Chad DeJager (CHI), Earl Vander Wall (CHI).

Minutes

1. President Bob Wierenga led the Regional Synod in a time of worship, devotion, prayer and communion.

2. Business Reports

1. Administrative and Ministry Leader Chad Schuitema welcomed guests and a motion was made, seconded, and carried to give our guests a privilege of the floor.
2. Minutes of the 2016 Annual Session, the November Special Session, and the January Special Session were approved by motion, second, and carry.
3. President's State of Religion Report - President Bob Wierenga gave an oral report.
4. Executive Team/AML Report (**page 4**) - This report was offered for information.
5. Financial Reports (**page 7**) - This report was offered for information.
6. Manitoqua Ministries (**page 9**) - The report from Manitoqua Ministries Director Laura Vroom was given for information. Laura gave an update on the most recent board meeting. She also led prayers for Manitoqua's King's Camp director, Ed, who was recently diagnosed with cancer.
7. Visionary Leader Report (**page 11**) - Wayne Van Regenmorter offered his report for information. Questions were asked and answered by Wayne.
8. General Synod Council Report (**page 28**)
 1. The RSMA member of GSC, Jimmie Stevenson was ill and not available to give a report. Wayne Van Regenmorter reported as the COSE representative on GSC.
 2. The classes discussed the Five Fold Test from Wayne's GSC report around their tables.
 3. Options for General Synod structure and format in the coming years were highlighted.
9. Election: An election of a vice-president to serve the one-year unfinished term vacated by the resignation of previous vice-president Troy Nanninga due to personal reasons.
 1. Candidate is Rev. Jason DeVries. Motion, seconded, and carried to suspend our bylaws to allow for a single slate.
 2. There was a motion to elect Jason DeVries as vice-president. Motion was seconded and carried unanimously.

3. RSMA Current Reality

1. A container conversation was held by splitting the RSMA Assembly in groups and discussing three statements:
 1. Our system is designed to get the current polarization we are getting.
 2. It's more important to have agreement about how we will be together in the face of disagreement than it is to have agreement about what is right.
 3. Churches need to have an exit strategy because of our current reality.
2. The RSMA facilitated this container conversation in order for individual leaders to be able to define themselves in a safe space and to also gauge the anxiety level around these statements.

4. RSMA Mission Vision Task Force

1. Ken Hoogstra recapped our new mission, vision, and core values which were approved at our January 2017 special session. Jason DeVries defined the process to getting to this recommendation. Christopher Poest made the recommendation on behalf of the Mission Vision Task Force to:
 1. That the preferred structure of each classis be to employ at least a part-time paid classis leader. Each classis executive team will be asked to respond to the Mission/Vision Task Force on this recommendation by October 1, 2017 on how they could see this working in their context.
 2. The delegates and guests broke up into groups not respective of classis, then into their own classis groups, and then as a large group to answer:
 1. 3 things they affirm, 1 concern, and 1 question they have.
 2. Responses were recorded and will be examined by the Mission Vision Task Force.
- 5. President Bob Wierenga accepted a motion to adjourn. That motion was seconded and approved unanimously. The meeting was closed in prayer by Jason DeVries.**

Executive Team Report to the Regional Synod Annual Assembly

Chad Schuitema, Regional Synod of Mid-America Administrative and Ministry Leader

The Regional Synod of Mid-America **Executive Team** is comprised of Bob Wierenga (President), Edie Lenz (Past-President), Wayne Van Regenmorter (Visionary Leader), and Chad Schuitema (Stated Clerk/Treasurer/Administrative and Ministry Leader). Per our bylaws, this team is responsible to carry out the will of the Synod Assembly and to act on behalf of the Synod Assembly between sessions. The Executive Team annually evaluates the staff of the RSMA, determines budget and oversees business and ministry. The Executive Team meets monthly through video/telephone communication methods and at least quarterly in person.

The Executive Team makes decisions regarding the dispersement of **Urban Ministry Grants**. Urban Ministry Grant assistance is for ministries to, in, and/or for areas considered urban in geography of our regional synod. The minimum criterion is that it is a ministry to, in, and/or for the urban area with a vision, plans, and goals for outreach into the community. Those ministries applying for a grant that aren't in a traditionally geographic urban setting should take into account that the ideal of the grant is that it be used for those living in geographically urban areas, multi-cultural areas, and lower socio-economic areas. The synod's goal is to see lives changed through the work of Christ and the Gospel.

This year's requests totaled nearly \$60,000. Ultimately we awarded \$25,000 in grants to the following ministries: First Reformed Church, South Holland, IL - First Campus Ministries; Faith Community Church, Stickney, IL; Heartland Community Church, Lafayette, IN; Hope Reformed Church, Sheboygan, WI, Trinity Community Church, Brown Deer, WI; Faith Church, Hammond, IN Arts Center; Living Springs Riverdale, IL Ministry Center; and La Capilla del Barrio, Chicago, IL; Remedy, Sheboygan, WI.

Churches who would like to help fund Urban Ministry within the RSMA are encouraged to give \$4 per member and \$2 per Sunday School participant. In recent years we have received approximately \$20,000 per year towards Urban Ministry Grants and using our previous Urban Ministry reserves to fund the difference. The reality of this fund is that if giving continues this year as previous years, we will have a surplus in this fund of only \$24,000 at the end of 2017. This could indicate that 2018 be our last year of funding Urban Ministries. The Executive Team will be making this decision prior to September and would appreciate input from the assembly.

Financially, the RSMA ran at a budget deficit again in 2016. The income was \$298,747. Our expenditures were \$341,925 (vs. \$360,374 budget). A full 2016 financial status summary is found in this agenda along with a 2017 budget.

The Executive Team received a request from Faith Community Church - Stickney, Illinois to transfer from Chicago Classis to City Classis. While this is a General Synod decision, Faith presented it to the RSMA for information and for the possibility of sending a blessing of this transfer along to General Synod. The Executive Team determine that this request could not be fully examined in time before General Synod as the RSMA would not have time to process it fully with all affected parties prior to the June General Synod meeting. This request will still go before General Synod though the RSMA will remain neutral to it at this time. Understanding that this transfer may not be the last one submitted to us in the future, the Executive Team will be exploring whether or not to develop a process to deal with these types of requests in the future.

The Executive Team appoints individuals to serve on **RCA commissions**. This year we appointed Rev. Stephanie Doeschot to serve as our regional representative to the General Synod Council as Jimmie Stevenson's term is ending. The Executive Team also appoints a delegate from the RSMA Assembly to **General Synod** annually and this year Ken Hoogstra was appointed. Mary Strawsma and Pam Otten were both appointed as Women Corresponding Delegates. This year we were unable to find a Young Adult Corresponding Delegate.

The **Salary Committee** of the RSMA is moderated by the Administrative and Ministry Leader. This committee is:

Chicago Classis:

Rich Schuler - 2017 (2nd Term)
Paul Tuuk - 2017 (2nd Term)

Illiana-Florida Classis:

Justin Kats - 2017 (1st Term)
Andy Shaver - 2017 (1st Term)

Wisconsin Classis:

Susan Kist - 2017 (2nd Term)
Dan Harmsen - 2017 (2nd Term)

Illinois Classis:

Brian Lenz - 2018 (1st Term)
Don Kincaid - 2018 (2nd Term)

The action taken by the Salary Committee has been previously published and is available on our website: www.rsmam.org. These guidelines are submitted to each classis as recommended salary guidelines and each classis tends to adopt them.

The Executive Team has a **partnership** with Manitoqua Ministries. Laura Vroom gives excellent leadership to Manitoqua Ministries and gives reports to the RSMA. As Executive Director of Manitoqua Ministries, Laura will also report at the annual session.

