The Missional Church: 
A Denominational Case Study

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

How does a denomination reorient itself to a fresh call to mission? One congregation at a time!

That is the surest answer to growing expectations that new missiological imperatives must reshape the life of North American denominations. If mission is to alter the shape and life of the church today, regardless of its polity, that change will be evidenced primarily at the congregational level.

This congregational focus does not relieve other assemblies and denominational structures from the need of mission-mandated change. It demands of them the creation of an intentional and supportive climate. Denominational structures may need to undergo radical change, but those changes can never be the final goal. Rather, they must enable, encourage, and nurture changes which are finally evidenced in the daily life of congregations.

This is precisely the case for the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Among the oldest Protestant denominations in North America, we are deeply imbedded within local subcultures. Yet, our long-term vitality, and perhaps even our survival as a covenanted community of congregations, linked together in mutual accountability through our assemblies, depends upon embracing a renewed call to mission. As always in the church’s life, doing so will disturb our complacency, enliven our theology, challenge our structures, and revitalize our fellowship.

What Has Changed?

RCA congregations are ministering in the midst of dramatic cultural changes. As we approach the twenty-first century, North American culture is characterized by these features:

- It is thoroughly secularized.
- It is dramatically, richly, and irreversibly pluralistic.
- It is comprised of subcultures defined by generations as well as by ethnicity.
- It is shaped by and saturated with electronic information.
- It is spiritually hungry, curious, and open.

In the annual “State of Religion” report required of all RCA classes, the Classis of New Brunswick summarized succinctly the challenge congregations face: “Vast cultural and social changes in North America place the Christian church in
a radically different position from the one it occupied even a generation or two ago.”

The church no longer holds the assured place in society it once had. The 1998 General Synod received a report, “A Revitalized Church for a Renewed Future,” from pastors across the RCA who had gathered over a two-year period to discuss what it takes for congregations to be revitalized in their ministry and mission. Describing the current place of the church within North American culture, and drawing on research by George Barna, the report painted this picture:

- Only 37% of the United States population is in church on any given Sunday morning.
- Christianity on the North American continent is stagnant. In the past decade there has been no net gain in the number of people becoming Christians.
- Only 28% of the population believe churches in their area of residence are relevant.
- Not one county in the United States has a higher percentage of church people today than it had a decade ago.

Extensive work by a variety of researchers and organizations has explored the state of the church within contemporary culture. Recent studies of the dynamics of congregational life by various consultants and sociologists of religion have made four things clear:

- The church in North America is shifting from a majority to a minority position in society.
- Religious values and practices have less effect in shaping the culture(s) of North America.
- The practice of religious faith, through faithful participation in the church and a life of discipleship, is becoming a “counter-cultural” activity in North America.
- The church’s relationship to North American society is now best defined and understood through mission.

All this should help denominations understand more perceptively the missional challenges facing both their congregations, and their denominational structures and programs.

What Does This Mean?

At the recommendation of its president, the Reverend Anthony Vis, the 1997 General Synod adopted the following:

To declare the Reformed Church in America a “missionary denomination” for the twenty-first century; and further,
To declare North America a primary mission field for the Reformed Church in America in the first two decades of the twenty-first century; and further, to encourage every congregation of the RCA to think of itself as a “mission station” and to think of its members as missionaries called to bear witness to the good news of God in Jesus Christ in the midst of a disbelieving culture; . . .

So clear and decisive a declaration should inspire change. And in RCA polity that is the way change best occurs: inspired, envisioned, and encouraged, rather than mandated. Our structure of clearly defined areas of authority within each of our four levels of assemblies—consistory, classis, regional synod, and general synod—as well as the very nature of mission, require this understanding. Mission cannot be legislated; it can only be persuasively instilled throughout our life.

The best, clearest, and most helpful definition of mission I know is this: “Mission is the intentional crossing of boundaries in word and deed with the gospel of the love of God in Jesus Christ.” Thus, mission is more than evangelism, although evangelism is a key component. Mission is holistic, encompassing both what the church does and what it says. Mission is seen as well as heard, and is intentional rather than automatic. It requires a clear commitment and a decisive step.

Crossing boundaries begins with recognizing them. Whether cultural, geographical, generational, economic, linguistic, racial, ethnic, or social, the church is tempted to remain comfortably confined within them. Living within them enables the church to maintain its established structures and patterns, but limits its grasp of God’s love, weakens its witness to the gospel, and diminishes its faithfulness.

The 954 congregations of the RCA are only beginning to understand what it may mean for them to function as “mission stations.” Doubtless, many have not even thought about this; others have but do not understand; some are awakening to the challenge and responding; a few are being dramatically transformed and renewed by a fresh call to be intentionally engaged in mission.

The missiological issues of the church’s life, which have a long and rich history in the RCA, have now come home. This does not at all mean that mission itself for the RCA has retreated to this continent. But the context for mission is now both local and global, and this reality touches every congregation’s life.

