

Outline of the report

I. Introduction

II. Our mandate

III. Context for the problem: Three Christian perspectives

- A. *The story of Scripture: A biblical perspective*
- B. *The story of the church universal: A historical perspective*
- C. *The story of confessions: A theological perspective*

IV. The problem today

- A. *Approaching the modern problem of persecution*
- B. *Defining religion and religious liberty*
- C. *Persecution and religious liberty at home and abroad*
- D. *A snapshot of the CRCNA*

V. Two goals for the CRCNA

- A. *Orienting the church*
- B. *Mobilizing the church*

VI. Recommendations

VII. Conclusion

I. Introduction

The Christian faith was born out of persecution. The story begins even before Christ walked the earth. The ancient Israelites experienced the brutality of violent suppression and displacement because of their identity as God's chosen people. After the New Covenant established through Christ, the early disciples risked their freedom and lives as they struggled to establish the early church in an empire that worshiped another human being as a god. Even as Christianity emerged as the dominant religious faith in Europe, persecution remained a common part of life, sometimes as the result of grievous conflict among Christian groups themselves. During the Protestant Reformation, many of the founders of our own denomination's traditions were forced into exile or prison, and the intended audience of their writing and preaching was often persecuted congregations in their home countries. And we cannot wash over the complicity of many of these Reformation leaders themselves in acts of violent suppression against religious dissenters.

Today the persecution of Christians is a global phenomenon—and a growing problem. In too many places Christians face a daily horror of brutal violence and harassment, either at the hand of the state or by extremists in society. The bloody insurgencies of Boko Haram and al-Shabaab in Africa; the ruthless destruction by Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq; the interreligious conflicts in India and neighboring countries; the struggle of nonregistered Christian communities in China and elsewhere in Asia: these are experiences of tens of millions of Christians throughout the world every day. But even in Western democracies, where legal protections for religious liberty are relatively strong, the threats to faithful presence in society can be quite real, even if they are indirect and less severe. Many Christians in North

America are increasingly anxious about their own religious freedom.¹ All of these concerns cry out urgently for a Christian response.

But *how* should we respond? Here we confront a tension. On the one hand, Christ himself, who suffered and died at the hands of an oppressive government and hostile public, declared the persecuted “blessed” and promised them the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:10). Indeed, we can point to many examples in which persecution appears to have strengthened the church in the long run. On the other hand, the church experiences persecution as an evil that Christians have an obligation to combat. It is a violation of *shalom*, a wrong that diminishes who we are as imagebearers of God. Any effort by Christians to address persecution will need to address this tension between the “blessedness” of the persecuted and the injustice of persecution.

II. Our mandate

We submit this report as a first step in a response by the Christian Reformed Church in North America to the problem of religious persecution and threats to religious freedom across the globe. The specific goals of this report, as overtured by Classis Toronto and mandated by Synod 2013, are as follows:

- a. Provide a Reformed framework that establishes a biblical and theological grounding for religious liberty and the injustice of religious persecution.
- b. Propose individual and group action that empowers the church in our increasingly secularized North American setting to walk alongside and intercede on behalf of those who are subject to religious persecution or denied religious liberty at home or abroad.
- c. Report on [the committee’s] progress to Synod 2015 and provide the completed study to Synod 2016.

(Acts of Synod 2013, p. 641)

The mandate is remarkably ambitious. First, synod asks the committee to cast its vision across the globe, a forthright recognition that geography matters when considering the profoundly varied experience of religion-based conflict. Egypt, Canada, Pakistan, the United States, Nigeria, China—these are very different contexts for the practice of religion and therefore require different responses. Second, synod asks for a biblical and theological grounding for two concepts—religious liberty and persecution—that are themselves deeply contested among theologians, philosophers, and social scientists. Indeed, the second point is related to the first: intellectual disagreements often come to light most clearly when we compare perspectives on liberty and persecution cross-nationally. Consider, for example, that while Anglo-American models of human rights justify a robust response to religious persecution, non-Westerners often reject Western notions of rights as too individualistic, at best, or downright imperialistic, at worst.

While these aspects of the mandate are daunting, it is difficult to see how any serious treatment of persecution could avoid addressing them. And the committee’s initial work confirms Classis Toronto’s sense of urgency. The experience of our own denomination is illustrative. For a denomination of its size, the CRCNA has an unusually large international outreach, with staff in numerous ministry fields throughout the world working with hundreds of

¹ While scholars often use the terms religious liberty and religious freedom in subtly different ways, for the purposes of this report we will use the terms interchangeably.

indigenous ministry partners. In whatever form—traditional evangelistic missions, development work, media ministry—this physical presence has exposed people and infrastructure to threat in many regions that lack robust protections for religious expression. Even in the United States and Canada, where safeguards for religious liberty have been relatively strong, church leaders and ordinary parishioners have been raising alarms about a gradual erosion in both legal protections and cultural tolerance for faithful Christian living.