The AML has duties of 75% focus on administrating the business and details of the RSMA and 25% focus on Transformed and Transforming initiatives. Website design and maintenance, efficient accounting procedures, monthly newsletters, all communications, clerk requirements, treasurer responsibilities, administrative duties, staff support, IT support, and

many other daily activities comprise the administrative responsibilities of the AML. I am a member of the Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches team and work in the areas of Transformational Experiences, Cultivating Redemptive Relationships in Christ, and Thriving Leaders/Thriving Churches. I represent our region on the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Board. I also coach many pastors from our region as we try and live into Transformed and Transforming.

I oversee the Specialized Transitional Ministers in our region and recently was trained in this ministry by Interim Ministry Partners. I meet quarterly with those STM's willing to work in our region as we share best practices, opportunities, and prayer requests. I work with congregations in hiring STM's as well as receive periodic performance evaluations of these ministers.

I have been leading our Ministerial Excellence Grant team in developing an application and grant guidelines for the Ministerial Excellence Grant the RCA recently received from Lilly and that 3 of our classes have committed to financially. With the Lilly matching funds, we have \$60,000 to give to pastors in financial crisis in Wisconsin, Illiana-Florida, and Illinois classes. Ken Eriks is our representative from the RCA and continues to give guidance. This grant is tentatively planned to be publicized to those participating classes by this fall.

Some other areas I serve are on the Ridder Church Renewal Implementation team for our region and also as a RCR faculty presenter for Western Canada. I am also the Church Health and Revitalization team leader for the Classis of Illiana-Florida.

– Chad Schuitema

2016 RSMA Budget Status

As of 12/31/16 (100% through year)

General Fund Income	Budget	Actual
Assessment Income	\$298,720.00	\$298,720.00
Interest Income	\$35.00	\$27.47
TOTAL	\$298,755.00	\$298,747.47

Urban Ministry Income	Budget	Actual
Asking (\$4/member; \$2 SS)	\$30,000.00	\$15,722.86
TOTAL	\$30,000.00	\$15,722.86

Urban Ministry Disbursements	Budget	Actual
Assistance	\$33,000.00	\$30,292.69
TOTAL	\$33,000.00	\$30,292.69

Fund Totals	01/01/2016	12/31/2016
RCA-CGF 3-yr Certificate #1	\$104,589.61	\$106,963.21
RCA-CGF 3-yr Certificate #2	\$104,589.61	\$106,963.21
RCA-CGF Demand Certificate	\$210,607.60	\$132,280.35
Providence Bank Checking	\$66,433.13	\$73,701.75
TOTAL	\$486,219.95	\$419,908.52

DISBURSEMENTS	BUDGET	CURRENT	PERCENTAGE
Visionary Leader			
Services	\$116,100	\$116,439	100.3%
Continuing Education	\$1,093	\$1,084	99.2%
Travel	\$17,000	\$18,504	108.8%
Admin & Ministry Leader			
Services	\$113,088	\$112,988	99.9%
Continuing Education	\$993	\$981	98.8%
Travel	\$6,000	\$8,455	140.9%
Administration Expenses			
Executive Team	\$1,500	\$181	12.1%
OJB	\$500	\$0	0.0%
Synod Annual Session	\$1,500	\$2597	173.1%
Office Expenses			
Insurance	\$2,500	\$2,326	93.0%
Financial Review	\$900	\$885	98.3%
Utilities	\$4,500	\$4,792	106.5%
Office Supplies	\$3,000	\$2,297	76.6%
Office Equipment	\$2,000	\$1,455	72.8%
Miscellaneous	\$2,000	\$2,039	102.0%
Ministry Expenses			
Manitowish Contribution	\$40,000	\$40,977	102.4%
Leadership Equipping	\$5,000	\$5196	103.9%
Journey Expenses	\$500	\$0	0.0%
Journey Leader	\$3,000	\$3,000	100.0%
Journey Leader Expenses	\$200	\$0	0.0%
Ridder Church Renewal	\$9,000	\$15,696	174.4%
STM	\$3,000	\$0	0.0%
Miscellaneous Ministry	\$2,000	\$1,241	62.1%
Multiplication Consultant	\$25,000	\$790	3.2%
Total Expenses	\$360,374.00	\$341,925	94.9%

2017 RSMA Budget

DISBURSEMENTS	2016	2017
Visionary Leader		
Services (Insurance, Retirement, Salary, Housing)	\$116,300	\$119,186
Continuing Education	\$1,093	\$1,115
Travel	\$17,000	\$17,000
VL Total	\$134,393	\$137,301
Admin & Ministry Leader		
Services (Insurance, Retirement, Salary, Housing)	\$111,017	\$115,856
Continuing Education	\$993	\$1,032
Travel	\$6,000	\$7,000
AML Total	\$118,010	\$123,888
Administration Expenses		
Executive Team	\$1500	\$1,000
OJB	\$500	\$500
Synod Annual Session	\$1500	\$1,500
Office Expenses		
Insurance	\$2,500	\$2,500
Financial Review	\$900	\$900
Utilities	\$4,500	\$4,500
Office Supplies	\$3,000	\$2,000
Office Equipment	\$2,000	\$2,000
Miscellaneous	\$2,000	\$2,000
Admin/Office Total	\$18,400	\$16,900
Ministry Expenses		
Manitoqua Contribution	\$40,000	\$30,000
Leadership Equipping	\$5000	\$7,500
Illinois Classis Leader	\$0	\$15,000
Ridder Church Renewal	\$9,000	\$7,500
Specialized Transition Ministers	\$3,000	\$3,000
Miscellaneous Ministry	\$2,000	\$1,000
Ministry Total	\$59,000	\$64,000
Total Expenses	\$329,803	\$342,089

Income	Projected
Assessment Income *RSMA Members 18,536	\$296,576 (@\$16.00 assessment)

Summary	Proposed
Personnel Expenses	\$261,189
Ministry Expenses	\$64,000
Administration Expenses	\$16,900
TOTAL	\$342,089

SYNOD REPORT

Board Members:

Brad Haitsma	Ben Kappers
Joan Iwema	Joe Paglia
Mark Reynhout	Dennis Colton
Kevin Kavanaugh	Christine Radtke
Ronald Sanford	Bob Wierenga (Synod Rep)

God's Spirit Changing Lives

TO: REGIONAL SYNOD GENERAL ASSEMBLY
FROM: LAURA VROOM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
DATE: April 12, 2017

Manitqua Ministries, a God-Centered organization, serves guests by providing a setting and programs for retreating, camping and outdoor education.

Exciting news!!!

- Camp Manitqua is celebrating its 60th year of ministry in 2017. It is fun to look at all that God has done and continues to do in this place that has and continues to create an environment for God's Spirit to change people's lives.
- The Board of Manitqua Ministries has started to look into the possibly of building new cabins. We continue to struggle with maintaining our aging cabins as we move forward. I will continue to keep you informed in the process as well as I am sure we will need financial support to build them.
- I want to say a huge and special thank-you to the following churches who gave special offerings to help us out of a rough situation last year. American DeMotte, Trinity Munster, Faith Community Stickney, and Raritan Reformed. Thank you so much for being a blessing to camp.

Personally:

- My health is getting better and I continue to thank all of those that held our family up in prayer! Grace, my daughter, has turned 13 and has become a teenager and Isaac is 10 and is sure he will play football for the Packers some day! So fun to watch what God is doing in their lives.

Property:

- Camp Manitqua has continued to try to update its facilities. We have put new carpet in the chapel, purchased new dining hall chairs, painted the game room, and put up new blinds in the dining hall. Currently, we are planning for portable air conditioners for the cabins this summer.
- Kings Camp is maintaining but with its aging population, we continue to look at how to grow that ministry, as well as looking at the longevity of the ministry there.