This change, if embraced fully by RCA congregations, classes, regional synods, and general synod, is the single most important factor reshaping our denominational life as we enter the twenty-first century. In my judgment, our future faithfulness and fruitfulness depend decisively on embracing this reality. Doing so brings fresh insight to the pressing issues facing both congregational and denominational life. All too often we fail to recognize that many of those issues are at root missiological.
Issues of worship style and liturgy are examples. Few issues foster more tension and contention within today’s consistories. But at the core is really mission, and the relationship of the gospel to particular cultures. For decades, RCA missionaries have struggled to conduct worship in the Reformed tradition within a different, “foreign” culture. All worship uses the tools of culture—language, music, speech, dance, and art—to express praise, confession, proclamation, intercession, and commitment to God. Worship that is thoroughly infused with the style of one culture has difficulty connecting with a sharply differing culture. Yet, attempts to make worship highly contextualized and “relevant” to any one particular culture—whether the Tamil culture of south India, or the X-generation culture of North America—run the risk of compromising enduring marks of the Christian tradition.

These are issues which have long been debated within the historic mission of the Reformed Church. Mission always raises fresh questions of the gospel’s relationship to a particular culture or subculture, once one intentionally and perceptively crosses those boundaries. The change is that today, RCA members struggle with those questions not only in southern Sudan, but also in southern California, northeast New York, and western Michigan.

Questions in the RCA about theological identity also should be understood in light of our missiological setting. Precisely as our culture becomes more deeply pluralistic, pressures to clarify the distinctiveness and identity of the Christian community increase. Again, the issue is put into perspective when viewed missiologically. Even though no easy answers follow, at least we get the questions right. Mission means crossing boundaries; but this is only possible if we begin with a clear understanding of identity. Otherwise we may substitute enculturation for faithful proclamation in word and deed.

The relationship between evangelistic witness and open dialogue with those of other faiths is a growing challenge to the church within North American culture. Members of our “foreign” mission community have always faced this challenge. When missionaries gather there is always intense discussion about our commitment to evangelism and the importance of understanding in depth other living, religious traditions, and about our ability as Christians to engage both in faithful witness to them and genuine dialogue with them.

In response to this challenge, the General Synod’s Commission on Theology has prepared the careful and thorough study paper, “The Crucified One Is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society.” Presented to the 1998 General Synod, it is now circulating among churches for their response. This study recognizes that the questions of our witness and relationship to those of other faiths are no longer confined to debates among missionaries; these issues must now be discussed in consistories as well, for they are encountered concretely in our communities.

Therefore, to approach the twenty-first century declaring ourselves to be a “missionary denomination” and our congregations to be “mission stations,” means that the long-standing denominational, missiological challenges are now
rooted in our congregations. “Mission” becomes the lens through which we view both the structures and priorities of our denomination and the challenges facing our congregations.

What Has Been Done?

The RCA has made a concerted effort to place the changing call to mission clearly before its decision-making bodies—general synod, regional synods, classes, and consistories. The most dramatic example is the Statement of Mission and Vision adopted by the 1997 General Synod. Prepared by the General Synod Council, it has been shared with all congregations, classes, commissions, assemblies, and denominational agencies for their response. Each classis has been requested to prepare specific statements of mission for their congregations in their “State of Religion” report to the 1999 General Synod. To that end, classes are already planning special gatherings to discern the call to mission in their particular context.

The statement begins by declaring that RCA congregations are “called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.” Our identity is found not by holding to our institutional securities, but in discerning and shaping our life according to the presence of Christ in the world. The priority for all RCA assemblies is to “equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.” The statement continues with a vision of what the denomination as a whole (pastors, laity, classes, synods) will look like as we follow our mission. It concludes by picturing how each ecclesiastical assembly will seek to shape its attention in order to live out this vision. Words matter, and these words have the potential to focus our attention and prioritize our energy around God’s call to mission.

Dr. Charles Van Engen, president of the 1998 General Synod, used Acts 1:8 as a framework to guide RCA congregations into concrete commitments to be a “missionary denomination.” Being witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” was applied to challenge them to specific steps of mission both local and global. Starting new ministries to meet needs close at hand, participating in a new “offspring” church start, partnering with other congregations around transformational ministry in the city, and developing a new global partnership for ministry were concrete missiological challenges given to every congregation. Van Engen’s presidential recommendations to the synod gave these goals specific institutional support.

More important, Van Engen proposed a major RCA convocation in the year 2000. The convocation would be the forum for 1,000 to 1,200 members from throughout the denomination to discern the specific shape of God’s call to mission in the twenty-first century.

A retreat for officers and unit directors of the RCA prior to the 1998 General Synod produced a further challenge. Could we radically reshape General Synod itself in the year 2000, making it a unique and historic occasion by holding this
mission convocation as the heart of its own process? Would that dramatic step enable the RCA to enter the twenty-first century with not only a commitment, but also a decisive, long-range plan for living out its life as a "missionary denomination"? That now is the proposal—to hold the most unique General Synod in RCA history in the year 2000 to allow our life to be shaped by God's call to mission.

