

Global Vision Team

I. Executive summary

In the past several decades, ethnic minorities in the United States and Canada, with many immigrants among them, are responsible for new CRCNA affiliations, church plants, and congregational growth. Such developments are enhanced by international travel, the worldwide internet, and the spectacular rise of Christianity in the Global South. Together these dynamics create a historic opportunity for the CRCNA, a denomination born and nurtured through immigration, to embrace God’s vision of the church from and for all nations, tribes, and languages. Within this context, in 2022 a cluster of Venezuelan congregations joined Classis California South. Subsequently, the Council of Delegates instructed the general secretary to “gather a discussion group to study the integration of international churches into the composition of the CRC.” The general secretary assembled a binational team of globally experienced and connected CRC leaders (named the Global Vision Team) to develop “a conceptual framework for a global Christian Reformed Church.” The framework would include general principles/models of partnership, shared ministry, organization, governance, and communication to respond to the Council of Delegates’ instructions. This document is the fruit of this work.

The Global Vision Team (GVT) conducted substantial research that is described further in this report. In the process, the GVT discovered that engagement between CRCNA congregations and churches outside North America has already been fruitful. Christian church leaders inside and outside North America are growing through deepened relationships and shared ministry formation. International partnerships have led to church plants and the emergence of new ministry leaders. Many are witnessing the Holy Spirit at work through these associations.

However, this opportunity also poses significant challenges, including physical distance; cultural and language differences; and uncertainties in polity and credentialing. An ever-present concern is paternalism, a legacy of Western mission influence. However, neither CRCNA congregations nor their international partners view these as insurmountable challenges. Instead, the GVT and CRCNA congregations recognize a missional opportunity. To engage it, we need an ecclesiastical framework to foster effective, shared ministry with our historical and current partners.

This partnership must be shaped by biblical values and based on preexisting relationships both between classes and international churches and between the CRCNA and its closest international ecumenical contacts. In time and with focused nurture, these relationships could bloom into a Christian

Reformed ecclesiastical body made up of the CRCNA, its closest international partners, and mature groups of international congregations “incubated” in CRCNA classes.

Through its agencies, institutions, networks, and resources, the CRCNA has much to offer international churches. However, these church relationships will also benefit the CRCNA. Our international partners have tremendous strengths from which the CRCNA can learn about their experience with evangelism, community ministry engagement, and the development of young leaders. While some of our North American congregations face cultural and social obstacles, could it be God’s mysterious calling that the CRCNA invest in a more global future? This report explores the theological bases, core values, and findings from research that can lead to next-step recommendations for the CRCNA.

II. General introduction

For many decades, the Christian Reformed Church has been committed to a “Revelation 7” vision of the church—a body made up of all nations, tribes, and languages.¹ As imperfectly as our denomination has lived out that vision, CRCNA congregations and classes have understood that their *direct ministry* would happen within the national borders of our two countries (the United States and Canada)—that is, in *North America*. This vision led to the establishment of CRCNA agencies and ecumenical committees that have developed deep and fruitful relationships with churches all over the world during the past 120 years. For the most part, churches and denominations outside of North America that were established and supported during past eras of the CRC mission have been connected to the CRCNA ecumenically as churches *in cooperation* or churches *in communion*.²

However, as the CRCNA has become a more ethnically diverse body in North America, the distinction between North America and “everywhere else” has begun to disappear. CRCNA leaders and members have leveraged their deep connections in their countries of origin to plant churches and to engage in ministry outside of North America in the name of the CRCNA. Instead of the historical model of sending missionaries from the “West to the rest,” today’s CRC mission happens “to everywhere from everywhere.” In today’s global world, where ministry can happen through many different mediums and travel is convenient, national borders and geographic distinctions continue to break down, providing new opportunities for mission and ministry.

¹ A good summary of the Christian Reformed Church’s vision may be found in the synodically approved document *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* and in the position statement on race relations found at crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/race-relations.

² For the significance of these ecumenical designations, see crcna.org/eirc/ecumenical-relations/ecumenical-charter.

A. Background narrative: Why now? Why us? Why this project?

1. Why now?

The idea of having churches outside North America affiliated with the CRCNA is not new, but interest in it has been growing. For example, a CRCNA congregation exists in Guam, and CRCNA congregations have existed in Puerto Rico (i.e., territories of the United States). CRCNA churches on the southern border of the United States have reached into Mexico as part of their ministry. Contained in this report is an account of the relationship between Classis Pacific Northwest and a cluster of churches in Seoul, South Korea. However, the occasion for this reflection is the ecclesiastical relationship, established two years ago, between Classis California South and a growing group of congregations and pastors in Venezuela.