Events:

- I would like to invite all of you to attend our 12,000’ obstacle run and Spring into Summer on Saturday, June 3, 2017

Programs:

- Here are our summer camp stats:

SUMMER CAMP REGISTRATION STATS			
March 31, 2017			
	2015	2016	2017
Overnight	1027	988	1073
Explorer	2129	2392	2455
Journey	109	136	102
Swim	91	89	74
Total	3356	3605	3704
% increase from previous year		7.4%	2.7%

RCA Relationship:

- We received about \$38,000 less in RCA askings from 2 years ago for the first 6 months of our fiscal year.
- As of March 31, 263 overnight campers registered from RCA churches within our Synod.

Prayer Requests:

- For plenty of quality summer staff. Also that they become equipped to share the gospel as much as possible.
- That campers, staff and families be changed by our work!
- That we could grow our donor list and find people who have a passion to help us in our ministry. That we can grow more church partnerships.
- That we can raise enough money to build new cabins.

Thank you:

- The staff finds it a pleasure to serve the Synod. We really want to take this time to say thank you. If we can serve you in any way please let us know.
- For more information about Manitoqua, please visit Manitoqua.org.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura Vroom
Executive Director



Report to the Regional Synod of Mid-America

Wayne Van Regenmorter, Visionary Leader

Doug Leonard, Director of Global Missions for the RCA, tells a story about a 10 year old girl named Elizabeth, whose family attended the Reformed Church where he served near Peekskill, NY. One Sunday instead of collecting an offering Doug decided that he would put five dollar bills in the offering plate and ask each church member to take one. The church members were asked to do something missional within the next month and then come back to share their stories. Some people bought a stranger a meal; other people pooled their money together and gave it to a mission organization. But Elizabeth had a vision for something larger. She bought some beads, strung them together, and sold them, making \$20. She took her \$20 and bought more beads and string and sold them, making \$100. She took her \$100 and bought a whole lot of beads and a whole lot of string and sold them in school and in parents' businesses and made \$800. She took the entire \$800 and said, "I want to give this entire \$800 to the homeless shelter in Peekskill, NY."

At that time there was a mayoral race occurring and the homeless shelter had become a political football in the race. One mayoral candidate said that the shelter should be shut down because the residents were convicted felons. The other mayoral candidate said, "We need to be a compassionate city; we need to keep the shelter open." Elizabeth wanted to meet the executive director of the homeless shelter to give her money directly to the shelter. So Doug arranged for her to meet the director of the shelter. The local news station was there; the local newspaper showed up and wrote a cover story about Elizabeth handing an \$800 check over to the director. The executive director reported that this contribution was the single largest amount he had received from an individual for the entire year. When Elizabeth was asked why she did it she said, "I follow Jesus and Jesus wants everybody to have a place to live, even people who have been to jail." The New York Times picked up the story and wrote a follow up story about it which sparked people to give throughout the region. People gave matching gifts to Elizabeth's gift. The shelter raised thousands of dollars because of her \$5 bill.

This is the face of the Reformed Church in America...the local church at its best. One little girl with a vision inviting other people into mission which is larger than themselves. That kind of mission impact would not have happened if the church had held a mission committee meeting. It happened because a 10 year old girl began to see a need and then to grow her capacity to actually live missionally in a local community. That's the way mission works. God's mission comes to human hearts, to individual people, to transform us in our identity and call to follow Jesus. This little girl's story of mission also helped make a shift within the local church where church volunteers now worked in the homeless shelter. There was movement from being internally focused to more externally focused. It began to shift the mental model

of the church where people's needs were met as long as visitors came through their doors, to better understanding the complex needs of people with mental, financial and health issues living in a homeless shelter. This is all a part of the adaptive challenges that pastors, congregations, classes and regions are facing today. So what is God teaching us as we are challenged to create a new DNA that enables the living systems of our churches to flourish in new ways and in more complex environments? What does thriving in a transformational way look like in the context of the churches, the classes, the region and the RCA?

The Adaptive Work of Transformation

The Apostle Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 3:6 that God's people plant and water, but only God gives the growth. Throughout the Synod of Mid-America I hear stories of pastors and congregations engaging the adaptive work of transformation in varying degrees. This is hard work because it requires change which challenges people's familiar realities which can be difficult and dangerous. Church leadership must embrace uncertainty, new approaches, new dreams, strategy and abilities. At the same time church leaders must allow space for critical questions to be raised and discussed. The adaptive work of transformation requires mobilizing people to tackle the toughest issues and do the adaptive work necessary to move forward together in mission. Leadership would be easy if churches only faced problems for which they already knew solutions. In fact, for technical problems we'd just call in the experts with know-how and the problems would be solved. The technical problems like the use of PowerPoint slides during worship or acoustics in the sanctuary could be solved with procedures already in hand. But the adaptive challenges take us off the map where these problems require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places. Without learning new ways--changing attitudes, values, and deep-seated behaviors--people cannot make the adaptive transformational leap necessary to thrive in a new environment.

The journey of Moses during the Exodus and wilderness journey was helping former slaves make the transition from one reality, slavery, to a new and different reality, freedom lived in covenant with Yahweh. In his first letter Peter puts it this way, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." (I Peter 2:10a) This change for the people of Israel was long and labored, filled with difficult learning, but in the end it was the adaptive work of transformation which the people had to figure out for themselves. Time and time again during the wilderness journey, Moses was challenged by those who wanted a quick fix, a technical solution--"Give us bread." Manna was provided but it was only a temporary provision that was leading to a new emerging reality--the reality of living in a trusting relationship with God. The challenges that Moses and the people faced were not clearly known or defined at the outset. Their story not only involved "freedom from" Egypt, but also "freedom for" being God's faithful people in the midst of uncertain circumstances. The journey of the adaptive work of transformation required new learning, and a change of hearts

and minds. Such is the reality that we find ourselves in today in our churches, classes and regional synod.

Over this past year the Regional Synod of Mid-America has been on a journey of the adaptive work of transformation as we have moved from the vision of Our Call to seek to live into the RCA vision of *Transformed and Transforming*. For the past couple of years the region has been casting vision, encouraging church leaders, and equipping congregations and classes to live into *Transformed and Transforming*. Learning communities have provided church leaders the opportunity to step away from the daily pressures and rhythms of life and ministry to engage in listening to one another and discern the work of God's Spirit in their church and community context. Connection Events have provided new vision and appropriate pathways for pastors and their teams to "taste and see" new opportunities in ministry areas such as local community engagement, emerging adults, and discipleship. The regional staff has been working with classis leaders and others to connect them to RCA staff people to help get the right people and the right resources in the right places to assist pastors, church leaders, congregations, and classes to walk together into a deeper spiritual journey of transforming relationships and missional experiences. A Mission/Vision Task Force Team has had several meetings and a final draft of a new regional synod mission, vision and core values was presented, discussed and approved on January 17, 2017, at a special meeting of the Regional Synod Assembly. The regional synods' new vision, mission and values are:

- *The **vision** of the Regional Synod of Mid-America is healthy classes, congregations and leaders following Christ in mission.*
- *Our **mission** is to create and strengthen classes through relationships, mutual accountability, and equipping leaders.*
- *Our **values** are: casting vision, cultivating trust, building partnerships, sharing resources, demonstrating mutual accountability; all through open and honest communication, while exercising flexibility and creativity, and being available in crises.*

In order to put hands and feet on the vision, mission and values, the Mission/Vision Task Force Team has continued to meet regularly. Some of the work that the MVTFT (group of seven people which includes one representative from each classis) has done includes having conversations with Classes Executive Teams, regular updates to the Regional Executive Team and researching other structures and best practices in the Synod of the Great Lakes and the Synod of the Heartland. A recommendation will be presented at the Regional Assembly meeting for further conversation, discussion and processing with the hope that a more focused structure will be in place to carry out the vision and mission of the Regional Synod of Mid-America.