What Is Already Happening?

The Statement of Mission and Vision has two purposes. The first is to inspire congregations, classes, and other bodies to articulate what the statement means in their setting. That is well underway. Over 400 congregations are using a special video with study guide designed for reflection on what the statement could mean for their ministry. The second is to provide a framework for prioritizing and focusing the resources and programs of the General Synod Council (GSC). That body has already begun the process by formulating goals and plans to that end.

The goal statements are clear and direct: (a) RCA congregations will be at the center of local and global mission; (b) RCA ministers and laity will be equipped to meet the challenges of ministry and mission in the midst of a disbelieving culture; (c) RCA congregations, classes, and ministers will experience a renewed sense of hope and a clear sense of mission as they share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. Implementation strategies underlie each statement.

Specific recommendations have already arisen out of these statements. The Evangelism and Church Development unit, for example, has adopted specific strategies to enable 200 congregations to participate in "church revitalization networks" by the year 2003. It also plans to start 80 new churches by the year 2005. These integrated efforts of outreach, evangelism, congregational revitalization, and new church development project a 10 percent increase in the communicant membership of the RCA by the year 2005.

Central to living out the Statement of Mission and Vision is a new commitment to urban ministry. The GSC has already made this a priority within our mission program by assigning staff, calling forth a city ministries team, and launching a major drive to fund it.

The RCA's racial ethnic councils and the General Synod reorganized their relationship in strategic ways at the 1998 General Synod. Rather than functioning as largely autonomous bodies, the councils' energies and gifts will become more closely related to the overall work of the GSC in such areas as urban ministry, new church development, congregational revitalization, and youth work. Further, a proposed General Synod commission is to hold the denomination accountable to work toward racial justice and build an inclusive fellowship. These steps are crucial if all parts of the RCA are to move together around a common mission.
The GSC has begun to ask how it can evaluate its programs, set goals, allocate resources, and alter its structures to reflect the commitments made in the mission and vision statement. Although some bureaucratic inertia remains to be overcome, the right questions are being asked, and clear directions are being established.

What Needs To Happen?

Fundamentally, becoming a “missionary denomination” entails changing the organizational culture of the RCA. To say it simply, we must learn to look “up and out” rather than “down and in,” in our consistories, classes, and synods. How we function and make decisions needs to be oriented around major, long-term challenges, rather than immediate, internal preoccupations.

That kind of focus requires increased discernment skills. Meetings must become occasions for sharing spiritual journeys, for engaging in biblical reflection, for opening ourselves to hear God’s Spirit move, and for challenging us in fresh ways. The need to redefine what our real “business” is involves developing the trust necessary to delegate administrative matters to others skilled in those areas. That will permit our assemblies to focus on asking what it means to “follow Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

In his presidential report, Van Engen suggested that the role and functioning of our consistories needs reexamination if congregations are to respond to our missional calling. A special group will be convened to explore how such changes might be undertaken, and how they might alter the Book of Church Order.

Van Engen also emphasized that the church’s mission cannot be fulfilled unless the gifts of all persons—and especially the gifts of women—are called forth and fully supported. Whenever the church has been renewed in its mission, the Spirit’s gifts to every member of the body of Christ have been affirmed, often in ways which threaten traditional understandings and structures. The same dynamic will be evident within the RCA.

One of our unfortunate hypocrisies has been to affirm the gifts of women in “foreign” mission undertakings and to restrict them within congregations at home. When viewed from the standpoint of the church’s call to mission rooted within each of our congregations, and reaching out to the “foreign” subcultures now within our own communities, denying the gifts of women to minister in ways in which they hear God’s call seems nothing short of quenching the Spirit. The church deeply needs all whom God has called to offer their gifts in ministry if we are to become a truly “missionary denomination” for the twenty-first century.

Finally, allowing mission to shape the denomination means determining the best allocation of staff and resources. During the twentieth century, denominations in the United States and Canada have developed national staffs (or, for the RCA, a bi-national staff), organized to serve mainly as specialists.
The patterns by which those specialists have carried out mission, witness, advocacy, and education on behalf of congregations are also changing.

In my judgment, to focus on mission is to restore the two proper dimensions of ecclesiology—the church local and the church global. The church “national” is a recent and pragmatic, historical development. A nation, after all, is neither a natural nor biblical context for defining church. Rather, the appropriate frame of reference comes from the local presence and ministry of congregations in a particular setting, and the global connection of churches together in common, “ecumenical” fellowship and mission.

Thus, a “missionary denomination” will find its identity more locally and more globally than nationally. The role of the national staff and organization of such a denomination will not be to serve its own “national” structures, but rather to support the local mission of congregations and to connect the church local with the church global.

National denominational structures properly exist only to “equip congregations for ministry” in their local settings, and enable them to “follow Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.” That is a profound challenge. But finally, these national structures are called to evolve—or perhaps devolve—in both local and global directions, connecting the two together as the “presence of Jesus Christ in the world” so that our denomination—or any other—may reform its life according to God’s missionary calling today.