2. Why us?

Classis California South and the Latino networking group known as Consejo Latino have been working together to enfold the Venezuelan churches into the life of the classis and the denomination. Though rewarding, this work has not been easy because the CRC is essentially structured to be a North American denomination (see section VI below). As an ecclesiastical leadership body, synod and the COD are responsible to prayerfully discern a vision to steward this organic movement in our CRCNA classes. In its May 2022 meeting, the Council of Delegates instructed the general secretary to “gather a discussion group to study the integration of international churches into the composition of the CRC” (minute COD 6206).

3. Why this project?

In its instruction, the Council of Delegates essentially requested the general secretary to put together a globally experienced and connected team of leaders to assist the COD in prayerfully discerning a *vision* for a Christian Reformed Church *not constrained by our national boundaries*. Such a vision could *guide* further discernment and practical developments. Without such a vision, it is possible that the CRCNA and its international partners could be pulled into some of the familiar pitfalls of intercultural relationships mentioned below (see sections V-VI). Conversely, without a vision, the CRCNA could entirely miss out on developing ecclesiastical relationships outside of North America and on the blessings this could represent to our North American churches and our international partners.

B. Committee mandate, composition, and process

The general secretary assembled a binational team of globally experienced and connected CRC leaders—the Global Vision Team (GVT). The team included a leader from Classis California South, two former mission workers, a leader of an immigrant ministry, a local church pastor, a leader of a global ministry network, the Calvin University president, and the general secretary. The general secretary mandated the team to develop “a conceptual framework for a global Christian Reformed Church. The framework would

include general principles/models of partnership, shared ministry, organization, governance, and communication and report back to the Council of Delegates at its winter meeting (February 2023).”

With regard to the mandate, it is important to note what is *not* included. First, the team’s mandate does not include *specific* recommendations on governance, polity, staffing, or organizational development for a global Christian Reformed entity. If the Council of Delegates and synod desired to move in that direction, more focused work would need to be done. Second, the team’s mandate is *not ecumenical*, meaning that whatever framework it suggests to the COD, it must be of a different nature than the CRCNA’s current church-to-church relationships and denominational networks (which are managed by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Committee, a standing committee of synod).³ These relationships are essentially *networking* in nature.

The GVT’s area of investigation includes the following: (1) interviews with two CRCNA classes, Classis California South and Classis Pacific Northwest; (2) research into synodical documents of previous conversations on this topic (especially as they relate to the “Seoul Cluster”); (3) interviews with the Venezuelan congregations and a collection of closely connected denominations outside North America in order to gauge their interest in a global CRC; (4) extensive conversations and interviews with denominations similar to the CRCNA that have global communions (for this purpose the GVT engaged a contracted researcher), with a special focus on two denominations: the Reformed Church in America and the Seventh Day Baptist denomination; (5) a fairly limited engagement with scholarly literature on this subject.

III. Theological perspective—Christians as “Body of Christ”: A biblical approach to global mission

We live in a world full of division and conflict. Now more than ever, as followers of Jesus, we need to be “salt and light” (Matt. 5:14-16). Unfortunately, children of God are not immune from fear and division; we also tend to stay within our social, spiritual, and ethnic boundaries. However, Scripture repeatedly reminds us to unite with fellow believers from all sectors of humanity.

In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul stresses that our **unity** through faith in Christ breaks down racial, ethnic, social, and gender barriers (Gal. 3:26-28). In contrast to the world around us, Christ calls us to create communities where everyone is welcome and appreciated. By being united with Christ, we are united with each other, so we recognize that our unity is a gift of God’s grace in Christ, not something we create (Eph. 4:4-6). But we realize that this unity can fade and be broken. Thus, in the same breath in

³ For more information about this committee, see crcna.org/eirc.

his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, Paul expounds on the body analogy to describe our unity, *diversity*, and *interdependence* as God’s people. In his use of this analogy in his letters to the Corinthians and Romans, Paul seems to have mainly local groups of believers in mind. In his letter to the Ephesians, however, he appears to have the global church in mind as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:3-6, 16). This provides a strong basis for recognizing our interdependence as God’s people—not only locally but also internationally.

Many insights regarding unity and collaboration come to expression in these passages, including the following:

- While diversity can tend to divide us, it has great potential to unite us.
- God has designed the church as the body of Christ to function interdependently; every member *needs* all the other members and *is needed by* all the other members.
- God designed his church to function synergistically, both locally and globally.
- *Mutual servanthood* fosters love, maturity, doctrinal stability, and growth as everyone uses their gifts in the faith community.
- Genuine, loving *personal relationships* provide the fertile ground needed for such mutuality.
- Serving one another through the use of our differing gifts honors God.