Transformed and Transforming

To put it in simple language, Transformed and Transforming is the RCA's vision to live and love like Jesus more intentionally. This vision challenges us as church leaders, churches, classes and regions to consider what it means in our context to be thriving, missional and culturally relevant. What does it mean to share the Gospel with those who do not know Jesus? What does it mean to walk more deeply in your own spiritual journey and to deepen the spiritual journey of your congregation? What does it mean for your church to engage in social justice issues? As God's called children, how can we do the work we have been called to do more effectively, more focused, more intentionally in our churches and communities? At its core, Transformed and Transforming is focused on three priorities:

- Cultivating Transformation in Christ
- Equipping Emerging Leaders of Today and Tomorrow
- Engaging in Christ's Kingdom Mission

Transformed and Transforming is not about programs. It's about the process of discovering and acting more intentionally on God's unique call for the church or ministry where you serve. The regional synod staff works alongside classes and classis leadership and connects with the RCA staff to offer resources, answer questions, and help you discern God's call in your context--working with you and not directing you. So what are the stories of transformation in our churches and classes? In what new ways is God working in our various contexts of ministry? What has been happening or not happening in the vision of implementing Transformed and Transforming in our region? What is working and not working in our churches, classes and region?

Cultivating Transformation in Christ

- **Transformational Experiences** - In a learning community, church teams come together around specific topics like Discipleship or Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity to learn from each other and with each other. Three congregations in our region have launched a Generosity learning community and are being equipped for mission through these type of transformational experiences. Since our last Synod Assembly two congregations have completed being a part of a Discipleship learning community in Dallas, Texas--Faith Church (Dyer, IN) and Living Springs (Glenwood, IL).

Bethany Reformed Church in Sheboygan, WI, has completed a collaborative learning experience with Leadership Network in Dallas, Texas, in their involvement in a Leadership Development Leadership Community.

In August 2016, Chad and I and three other classis leaders, along with leaders from four other regional synods completed a Regional Leadership Learning Community. Our

purpose was to sharpen the focus of mission and vision in our region and to consider structural changes in the living systems within the region and classes. We are seeking to learn from each other and with each other as regions and classes. Here are some of the goals that were adopted in the learning community--many of which have been initiated:

- 1) To gather classis executive teams to explore adding value and meaning to classis meetings. In addition, to share best practices and cast vision for what "could be" in regards to relationships, learning and business. (The fruit of this goal is seen in the President's Report given by Ken Hoogstra at the Wisconsin Classis meeting in March--"*We want to continue to make our classis more and more relevant to our churches, providing learning opportunities and fostering relationships within our classis and with each other. As a Servant Team, we have begun examining ways we can revise our classis meetings, using feedback we solicited at our meeting last October, and we hope to implement more of those suggestions as we move forward.*" Eliza Cortez-Bast added value to the Illiana-Florida Classis as she presented a seminar on local missional engagement.)
- 2) To hold vision conversations with and ask classis executive teams if a new classis cluster/network model is worth exploring. (The Illiana-Florida Classis gathered pastors in the southern part of the classis to discuss classis clusters or networks but decided to take no action at this point.)
- 3) To work with the Illinois Classis Executive Team and dream concretely about possible ways that the Illinois Classis could employ a staff person to help lead the classis into the future. (The Illinois Classis explored this possibility, caught the vision to move forward, launched a search process and voted to hire Ray Tilstra as their part-time classis minister in financial partnership with the regional synod.)
- 4) To train a team of classis supervisors for each classis that will be utilized in vacant churches to help congregations in transition. (This goal has not yet been accomplished but the regional synod staff provide support and conversational visits upon request with consistories dealing with pastoral transitions.)

Churches within our region are continuing to engage in FaithWalking 101 Retreats which are a part of the personal transformation component of Ridder Church Renewal. Under the leadership of Renee Jelsma, a part-time staff person at New Hope Community Church in Wausau, WI., several people have completed FaithWalking 101 as a dimension of their discipleship pathway and others are participating in FaithWalking 201. Renee has also led additional FaithWalking Retreats for people in neighboring RCA churches.

Ken Hoogstra also reports that Faith Reformed Church in Wisconsin Rapids has been engaged in a discipleship campaign where small groups are studying the book "Multiply" by Francis Chan with 40 people in small groups and 72 people reading the book.

Calvary Reformed Church in Orland Park, IL, has also been focusing on discipleship and transformation. Their leaders are challenged by the issue of how to have a community that keeps people long-term and have people engaged in true ministry. A group of people from Calvary began a journey of transformation focus to discover what churches in the RCA are doing discipleship well. Their finding reveals that not many churches are doing discipleship well. However they discovered a church in Idaho which seemed to be an exception. This church has the same ethos as Calvary but almost everyone in the church is a disciple-maker and/or being disciplined. In their assessment of Calvary Church they discovered that many of their teams were siloed and disempowered in discipleship. Now the church is working on empowering teams and restructuring the Elders and Deacons in order to create a culture where leaders are disciplined.

These are just a few examples of churches intentionally taking steps for developing discipleship pathways in order to see the seeds of transformation begin to grow. People are more intentionally asking one another--How is God showing up in my life? What am I learning from Scripture and what am I going to do about it?

Equipping Emerging Leaders

- **Emerging Leaders** - The work of raising up Emerging Leaders who have an increasing awareness that God is calling all people--youth, young adults, and adults--to become leaders in the church is a challenging task in most of our classes. Over the past few years, the Illiana-Florida Leadership Development Team has developed a comprehensive Commissioned Pastor Training Program with the Church Leadership Center now led by Jim Lankheet. Bob Grysen, the Director of the Illiana-Florida CMT, has designed an integrated process for training church planters to become Commissioned Pastors. At the current time, the Illiana-Florida Classis and New Thing Classis are working collaboratively in the training and examination of Commissioned Pastors. Many of these pastors are planting churches in Florida or are engaged as campus pastors on the multi-site campuses of Faith Church (Dyer, IN). The Living Springs Community Church (Glenwood, IL) has three Commissioned Pastor candidates who are now attending Western Seminary in Holland, MI. The Riverside church plant led by Ann Bilbrew is also mentoring a person for the Commissioned Pastor track.

In our region, as well as other parts of the RCA, there is an increasing need for trained preaching elders to serve the needs of congregations. The Book of Church Order of the RCA outlines a program of study that is required for commissioning as a preaching elder. Most of our classes are now working with the Church Leadership Center to design a program of study for preaching elders and Commissioned Pastors.

Several classis leaders within the RCA have worked together to develop a new training process to equip elders and deacons as leaders in the local church. Lyle Zumdahl, the classis

leader in Wisconsin Classis, has participated in this project. The new elder/deacon training curriculum is now in the final editing stages and will soon be printed to be available for congregations to use.

- **Thriving Leaders, Thriving Churches** - It is said, "When leaders thrive, churches thrive." Ridder Church Renewal (RCR) continues to help pastors, congregation leadership teams, and other church leaders internalize values and practice skill sets that lead to personal and congregational transformation. RCR helps leaders develop the tools to confront unhealthy models that hinder personal and congregational growth. The Classes of Wisconsin, Chicago and Illinois currently have five churches engaged in Module 1 of RCR and five churches in Module 2 of RCR. Each module consists of five retreats in Green Lake, WI., each about six months apart, with coaching and homework between retreats. Congregations who participate in RCR choose a leadership team of four to six congregational leaders plus the pastor.