This spirit of unity and interdependence leads us to strive toward more visible and functional engagement with churches in other parts of the world. We need them, and they need us. This will require the *transformation* of our hearts and lives (Rom. 12:1-3) and even our church structures, and this will in turn produce transformation, especially in our relationships with the body of Christ globally. Our aim is not to resolve all of the divisions in Christ’s church. But by engaging more meaningfully with Reformed groups on other continents, we envision making significant strides toward experiencing the unity Jesus has in mind for his people.

IV. Core values that guide growing ecclesiastical relationships

These core values were distilled from biblical-theological reflection and in conversation with CRCNA classes, denominations outside North America, and the Venezuelan group of churches.

Unity

In Christ we are one body with his followers all over the world. Living out that unity is not optional. God is leading us toward experiencing that unity more visibly and functionally, especially with groups outside of North

America that share our Reformed faith. The increased global interaction of our times through trade, media, the internet, and migration provide opportunities for greater integration with believers in all parts of the world (see John 17:22-23; Eph. 4:3-6).

Diversity

The body of Christ is an amazing global mosaic of races, cultures, and languages. This diversity tends to place barriers between us, but embracing it through stronger engagement with groups around the world will benefit all of us. As we increase our interaction with these groups, we want to honor the uniqueness of each group, including their historical backgrounds, cultures, resources, and needs—along with the challenges and opportunities of their contexts (see Rev. 7:9-10; 21:24-26).

Personal relationships

Global partnership involves cultivating deep, genuine, personal relationships with fellow believers on other continents. It will also require structures, goals, plans, results, reporting, and regulations; but the relationships must always be prioritized, and they must be marked by mutual servanthood, learning, and respect (see 1 Cor. 13; Rom. 12:9-16).

Interdependence

The predominant metaphor for the church in the New Testament is the human body, in which every part is needed and every part needs all the others. We seek to genuinely and practically experience that interdependence with groups in other parts of the world. We and all these groups need each other in order to fulfill the mandates Christ has given us. As we share our God-given resources, we want to avoid past patterns of paternalism, self-sufficiency, and dependency through genuine partnership and multilateral cooperation (see 1 Cor. 12:14-16, 21-23; Eph. 4:15-16).

Mutual servanthood

We want to promote genuine mutuality as servants of each other in Christ and to avoid any kind of domination of one group over another or one person over another. This mutuality will be characterized by listening to and learning from one another, advocacy for equality and dignity, and accountability that will lead us toward intergenerational respect and shared leadership (see Matt. 20:25-28; 1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Transformation

Embarking on greater global engagement will require much change on our part. We will need to give up things we feel are important, including some of our patterns and structures. We are entering unknown territory, and there aren't many existing patterns to follow. So we will need to be open to God doing something new—toward transformation, constantly guided by the Spirit (see Matt. 9:16-17; Rom. 7:6).

V. Research methodology and data analysis

One aspect of the Global Vision Team’s research focused on other Reformed denominations with which the CRCNA has a relationship. Twenty people from eight denominations were interviewed to glean perspectives of their current level of relationships with other entities (denominations and other networks or communions) and their attitudes regarding a global Christian Reformed Church.⁴ These denominations range in size from under 1,000 members to almost a million, as shown in the table below. When compared to the CRCNA, with 1,053 congregations and 204,664 members (as of 2022), most of these denominations are smaller, with the exception of the CRC of Nigeria.

Denomination / group of churches	# of congregations	Approx. # of members	# of people interviewed	WCRC member?
AFRICA				
Christian Reformed Church in Sierra Leone	62	6,000	1	No
The Christian Reformed Church in Sierra Leone developed from the work of CRWM and CRWRC missionaries, starting in the late 1970s and continuing until the early 1990s, when war disrupted most ministries. CRWM/Resonate returned in 2001 in partnership with the Reformed Church of Zambia, and later with the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria. The CRCSL is approaching 80 congregations with about 6,000 attendees. The denomination is a <i>church in cooperation</i> with the CRCNA.				
Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria	180	200,000 communicants 500,000 worshippers	2	No
The Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN) developed from the work of CRCNA missionaries, starting in 1919. Synod 1939 of the CRCNA officially took ownership of the work with CRWM/Resonate, later joined by CRWRC/World Renew, continuing ministry involvement to the present. The CRCN has over 284 ordained ministers, 154 congregations (most with additional preaching centers), and at least 200,000 members. The denomination is a <i>church in communion</i> with the CRCNA.				

⁴ These are churches that maintain a relationship with the CRCNA and responded to our request for an interview.

Denomination / group of churches	# of congregations	Approx. # of members	# of people interviewed	WCRC member?
Christian Reformed Church of Liberia	11 churches; 17 preaching stations	920*	1	No
The Christian Reformed Church of Liberia (CRCL) was organized in 2018 by several Liberians who had different connections to CRCNA ministries. The CRCL may have up to 10 congregations and 1,000 attenders. The denomination is working toward <i>church in cooperation</i> status with the CRCNA.				
Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (Nigeria)	132 local church councils	100,000	1	Yes
The Reformed Church of Christ for Nations (RCCN-Nigeria) formed in 1973 when most Kuteb-speaking members of the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria split away and established their own denomination. The RCCN has about 74 congregations and 100,000 members. The denomination has <i>church in communion</i> status with the CRCNA.				
CARIBBEAN				
L'Église Chrétienne Réformée d'Haïti (CRC in Haiti)	60 churches; 15 mission stations	3,500	3	Yes
This denomination was founded in the late 1980s by repatriated Haitian members of the CRC of the Dominican Republic and became a partner of Christian Reformed World Missions (Resonate), which it remains currently. Members of this denomination are planting churches in the Orlando, Florida, area today. Currently this denomination has <i>church in cooperation</i> status with the CRCNA.				
Iglesia Cristiana Reformada en Cuba (CRC-Cuba)	9 established; 26 in formation	771 baptized members; 562 congregants; 261 visitors	3	No
The CRC-Cuba formed in the 1940s through the work of Bessie Vander Valk, a member of Bethel CRC in New Jersey. The church was officially established in 1951, received financial aid from LaGrave Avenue CRC in				

Denomination / group of churches	# of congregations	Approx. # of members	# of people interviewed	WCRC member?
Michigan and was recognized as a CRCNA mission in 1959, shortly before the Cuban revolution. Missionaries left in 1960. Governmental opening in the 1990s allowed for North American visitors, and Resonate and World Renew partnered with the CRC-Cuba for a time, but current relationships are primarily with LaGrave Avenue CRC and Classis Alberta North. This denomination has <i>church in communion</i> status with the CRCNA.				
Iglesia Cristiana Reformada en República Dominicana (CRC in the Dominican Republic)	140 established; 55 missions	15,000	3	No
<i>Back to God Hour</i> (ReFrame) listeners in the Dominican Republic requested visits from CR World Missions (Resonate) staff in the 1970s, which led to the establishment of a denomination. The partnership has matured, and the CRC in the Dominican Republic has developed Indigenous ministries while maintaining a connection to Resonate. The denomination has <i>church in cooperation</i> status with the CRCNA.				
ASIA				
Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines (CRCP)	56 organized; 42 emerging	6,371 communicants; 1,861 non-communicants	6	Yes (inactive)
The CRCP developed from the work of CRWM missionaries, starting in 1962; and the work with CRWM/Resonate and CRWRC/World Renew continued until 2012. The CRCP's 98 congregations are located on five major islands. The denomination is organized into ten classes and has <i>church in communion</i> status with the CRCNA.				

* They consider a church to be a community of 40-50 baptized believers. LTG calculation: $(11*45) + (17*25) = (495+425) = 920$

In most cases, the relationship of these denominations with the CRCNA has been through missionaries of Resonate Global Mission and World Renew. When the missionaries were no longer in the country, the lack of personal contact had a negative impact on the relationship.

Most of the churches maintain relationships with other denominations within the country and encourage local congregations to maintain local relationships. Some of the denominations also have active relationships with

mission, development, and justice organizations. Seemingly in contrast, most of the churches have little involvement with the Ecumenical and Inter-faith Relations Committee of the CRCNA, and some have had little to no awareness of it. Similarly, most of the churches are not members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches,⁵ and the leaders who were consulted have little or no awareness of its existence.

VI. Other Denominational Frameworks

(based on findings of our contracted researcher, Rev. Dan Roels)

Research was conducted to see what we could learn from denominations that have global ecclesiastical communions. The research included consulting published materials especially as it relates to the Anglican Communion and Methodism. However, the primary research focus was on interviews of denominational leaders from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Assemblies of God, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Reformed Church in America, the Landmark Baptists, the Seventh Day Baptists, and the Reformed Church in South Africa. A leader of the World Communion of Reformed Churches was also consulted.

The “global communion” models used by these various denominations included aspects of the various frameworks discussed below: a single global CRC denomination, a network, a CRC global partnership, and churches outside of North America affiliating with the CRC. However, Methodism, Assemblies of God, and some Baptist groups are too unlike the CRCNA to be very helpful for our purposes (although the researcher did gain a few insights from them that he included in his report).