Retool is another resource used in the Wisconsin Classis to assist in congregational renewal. *The Retool Kit Pathway* is designed to help churches become vital, Christ-centered, community-focused congregations that will transform lives for eternity. Lyle Zumdahl, the Wisconsin Classis Leader, is helping Hingham Reformed Church, Hingham, WI, and First Reformed Church in Sheboygan, WI, engage in this process. The Wisconsin Classis generally funds up to 1/2 the costs for approved processes of revitalization efforts used by churches within the classis.

In the Illiana-Florida Classis, Chad Schuitema is leading several pastors in a classis learning community studying the book, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* by Tod Bolsinger. Each participant is asked to read a chapter in the book, to participate in an online video meeting, and to develop personal action plans to implement between meetings.

The Illiana-Florida Classis Church Health and Revitalization Team has begun a new endeavor to increase church health within the churches of the classis. The classis approved setting aside \$100,000 to be available for churches to use to help create healthier, revitalized churches and/or communities. In past years smaller grants were given to pay for hiring consultants, church renewal processes/conferences such as Ridder, 95 Network, etc. But now the classis has expanded the possibilities for greater revitalization opportunities. The Church Health and Revitalization Team of the Illiana-Florida Classis is willing to come to the local church and lead a process of dreaming God-sized dreams for the use of these funds. Grant recipients are expected to share their stories of the ministries with the greater classis. There is a value being practiced that all churches can learn from each other whether a ministry achieved the desired results or fell short. God works in all of these ways! In addition,

churches also receive a 20% rebate on assessments if they pay early or on time. These savings are expected to also be used for church health and revitalization, not general expenditures.

- **Next Generation Leadership** - In one of the pamphlets produced by the RCA it says, "Research tells us that up to 50 percent of young people walk away from the church and their faith." So how does the church go about solving this problem? Strengthening youth programs is not the answer. Emerging adults need to feel accepted, supportive, and want a sense of belonging. They want to talk about spirituality and religion, but they need space to share their doubts and complexities of life. They want the older generation to create space for younger people to join them in mission. They want to serve in leadership positions in churches and classes and on denominational levels today. The goal is to create an environment to move from an emphasis of simply "keeping" existing young adults to equipping congregations to engage in discipleship, leadership, and mission with young adults.

The absence of young adults is a significant challenge that many churches face in our classes. Ken Hoogstra writes in the President's Report to the Wisconsin Classis: *"Declining attendance was a common theme in many of this year's Consistorial reports, often accompanied by the statement, 'We have an aging congregation.' In my opinion, the aging of our Classis, and the inability of many of our churches to reach and retain young adults and families, is one of the most significant challenges we are facing. However, I also believe that it presents one of our greatest opportunities for transformation and growth, so long as we are willing to intentionally engage the emerging adults in our communities."*

In response to this felt need in the churches in Wisconsin Classis and churches in other classes as well, the regional synod is partnering with the Wisconsin Classis and the National Network of Youth Ministries of the Evangelical Free Church to host a Growing Young Event at Remedy Church in Sheboygan, WI, on May 11, 2017. Dr. Steve Argue, a professor at Fuller Seminary, will be the guest speaker. Dr. Argue will focus on how churches can better reach out to the emerging generation. He has a passion for serving and caring for the next generation and is one of the main researchers in the book: *"Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young Adults Discover and Love your Church"*, by Kara Powell and Jake Mulder. Dr. Argue will also be meeting with several church leaders in two of the Wisconsin Networks who have been discussing and learning together from the Growing Young book.

Engaging in Christ's Kingdom Mission

- **Local Missional Engagement** - Churches are finding ways to engage individuals, ministries, community organizations and local residents to partner with Christ in transforming their communities. Churches in our region are longing to see their communities experience health, vitality and renewal spiritually, physically and socially. Two local engagement events were held in the Chicago area this past year. Twelve RCA churches participated in a learning

community to learn how to assess the pressing realities of their neighborhoods. The question was asked, "Share and prioritize three issues that if churches could/would engage together that your contribution would lead to redemptive change." Churches were taught the principles of Asset Based Community Development:

- 1) Discovering and celebrating the gifts that were already happening in their community through existing organizations and associations.
- 2) Discovering the building blocks of their community where you learn to pull people together and get ownership from people who really care about the community.
- 3) Discovering the Biblical basis where people of faith can cooperate with God in His story to make a kingdom difference in a community. It doesn't take anything from another candle to light another candle.

Bethany Reformed Church in Sheboygan, WI, will be launching a local missional engagement learning community in May with a goal of engaging six congregations. In December 2016, this church also held a month-long "Christmas Comes Alive" initiative, where members were encouraged to serve in small groups and partner organizations in the community. Over half the church members participated in "Christmas Comes Alive," and many members had meaningful conversations with unchurched individuals in their community.

At First Reformed Church in Randolph, junior and senior high youth took up the challenge and responsibility to help unchurched students discover Scripture through Bible study and prayer. Emmanuel Reformed Church in Clinton, WI, (soon to be known as Emmanuel Community Church) added an after-school kids club to their community outreach programs. First Reformed Church in Friesland, WI, hired a new youth pastor who has a passion for outreach and evangelism. He has begun organizing Child Evangelism Fellowship activities in the local public school.

The regional synod is walking alongside classes and churches, connecting church leaders to resources and opportunities for connection events and learning communities, working to build relationships to help churches discover what "mutual mission" could look like. Churches are more intentionally discovering the needs of their local communities. The desire is to express the Gospel of Jesus Christ in transformational ways, bringing reconciliation, justice, blessing, and hope to individuals and families in their local communities. Churches are finding ways to live and love like Jesus.

- **Global Missional Engagement** - This year the RCA celebrates the 233rd year in Global Mission. The General Synod of 1784 sent the first missionaries out into the western territories of the Native Americans. RCA missions started small but they have made a tremendous impact in 233 years: gaining the respect of nations, making Christ known, and building up the Kingdom of God. The stories are truly amazing. There are entire regions of Arabia, Africa, India, and parts of Central and South America that are areas where certain diseases no longer

exist because of the missional impact. The RCA has equipped, educated and trained local people to be doctors, nurses, educators and church leaders. Our missionaries gave elementary and secondary educations to youth who went on to serve and lead their countries.

There was a reunion in Bahrain recently. RCA missionary Josh Perkins, Principal of the Al Raja School, organized an alumni reunion event and brought back the teachers who had served in the school over several decades. It was amazing for the teachers to see what has become of their students. Graduates of the Al Raja School have gone on to become government ministers and business men and women and powerful influencers in that country. The government of Bahrain (a Muslim-majority nation) allows the presence of our National Evangelical Church to flourish in Bahrain. Even those who have not become Christ-followers have developed a profound appreciation for Christ's Gospel and the need for the followers of Christ always to have a place in that society, a society that is otherwise being torn apart by the Sunni-Shia conflict. There is a profound witness to the peace of Christ which is still being witnessed to in that place. God has used this small denomination to bring about tremendous impact.

I worked with Megan Hodgkin to host a one-day global mission engagement connection event with mission teams from three congregations in the Chicago area. The purpose of this event was to help congregations evaluate their current missions paradigms, develop gospel-centered values and strategies for missions, and then implement a mission action plan that would align the missions churches supported with their values and vision. The hope is that congregations will identify ways they can expand their mission reach and become more effective agents of transformation to the indigenous populations with whom they serve in the global community. The regional synod comes alongside classes, congregations, and individuals to help support global mission opportunities that are bubbling up from the grass roots.