Special focus was given to the Reformed Church in America and Seventh Day Baptists, which are more analogous to the CRCNA but have more global engagement than we do.

The Reformed Church in America (RCA),⁶ a Dutch immigrant denomination founded in the 1600s, is now a diverse body with many congregations outside North America. The RCA has two international classes. The Classis de las Américas was founded in 1998 and now incorporates churches in Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, Chile, Kenya, Nepal, and other countries. It focuses on discipleship and leadership training. Rev. Andrés Serrano is the leader. The Classis de las Naciones was founded in 2020, with similar emphases, and it has a flexible polity for international groups while using the RCA polity as a template. Rev. Chad Farrand is a key leader.

⁵ The World Communion of Churches is a global ecumenical body to which the CRCNA belongs and in which the CRCNA played an instrumental role in forming.

⁶ The RCA is a *church in communion* with the CRCNA, and the two denominations have had historically close relations. The CRCNA was established after an 1857 split from the RCA.

The Seventh Day Baptist (SDB) World Federation has roots in seventeenth-century England, with a dash of Calvinist influence. This church is not connected with the Seventh Day Adventists. The federation was founded in 1965 and has networks around the world, the biggest of which are certain national ones in Africa. Rev. Carl Greene is the general secretary of the U.S. and Canada network.

The RCA and the SDB face five major challenges in their global relations:

- differences among the various countries in theological education and in the credentialing of ordained leaders
- difficulties in coordinating ministry globally
- negative power dynamics, especially from past patterns of paternalism and colonialism
- differences in how various cultures make decisions
- the lack of a working international polity model

Our contracted researcher outlined helpful responses to these challenges (the full report is available from the Office of General Secretary upon request).

These findings would give us serious pause in considering a single global CRC denomination. Challenges 2, 3, and 4 could also present difficulties for cooperation along the lines of our other framework options. Among the researcher's suggested responses to challenges, the following will especially be helpful, whichever option the CRCNA chooses:

- flexibility on all accounts, especially with regard to structures, polity, and decision-making approaches
- clarification of boundaries for all entities (national, regional, local)
- setting of new precedents to reverse unhealthy patterns of the past
- constant prioritization of people and relationships (even when it's time consuming)
- setting of clear rules about financial resources and contributions
- adjustment of decision-making processes by using approaches such as side forums, recognizing the significance of silence, informal conversations, and consensus models
- being open to something new that God will do

VII. Perspectives of CRCNA classes and related churches

Classis California South

One of the principal areas of the Global Vision Team's investigation and discernment was learning from Classis California South and its engagement with the Venezuelan congregations. The connection developed by California South with the Venezuelan churches is the fruit of a long and intentional period of growth and reflection in the classis that began six years ago with a sense of unease about how the classis was functioning (characterized as "on life-support"). With the assistance of the denomination's classical renewal program, Classis California South began to dream and pray about a

better future. As classis leaders asked, “What is our purpose?” they recognized the rich opportunity of its diverse composition (about half of the congregations in the classis are Caucasian, and about half are Korean, and several Latino congregations complete the body with them). Classis leaders also began to prioritize leadership training and discipleship (e.g., a commissioned pastor training program). Under the shepherding of several key leaders, the classis engaged with its key Spanish-speaking leaders who had connections in Columbia and Venezuela.

Through this critical relationship, the classis got to know a cluster of churches in Venezuela that are Reformed in persuasion and have a strong sense of community mission and outreach. This new connection energized the classis, particularly young leaders seeking evidence of God’s direction. The classis voted to accept a handful of these congregations into fellowship. Then the unexpected happened — three key classis leaders departed (two died unexpectedly, and a third moved on to different employment). The remaining leaders struggled to retain the momentum that had developed around the relationship with the Venezuelan congregations.

Over the past six months, God has been helping Classis California South to recover that ministry momentum. The classis is in regular contact with twenty Venezuelan churches and is planning to receive a new cohort of its leaders as pastors this spring. The classis’ Hispanic leaders (some of whom are part of the Consejo Latino networking group) have been busy training and supporting the Venezuelan leaders and their churches. There has been some difficulty around language, complying with Church Order, and organization, but the classis is moving forward. Here are a few lessons that the classis has learned:

- Developing relationships with churches outside of North America requires vision and the availability of leaders who will prioritize it.
- Don’t underestimate the cultural and organizational challenges of nurturing churches outside of North America. Videoconferencing can work well, but nothing substitutes for face-to-face relationship building.
- The global nature of ministry presents a great opportunity for a classis to reach out within and beyond its borders — we can both send and receive missionaries to and from other denominations and receive members from beyond our borders.
- With its biblical focus, Reformed doctrine is attractive where theologies that are not biblically rooted tend to hold sway — especially in parts of Latin America.
- We in the CRCNA have much to learn from other contexts that can greatly enrich us, and engagement with churches in other countries can reinvigorate us.
- A North America-based classis can provide an opportunity to support international churches, but eventually these churches outside

North America need to develop as a group (possibly becoming their own classis).

- Churches outside North America don't want to be dependent (financially, theologically, etc.); rather, they want to grow and learn with North American churches.
- The progress in partnering with international churches feels slow to leaders outside North America.

The Venezuela churches

The cluster of churches in Venezuela has twelve organized churches and twenty emerging churches spread across three states. With the support of Consejo Latino (the CRCNA Latino networking group) these networked congregations are legally recognized as the Christian Reformed Church of Venezuela. They are attracted to Reformed theology and the CRCNA because of their strong alignment with a worldview that integrates faith and life, especially as it relates to "holistic mission" (the union of gospel proclamation and concrete efforts to address material needs). There is one other Reformed presence in Venezuela—a group of Presbyterian churches—but affiliation was difficult because of different perspectives related to government involvement.

This group of churches participates in multiple local fellowships, such as the Evangelical Council of Venezuela, allowing them to form working partnerships, especially related to social-justice issues. Through a relationship with Mirtha Villafane (on behalf of Classis California South), they were introduced to the educational resources from the CRCNA, which their leaders have used to train others. Their keen desire for more training—for leaders and all members—has contributed to their desire to be part of Classis California South. They appreciate the relationship and the potential for mutual benefit but have found it difficult to navigate the complexities of classis, polity, and denomination (including agencies and offices). At the time of this writing, Classis California South aims to ordain a group of Venezuelan leaders in its winter/spring 2024 classis meeting.

Classis Pacific Northwest and the Seoul Cluster

Prior to Classis California South's engagement with churches outside of North America, Classis Pacific Northwest (PNW) had started similar work through the Seoul Cluster, an effort toward engaging Korean pastors and congregations who had shown interest in Christian Reformed Church doctrine and polity.

In 2014, Rev. Bomsu Kim (Seattle Dream Church) shared the story of Jaehun Shim, a former student who had attended Seattle Dream Church and had since moved back to Korea. Jaehun wanted to serve a church similar to Seattle Dream Church with a Reformed doctrine and polity but could not find one in Korea. Upon consultation with the CRCNA executive direc-

tor at the time and the head of the Candidacy Committee, Classis PNW decided to support Jaehun through ordination and entry into the CRC through Church Order Article 23. In fall 2014, Classis PNW decided to support this initiative, giving it the name *Seoul Cluster*, with the goal of ordaining ten pastors based in Korea serving ten CRC churches located in Korea. These pastors and their churches would be part of Classis PNW. Classis PNW did not regard the geographical distance to be a problem because they already had experience associating with multiple churches located outside of the Seattle area (Anchorage).

Along with Jaehun, two more Korean pastors were ordained through Church Order Article 23. Before long, however, the Seoul Cluster became “suspended” as a result of misunderstanding between Classis PNW, which saw the Seoul Cluster as an opportunity for church renewal, and other Korean pastors, who saw the Seoul Cluster as sending the wrong message to the Presbyterian churches in Korea, with which many of them had connections.

In spring 2023, Bomsu Kim visited the three pastors in Korea who were ordained through the Seoul Cluster. In doing so, Classis PNW confirmed its commitment to ordain ten pastors and to start ten congregations in Korea.

Some of the gleanings from the Seoul Cluster experience are as follows:

- Having churches in Anchorage (outside of the geographical vicinity of classis) allowed the classis to be more creative and to consider a Seoul Cluster.
- Classis PNW wanted to support a pastor within classis who had a vision for church renewal. Rev. Gilbert Kim, a pastor in Classis PNW (current Korean stated clerk of classis) leads Didachem Ministries, a ministry based in Vietnam and sharing the gospel through teaching English. Even amid financial difficulties, Classis PNW continues to support this ministry both financially and in prayer. This helps to foster cross-border relations in sharing the gospel.
- Work that expands beyond the physical boundaries of the classis is built on relationships, at times taking precedence over rules. Classis PNW seeks to build on present relationships.
- In addition to language and culture differences, accountability is a challenge as communication with the Seoul Cluster churches occurs through one person (Bomsu Kim).

VIII. Potential frameworks for CRC global partnerships

In interviews with leaders of Reformed denominations outside North America (see section V) our Global Vision Team asked participants about their group’s level of interest in “a newly organized global CRC, a brand-new global body.”