- **Church Multiplication** - The process of church planting is a high risk venture and requires great faith, so it always begins with prayer. Churches and classes in the Regional Synod of Mid-America continue to start new churches—reaching the spiritually disconnected, bringing them into a community of authentic relationships, and introducing them to the God of grace who transforms lives and eternities.

The Illiana-Florida **Church Multiplication Team** has a strong team of five leaders led by Bob Grysen. The vision of the team for church planting is that they are blessed with a strong and successful church planting ministry that the Lord can use to reach and disciple thousands of people in the years to come. This past year two new leaders were added to the team. Nate Bull is a successful urban church planter and works as a Urban/Multi-Racial Church Plant Consultant. Eddy Aleman has had many successful Hispanic church planting experiences and

works as the Hispanic Church Plant Consultant. This team works within a \$275,000 budget to fund the current and new church plants for 2017. It has the responsibility to develop and implement the vision and process for church planting in the Illiana-Florida Classis. It also develops and implements systems for recruiting, hiring, training, leading, and coaching church planters. These systems are contained in the Illiana-Florida CMT Vision and Plan Guide. Between the years 1970 to 2006 the Illiana Classis started 5 churches - 2 celebrated organization. In the past six years 17 churches were planted; 12 of those churches are still open - 5 have closed. Three new contingency projects are being considered for new Hispanic church plants in Florida. With the formation of New Thing Classis, the Illiana-Florida CMT still has supervision over 6 church plants and contingency projects. These new plants need our continual prayers:

- Aaron Klein - Current Community Church, Lakewood Ranch, FL.
- Eric Kingsley - Salt Life Church, Pembroke Pines, FL.
- Jason Densberger - North Ridge Church, Apopka, FL.
- Gianni Garcia - Vida y Esperanza (Life and Hope), Miami, FL.
- Bobby Blakely Jr. - Vanguard Family Benefit Twice model - Possibly the Kankakee area
- John Hines - Cornerstone Manteno Campus
- Contingency Projects

There are pastors and other leaders within the Illiana-Florida who have a negative evaluation of the Illiana-Florida CMT. Most of the criticism comes from the fact that the parachuting model of church planting which has been used primarily in Florida is without much "success". This is an expensive financial model and many people would consider the lack of organized churches to be a failure. The desire is to see the use of the parenting model of church planting which has a much higher "success" rate. This is a difficult model to implement in Florida. The current reality pertaining to church planting in Florida is that only one church has reached an average weekly worship attendance over 100. Only one of the other church plants is financially self-supporting. The survival of the other plants seem questionable. The other side of the argument is that 100's of people have been touched with the Gospel. With the campus plants, about 2,100 people have been added to the church. Lives have been transformed and many people have committed their lives to Christ. There has been a lot of wonderful ministry accomplished. So the question becomes, how does one measure "success" when a number of people's lives have been changed for eternity?

At the Spring 2017 Illiana-Florida Classis meeting the following recommendation was passed:

- 1) That we do a careful boot on the ground weekend assessment on each new church plant to see how Classis resources can be better utilized to help these churches become self-sustaining

- 2) That we consult with the present classis liaisons to see how we can use our resources to better assist our classis churches in their present ministries
- 3) That the President form a committee to implement the above recommendation and we allow up to \$10,000 to be used for resources and expenses.

The regional synod needs to be praying for the church multiplication movement in the Illiana-Florida Classis since there seems to be significant tension between various classis leaders and the CMT Team of the classis. Pray that these internal issues can be resolved and that the Lord will continue to reach and disciple thousands of people in the years to come.

The regional synod celebrates with the Classis of Wisconsin as River Rock Community Church in Sheboygan, WI., was organized on January 29, 2017. This is the first church to be organized in the Wisconsin Classis in over 50 years.

The church plants in the classes of Chicago and Wisconsin that need our prayers are:

- Remedy - Tony DeLaRosa - Sheboygan, WI.
- CrossRoads Community Church - Chicago, IL

These campus plants in the New Thing Classis who need our prayers:

- Ann Bilbrew - Living Springs Riverdale Ministry Center, Riverdale, IL.
- Nathan Prairie - Faith Church Beecher, Beecher, IL.
- Jason DeVries - Faith Church Highland, Highland, IN.
- Vacant - Faith Church Schererville, Schererville, IN.
- Dave Weemhoff - Faith Church Cedar Lake, Cedar Lake, IN.
- Brad Haitisma, - Faith Church Valparaiso, Valparaiso, IN.
- Charlie Contreras, Faith Church Hammond, Hammond, IN.
- David Mojica - Faith Church-Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

The Illinois Classis is seeking to live into their new church planting vision of 10 new congregations by 2030. The North Ridge Community Church in Eldridge, IA is a part of a learning community on being a multiplying church. They are exploring the possibility of starting a new church plant.

The Illinois Church Multiplication Team has renewed its relationship with Resurrected Life in St. Louis, MO. In October 2016, the regional synod held a meeting with denominational staff, Christ's Church and Resurrected Life Church in St Louis. It was decided that the denominational staff would hand off all development and supervision of the emerging ministries in St Louis to Christ's Church in St Peters, MO. Since that time Resurrected Life has made it a practice to worship as an emerging congregation with Christ's Church at least monthly. Pastor Terry, the pastor of Resurrected Life, has preached regularly at Christ's Church. In addition, Darryl Comming's emerging church, Bethany Way gathers in

South St. Louis on Saturday evenings in a UCC church facility. Also, Shirley Byrd of Kingdom Way Church continue to worship with Christ's Church and grow in their comprehension of the RCA and its structures. The Illinois Classis is being asked by Christ's Church to consider financial support of these emerging ministries as they continue the work of new church development among minority communities in St Louis.

- **Chicagoland Kingdom Enterprise Zone (KEZ)** was birthed in 2012 and has now grown into a Sustaining Zone. The KEZ was developed from the CRC/RCA Church Multiplication Initiative focused on creating a collaborative and sustainable multiplication movement. Currently the Chicagoland KEZ has an 8-person team representing the city and suburbs of both CRC/RCA denominations and 5 classes. Here have been some of the key areas of mission focus this past year:

- Hosted a Missional Cafe event in Chicago where Daryl Cripe was the guest speaker focusing on discipleship; and Ron Ovitt was the guest speaker focusing on Outreach and Evangelism for the church community, especially on issues of addiction and trauma.
- Made progress on identifying a business option to produce profit to help fund a church planting effort. Benefit Twice is a retail store option which purchases and sells returned and overstocked items from Sam's Club, Costco, and a few other big box stores. The products are primarily apparel, mixed with other consumer goods. All items are new, and prices are highly discounted from their original prices. The plan is to start a 501C3 franchise store in the Joliet/Crest Hill/Romeoville/Bolingbrook area in the next 6 months which will support a new church start.
- Sponsored funding scholarships for parent and potential parent churches in the Chicago area to attend the Chicago Exponential Conference in Naperville, IL.
- Provided monthly coaching for a year for each church who attended the Exponential Conference.
- Any congregation or group can reach out and build relationships with their neighbors and friends using the KEZ BLOCK PARTY TRAILER. The trailer is equipped with grilles, tables, and a gazillion games to turn your average block party into an event the neighbors will never forget. The rental fee for the BLOCK PARTY TRAILER is \$100. Rich Schuler can be contacted for details - rich@calvaryop.org

We celebrate what God is doing in expanding the kingdom through the planting of new churches. Continue to pray for our classis leaders, our church planters, and their families as they are sent into the harvest. Pray that the Lord will protect them in this journey of faith and that they seek the power and presence of the Holy Spirit as they work in a spiritually charged environment.