Interviewees from all the groups expressed interest in this. Some expressed concern about maintaining local autonomy, and thus would prefer some

kind of partnership that would not involve becoming a single global denomination. Others seemed to be comfortable with the concept of being one global denomination. This process creates several dynamics in seeking a design for the future, and with those dynamics in mind, we propose the four options that appear in the table below. Virtually all of these options would require greater coordination between the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee and the classes and any new entity or structure that would be developed.

Due to the mandate from COD (“study the integration of international churches into the composition of the CRC”), the Global Vision Team focused on developing “a conceptual framework for a global Christian Reformed Church.” For this reason one option the GVT did not extensively consider was keeping the “status quo” (i.e., not providing any assistance in integrating international churches into CRCNA classes). While there could be some upsides to the status quo, the GVT noted that the COD and Classis California South have requested assistance in processing the opportunities and challenges in supporting churches from outside North America that want to join the CRC.

Note: By proposing potential frameworks below, there is no suggestion that the CRCNA should quickly move ahead with any one framework (or a hybrid). The process of connecting CRCNA churches and classes with congregations and denominations is one based on relationship and mutual interest. However, for those churches outside North America who have already affiliated with the CRCNA, it is necessary to discern a general direction and to begin making provisions for matters such as polity, organization, mutual sharing, and so on in order to avoid confusion, unmet expectations, and unnecessary conflict. Finally, it is important to note that these potential frameworks are not necessarily *mutually exclusive*.

Description	Pros	Cons
<p>A. One Global CRC Denomination</p> <p>A worldwide Christian Reformed denomination with common confessions, a single polity, standard processes, integrated decision making, similar frameworks for accountability, and shared resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds on missionary ties of the past. • Shared Reformed polity and theology could unify. • There is opportunity for diversity and cultural exchange between churches and classes. • Would make our unity in Christ more visible and functional. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several closely related denominations are not interested in this because they feel a need for local autonomy. • Huge challenge in building contextual processes that could work for all churches (pastor credentialing, Church Order, governance, finance, etc.) • Danger of churches in one or two countries dominating

Description	Pros	Cons
<p>B. A Network</p> <p>A coming together of autonomous entities because of something shared. A shared history with many potential groups and shared confessions, theological convictions, and worldviews provides a basis for networking. The great diversity among potential partners provides rationale for sharing resources and learning from one another. A shared website (and possibly a shared magazine) would enhance networking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserves autonomy, less likely for one partner to dominate • Provides paths of engagement for ministry agencies/institutions of the CRCNA and network partners • Path for mutual sharing, learning, resources, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion with multilateral ecumenical relationships like the World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Reformed Fellowship, etc. • Relationships could become loose if structure is lacking. • May not provide the unity we aspire for.
<p>C. Churches outside of North America affiliating with the CRCNA</p> <p>Reformed congregations or groups of congregations outside North America may wish to affiliate with a CRCNA classis for various reasons. Typically this develops through personal connections over time. Normally churches or groups of churches that already belong to denominations would be discouraged from joining the CRCNA. The affiliation of a group of churches in Venezuela with Classis California South is</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reformed congregations outside of North America lacking a Reformed denomination in their context would be nurtured and strengthened. • CRCNA classes can experience enrichment and renewal through such a relationship. • Growth and multiplication of Reformed churches outside of North America • This affirms the current direction for classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language, distance, financial, and cultural challenges of relating between the CRCNA and churches outside North America. • May be hard to coordinate with existing CRCNA agencies and institutions who might not easily connect to the churches. • Challenges to polity (credentialing, Church Order, etc.) • May inhibit affiliating churches from connecting in their own context. • Risk of confusion as global engagement becomes a purview of the classes and not just the denomination and its agencies.

Description	Pros	Cons
<p>a current example of this option. The goal of this option would be to "incubate" or support churches in a classis for a time. At some point, churches outside North America would form their own classis and perhaps eventually become a member of a Global CRC ecclesiastical body.</p>		
<p>D. CRC Global Ecclesiastical Partnership/Entity</p> <p>Denominations from various countries form a multilateral ecclesiastical partnership structure for deepening fellowship, learning from each other, sharing resources, and doing joint ministry. The CRCNA would probably play a leading role in initiating the partnership, but all partners would have equal status. This would differ from a network in that it would have some clearly defined (and limited) partnership, authority, and accountability structures. Members would maintain their individuality but would share some common identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuality and shared identity provide a level of autonomy and collectivity for the long term. • Polity and legal issues are more manageable. • Relationships and joint ministry between agencies and institutions in the member denominations are encouraged where possible. • Opportunities for interdependence through sharing resources, with all members contributing. • The ecclesiastical entity grows in stages, possibly through engagement with classes and regional bodies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building cross-cultural relationships (esp. trust) is essential but takes much effort. • Developing authority and accountability structures would be time intensive. Some founding documents and procedures would be required. • Maintaining accountability would be difficult. • Challenge of resource sharing in which there is economic imbalance between members

IX. Conclusion

The goal of this report is to cast a vision for a deeper global engagement between the CRCNA and its most significant ecumenical relationships. This research demonstrates what many in Christian leadership have observed: increased immigration/migration and global connectivity (travel, internet, communications, and media) have aligned to produce what is almost certainly an unprecedented opportunity for mission and ministry in North America and around the world. Many, if not most, other North American denominations are currently working to take advantage of this situation.