- **Lilly Grant Project** - As I reported last year, the RCA was awarded a \$1,000,000 grant in early December 2015 from the Lilly Endowment. The purposes and goals of the grant include:
 - Increase awareness about the financial challenges and pressures RCA pastoral leaders face, and the effect of those pressures on pastoral leaders, congregational leaders, and congregations; and in the process, break the "code of silence" that prevents helpful conversation and effective problem-solving.
 - Equip pastoral and congregational leaders in a variety of areas of congregational leadership, including creating cultures of congregational generosity, effective congregational financial management, compensation packages, and budget-building.
 - Equip clergy through training and learning experiences that will increase their skills in personal financial planning, more robust retirement planning, and debt management.
 - Create a Ministerial Excellence Fund of up to \$800,000 (\$100,000 for each of the eight regional synods in the RCA) launched with a proposal for \$400,000 in seed money from the Lilly Endowment; to be matched by gifts totaling \$400,000 from congregations and individuals within the various regional synods, to address pastors' pressing needs, and to help pastors invest more wisely and fully in their future—especially their retirement.
 - Continue building awareness of the financial challenges facing RCA clergy and nurturing donor relationships that will help provide the financial resources necessary to sustain the project after the three-year period ends.

Three out of five classes in our region have decided to participate in the Ministerial Excellence Fund. This fund is to be used for financial challenges and pressures that RCA pastoral leaders face. \$10,000 would be designated for the Synod of Mid-America to each of these three classes to be matched by gifts totaling \$30,000 which equals \$60,000. Inviting churches into learning communities of Creating Congregational Culture of Generosity has been a difficult process. Congregations have not responded to the offer of free e-books, webinars, and church resources on the web as expected.

- **New Thing Classis** - In a special meeting of the Synod Assembly on November 6, 2016, the Regional Synod of Mid-America officially formed a new classis, known as New Thing Classis. The new classis began with three anchor churches including, Calvary Reformed Church, Orland Park, IL; Faith Reformed Church, Dyer, IN; and Living Springs Community Church, Glenwood, IL. The purpose of the classis is the multiplying and reproducing of new churches. New Thing Classis seeks to be exponential in both its disciple-making, and sending capacity. Romans 10:15 says, "**And how are they to preach unless they are sent?**" (Romans 10:15 ESV) This new classis seeks to join God in mission and focus on an intentional church planting movement. The desire of the classis is to be the very presence of Christ in word, deed, and character--through many people in multiple locations doing one thing--living and loving like Jesus. On December 6, 2016, this new classis was launched with a special worship service which was followed by their first organizational meeting.

As part of the transition in response to the changes of Faith Church and Living Springs Church being formed into a new classis, the Illiana-Florida Classis reworked their by-laws and filled in the vacant leadership positions. The Illiana-Florida Classis and New Thing Classis work in partnership in the training and examination of Commissioned Pastors candidates and students pursuing education in seminaries. The Chicago Classis has struggled more in its new identity and purpose as Calvary Church in Orland Park became a part of the new classis. In his President's Report to the Chicago Classis, Steve Orshonsky likened the transition in the classis to Elijah and his young student Elisha having a conversation as they were walking together toward the Jordan River in II Kings 2:8-13. Verse 9 says, *"When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?' 'Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,' Elisha said."* Elisha had spent some time with Elijah and was so shaped and guided by Elisha's spirit, heart, and leadership that he wanted a double portion of what Elijah had. Steve challenged the classis to remember the grace that has been shown to them over the years; remember the spirit of those who came alongside us; remember those who mentored us; and then pass it on to the next generation. He asked the question: We were mentored, but who wants to be mentored by us? Who wants to be like us?

At its winter classis meeting, the Chicago Classis formed a task team to clarify the vision, mission, and structure of the classis. The team has agreed that the Chicago Classis exists to support churches to do ministry in their communities. The work of God in the classis happens through:

- **Strengthening Relationships** - The health of any classis is dependent on the health of its relationships (among churches, leaders and congregations).
- **The Necessity of Communication** - There is a need for consistent, timely and open communication, especially to churches not in the midst of crisis. Improved communication would promote partnership, deepen trust and spark future endeavors.
- **Structure** - It has become clear that care encompasses much of the classis work: care in listening to consistories, care in walking alongside students seeking ordination, care when discovering available resources and funds, care in supporting pastors personal health, family and professional lives, care to walk alongside vacant churches and churches in crisis and care in assessing the health and needs of a congregation.
- **Leadership** - The team identified the need for leadership to help pastors or consistories find resources, connect to regional or denominational programs, answer questions and provide central consistent communication.

The Chicago Classis agreed that the classis would remain as one classis and passed a motion that a task team would be formed to investigate and come back with recommendations of deep change to the structure of Chicago Classis. A report will be given at the Fall Session of the Chicago Classis.

- **Concerns Over the Issue of Human Sexuality** - There are ongoing tensions, frustrations, and challenges over the issue of human sexuality within our denomination and classes in our region. Church leaders in classes continue to discuss, dialogue and pray for clarity and resolution surrounding the issue of human sexuality in the RCA. In his report to the Wisconsin Classis, President Ken Hoogstra says, *"Of course, one of the biggest stress points in our Classis relates to the growing divide within our denomination over gay marriage and human sexuality, and our denomination's response to those issues. Just last week, we received a request from one of our congregations to transfer out of the RCA, and it's no secret that other churches are having similar discussions. This is causing a significant amount of anxiety and makes one wonder if we will be able to sustain our current Classis structure and leadership in the long run."* He reminds the classis of the words that Paul writes in Philippians 4:6, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* He notes that the Greek word for "anxious" has a connotation of being distracted. In other words, we should not let the anxiety we may be feeling distract us from the ministry to which God has called us. Ken's advice to the Wisconsin Classis are good words for all of us to remain focused on our vision and mission despite experiencing anxiety and possible change. Our hope is that whatever happens our sovereign God directs the path forward.

- **Gospel Alliance** - A group of like-minded kingdom pastors and leaders came together in Denver, CO., on March 21 and 22 to affirm their commitment to the centrality of the Word and the supremacy of Christ in all things by living out the gospel in and through our culture. The Regional Executives of four regional synods were invited to this meeting as observers and guests - about 27 conservative church leaders were in attendance coming from New York, California and places in the Midwest. A Gospel Alliance was formed and was identified as: "The Gospel Alliance is a movement of covenant partners who are engaging leaders and communities with the transforming message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in order to make more and stronger disciples." This group of leaders identified: Alliance Essentials, Alliance Distinctives, and Freedom - To Accept without Division - "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things clarity." One of the purposes of the alliance is to strengthen the bonds of conservative pastors and provide a temporary home for churches and pastors considering the possibility of leaving the RCA. My purpose in sharing this information is to make the Synod Assembly and classes aware of what is happening in our region and the RCA. Pray for our denomination and our churches as we journey through this difficult time together.

- **Our Hope For the Future** - In Colossians 3:12-14, the Apostle Paul reminds the church: *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must*

forgive. And above all these things put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (ESV) Like exiled Israel, the church today longs to hear these words from God. As followers of Jesus, we believe that Christ came into this world to bring a new order; to bring redemption, healing, and restoration. We need to hear afresh that God is at work in this world. That means more than just inviting people to a church service. It means that the church is equipped and called to bring reconciliation and restoration to that which is broken, to serve as ambassadors of love, dignity, commitment, communion and grace. David Bosch wrote, "The central theme of our missionary message is that Christ is risen, and that, secondly and consequently, the church is called to live the resurrection life in the here and now and to be a sign of contradiction against the forces of death and destruction."

Do we have that passion, humility and courage to help change the direction of our culture as God envisions it to be? Will we make the time and space to allow the Holy Spirit to do a transforming work in us? Will we invest ourselves in our communities in areas such as business, education, health care, art, politics, and graciously love our community? If this is what God is calling us to, then it means more than merely asking, what kind of church does the world need, but what kind of world is God giving birth to.