It would be easy for our committee simply to highlight the opportunities for international churches (like those in Venezuela) and denominations to benefit from the agencies, institutions, networks, and resources developed by faithful generations of CRCNA folks. But that would only be part of the story. Perhaps the greatest benefit in deepening our ecclesiastical relationships would accrue to the CRCNA churches and classes themselves. Our international ecclesiastical partners have tremendous strengths in areas where our denomination has shown persistent weaknesses, such as evangelism, community ministry engagement, and developing young leaders. This report has presented a vision for a deeper global engagement that would benefit both CRCNA churches and their partners outside North America. Could it be God's mysterious calling for our denomination to invest in a global future even while our churches in North America face cultural and social obstacles?

This report does not minimize the significant challenges of charting the next steps of our global vision, however. The direction would require a significant investment of collective energy and resources in a time when many churches are stepping back from supporting our denomination. Further, this would require us as a denomination to develop new ecclesiastical procedures for credentialing pastors and for affiliation with international churches. And classes would have to commit to developing their own vision and communication pathways to accommodate and pursue global opportunities. Finally, it would take all CRC folks in the pulpits, pews, agencies, and institutions to adopt the countercultural values expressed in section III above to avoid mistakes from the past.

X. Recommendations

The Global Vision team thus provides the Council of Delegates with the following recommendations:

- A. That the COD endorse the revised Global Vision Team report and forward to Synod 2024 for its adoption as a guide to CRCNA classes that are in conversation with congregations outside North America desiring to affiliate with the CRCNA.
- B. That the COD recommend that synod adopt the following instruction:

The Office of General Secretary will establish a “Vision Implementation Team” made up of diverse members from the CRCNA and its international partners. The team will have the following mandate:

1. To immediately make an inventory of resources (people, material resources, etc.) that can be mobilized and made available to classes and congregations considering affiliations outside North America.
 2. To dialogue with (a) CRCNA agencies and institutions, (b) CRCNA classes, and (c) international churches connected with the classes to identify concrete barriers and opportunities to build the mutually edifying ecclesiastical relationships described in the Global Vision Team report. The Vision Implementation Team will occasionally report to the COD results of this work, including findings and proposals and/or projects (if any).
 3. To recommend to the Council of Delegates and to synod any appropriate changes that might be needed in CRCNA polity, governance, and structure to support such relationships in light of the work in B, 2. Recommendations would be presented to the Council of Delegates by (if not before) its winter 2027 meeting for adoption at Synod 2027.
 4. To converse with CRCNA-affiliated churches outside North America and interested international denominational partners with a view toward developing a CRC Global Ecclesiastical Partnership/Entity. Such an ecclesiastical partnership/entity would have a clear and limited mandate, authority structures, and pathways of collaboration (see framework D in section VIII above). Such an ecclesiastical partnership/entity would eventually house on equal footing the CRCNA, other international denominational partners, and groups of international congregations “incubated” in CRCNA classes. A report with possible recommendations would be received by the Council of Delegates by its winter 2028 meeting and forwarded to synod for information or adoption of any relevant recommendations.
- C. That the COD recommend that synod adopt the following instruction:
With the partnership of CRCNA agencies, institutions, and ethnic ministry networks, classes are encouraged to continue developing their own connections to international churches (based on framework C described in section VIII above) and using the vision developed in this report. Classes are encouraged to periodically share challenges and opportunities related to this effort with the Office of General Secretary.
- D. That the COD recommend that synod affirm the importance of this global vision so that the financial and human resources needed for the continued work of denominational staff, leaders, and volunteers in this effort will be prioritized.

- E. That the COD recommend that synod direct the Office of General Secretary to communicate this global vision to the classes and congregations of the CRCNA and to the international partners who participated in the research of this report, on its behalf.
- F. That the COD recommend that synod grant the privilege of the floor to the chair of the Global Vision Team when matters pertaining to this report are discussed.
- G. That the COD recommend that synod give thanks to the members of the Global Vision Team for their thoughtful and prayerful work in developing a global vision for the CRC.

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