Walking Together in Mission,

Wayne Van Regenmorter

General Synod Council Meeting Summary March 14-16, 2017

The General Synod Council (GSC) met on March 14-16, 2017, in Orlando, Florida. The agenda included a number of items that will be brought to the June 8-13 meeting of the General Synod. The following items were discussed at the meeting.

2017 General Synod schedule and agenda reviewed and approved

General Synod 2017 will be held at Hope College, in Holland, Michigan, June 8 to 13. The GSC reviewed the tentative agenda and schedule of the upcoming meeting of the General Synod. The meeting will include time for the Reformation commemoration approved by General Synod 2016, as well as an address by Dr. Richard Mouw, professor of faith and public life at Fuller Theological Seminary. **(See Attached Tentative Schedule)**

Transformed & Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together

GSC heard updates on the progress of Transformed & Transforming through the General Secretary's monitoring reports. Here are some highlights to celebrate of how the RCA congregations and leaders are engaging in Transformed and Transforming:

- 12 leadership collaboratives are meeting with 130 leaders involved in growing in their leadership capacity
- 92 connection events took place this year with 382 churches participating
- 31 learning communities are gathering to equip congregations for mission with 139 churches participating
- 5 leadership communities were launched with 21 churches involved
- The Called capital campaign is 96% completed with the Church Growth Fund generously providing a \$150,000 gift, and a matching contribution of \$100,000 that will help us reach our goal of \$6.5 million dollars if the matching gifts of \$100,000 are raised by General Synod in June
- This has allowed construction to begin on the new DeWitt Ministry Center as part of the Grand Rapids offices
- Over 1100 intergenerational volunteers were deployed locally and globally this year, including eight groups sent to Israel/Palestine to participate in the Peace Project
- 20 congregations were equipped in a focused global mission engagement strategy
- 4 new churches were organized
- 8 FaithWalking retreats
- 6 leadership collaboratives in Women's Transformation and Leadership that have launched
- 5 connection events in local missional engagement
- A three-day disability conference to equip congregations and advocates in partnership with the Christian Reformed Church
- A new Growing Young learning community through next generation engagement and in partnership with the Fuller Youth Institute
- Launching the Reformed Leadership Initiative in partnership with the CRC and creating six new leadership collaboratives with RCA and CRC pastors – one that is Spanish-speaking, and one that is Korean-speaking
- 3 cultural agility learning communities and a mass incarceration event as part of our missional mosaic initiative
- Starting the Urban Ministry Institute in Los Angeles with 20 students in partnership with World Impact
- 96 churches participating in the Ridder Church Leadership Initiative
- RCA churches participating in Transformed & Transforming grew from 392 last year to 443 this year

Jill VerSteege, Director of Transformational Engagement, gave a report on the progress and developments within the Cultivating Transformation in Christ strategic priority area.

Proposed Commission Review Process

The *Book of Church Order* gives the GSC several responsibilities with regard to the commissions, including direct responsibility for conducting a review of every commission once every five years and making a recommendation to the General Synod concerning that commission. The GSC approved a draft process to help guide the GSC in better supporting the work of the General Synod commissions. The General Synod president, GSC moderator, and several commission moderators worked together to help develop the framework of the process. In the proposed process, after reviewing a commission the GSC will decide whether to recommend to the General Synod a continuation, a reconstitution, or a discontinuation of any particular commission.

Five-Fold Test

The GSC engaged in discussion in small groups around the five dimensions of the Five-Fold Test (a tool developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church to help groups, systems, and structures become freer from racism) and ways that GSC members see those dimensions being lived into in their own contexts. The Five-Fold discussion questions were approved:

1) Population

How are we identifying, reaching, and embracing increasing numbers of people among diverse racial and ethnic populations?

2) Participation

Are we intentionally finding ways to engage life together through denominational, classis, and local events, service, and fellowship?

3) Power

Are positions and structures of influence influenced by the perspectives and gifts of diverse populations? (Think of consistories, ministry teams, committees, commissions, boards, task forces, working groups.)

4) Pace-Setting

Having been informed by the additional perspectives, burdens, and gifts that our racial and ethnic diversity bring to us, what new ministry opportunities are we now better positioned to strengthen and initiate?

5) Purposeful Narrative

In what ways do we know and honor our various cultures and traditions? How do we incorporate the stories of new backgrounds into our history? How do all of these streams flow together into one story moving forward, rather than running as parallel tracks?

GSC members were asked to identify a person in their congregation or classis with whom they can commit to having a discussion about how to continue these conversations in their context. On a denominational level there is a greater focus on diversity and ethnicity. On a classis level there is more of a struggle with diversity. How do we find better ways to encourage minorities to participate in the decisions of a classis?

Proposed Alternative Plan for General Synod

Here are some of the proposed changes to the annual General Synod gathering.

1. Approve and communicate to staff, commissions, and institutions a change in the reporting structure at General Synod that includes video reporting. Commissions, institutions, agencies, and councils will continue to submit written reports but will not speak from the platform unless they have recommendations to present. Instead, the standard will be an invitation to submit a brief video report that highlights the body's work over the year and can be used beyond the synod setting. This will include training and resourcing for commission moderators and possibly new commission members at the fall joint GSC/commission meetings.

2. Approve a shorter synod with the goal of moving to five days in 2018 and four days in 2019.

Arrange for a five day synod in 2018 and a four day synod for 2019 that includes the weekend. This may require renegotiating contracts with Hope College for 2019 or may be implemented in 2020. In preparing for joint sessions with the CRC synod in 2018, move away from business and mission conversation to a worship and discipleship event.

3. Actively explore potential venues for General Synod 2020 that are in mid to large size cities. As a denomination seeking to be multi-ethnic and expansive, move synod to larger metro areas, which may move synod to other colleges or hotel venues. If cost is the prohibitive factor, GSC needs to wrestle with what drives Transformed & Transforming goals. Charge staff to make this happen for GS 2020. The image for GS can no longer be a "family reunion" but a Pentecost gathering for all. The General Synod is a fellowship event - a gathering of friendly strangers who are seeking fellowship with one another through the power of the spirit and the bond of Christ.

4. Approve a biennial 2-day (Friday to Saturday) worship, discipleship, and evangelism event adjacent to synod starting in 2019. Charge Tom De Vries with deploying two to three staff to work with us to organize a planning and implementation team. We encourage GSC to invite members to this team who have experience with event planning.

5. Approve the continuation of this team for the next two years (2017-2019), and add a few more people to the team, including at least one additional GSC member. We are committed to consider and plan for changes to the structure and content of General Synod. We anticipate being able to work within the remaining budget from the Biennial Synod Task Force. Adding more a few more people from GSC and the RCA at large will help drive this

Reports From Racial Councils

GSC received encouraging reports from the racial ethnic councils on how they are actively engaging with Transformed & Transforming and working to help the RCA continue to live into a multiracial future freed from racism, and how GSC can continue to support them in their efforts.

GSC officer reports

GSC heard reports from the General Synod president and vice president, the GSC moderator, and the general secretary on their work, travel, and ministry across the RCA. The General Synod president gave GSC an update on some of the things he plans to cover in his report to General Synod 2017.

GSC classis and commission visit reports

GSC heard reports from members on visits made to various classis and commission meetings.

Other business

- The recommendation from RCA staff to GSC is to propose to General Synod a 2018 per-member General Synod assessment amount of \$53.61 which is \$1.38 increase from 2017.
- Dan Gillett was elected to be the new moderator of GSC and Nancy Van Heerde was elected vice moderator beginning July 1, 2017.