In this report, the committee hopes to address these challenging aspects of the mandate in a way that both edifies and engages the church. As with any report of this kind, we have had to make choices about points of emphasis, lest we chase intellectual rabbit trails and lose our general audience. (We have provided a companion website to this report to provide deeper analysis and other resources: www.crcna.org/persecution.) While we delve into biblical theology, church history, and confessional frameworks, we have often traded breadth of analysis for a careful focus on what we consider the most relevant ideas and insights. We have also sought to illustrate the realities of persecution and religious liberty by telling the stories of members of the CRCNA both in North America and abroad. Above all, we wish the report to be *useful*. Our recommendations are multifaceted and multilayered, with suggestions for leaders and ordinary members alike.

The committee, which includes academics, clergy, a retired diplomat, and CRCNA ministry partners (some with extensive experience abroad), has met as a whole on three occasions (October 2013, February 2014, and July 2014). We developed a division of labor with several smaller groups working on specific sections through most of 2015, complementing many hours of work by individual committee members. The committee has presented initial findings to CRCNA leaders and outside scholars and practitioners for feedback before issuing this report. Dr. James Payton, Jr., a member of our study committee, also served as a liaison to a special stakeholding organization within the CRCNA, the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee. In addition, Calvin College has supported the work of the study committee by providing research assistance through the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics and through the Center for Social Research. (We thank Calvin students Joshua Nederhood, Jenny Lamb, and Joshua Vanderleest for their capable support.)

The committee quickly recognized that the mandate raises a host of key questions and tensions, including the following:

- What should we do with the overall biblical message—a message Christ himself articulates (e.g., Matt. 5:10)—that persecution can be a “blessing” to believers and the church?
- How does that square with the church’s experience of persecution as an injustice that we have some obligation to combat?
- How do we define persecution and religious liberty?
- How can the church, in contrast to other institutions, confront legal systems or public officials that condone or perpetrate systematic abuse of people of faith? What are the proper limits to those interventions?
- As an organization, are there resources the CRCNA could provide its members and partners—both in North America and beyond—to address their concerns about persecution and religious freedom?

- At a more interpersonal level, how might the church address the conditions for distrust and animosity across and even within faith traditions—conditions that are so often the root of the problem of persecution?
- Does the church have a perspective on pluralism that might help us address the political and social dimensions of persecution?

These are wide-ranging and complex questions, but the study committee has benefited from the fact that the Scriptures and the historical experience of the church provide keen insight into answering them. In section III, we explore three interrelated *contexts* for assessing the problem of religious persecution from a Reformed perspective. The discussion commences from a focused biblical exegesis (III, A), which sets up theological discussions rooted in church history (III, B) and in the Reformed confessions (III, C). Taken together, these approaches—exegetical, historical, and systematic/confessional—provide a framework for the rest of the report.

Section IV of the report tackles the problem of persecution as it is experienced in the world today. We provide working definitions of religion, religious freedom, and persecution, and in light of those definitions we examine how violence and harassment have affected the modern church. We give special emphasis to the CRCNA’s experience in both North America and abroad, using an extensive global survey of the denomination’s international ministry staff as a key piece of evidence.

We conclude with recommendations that are focused on two goals: (1) orienting the North American church around the suffering of brothers and sisters across the globe and (2) mobilizing the church against that suffering (see sections V-VI). We have considered the efforts of other churches and denominations, but we have also noted that those efforts are surprisingly rare. To the extent that we have adapted those peer efforts, we have been mindful of our denomination’s unique global footprint and distinctive beliefs and practices.

III. Context for the problem: Three Christian perspectives

A. *The story of Scripture: A biblical perspective*

We are created for right relationships—relationships with God, with each other, and with the whole of creation. The Bible calls that state *shalom*—a state we come from, and a place we are going to. As our confessions declare, this relational nature reflects our exceptional status as imagebearers of God. (We discuss the confessional tradition in section III, C.)

God created us for these relationships, but the fall shattered them. God intervened to promise redemption, but time would unfold with conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The sweep of the biblical narrative suggests that persecution is one consequence of this loss of *shalom*. At times, the ancient Israelites experienced persecution because they were God’s chosen people, but they also persecuted prophets sent from God to summon them back to faithfulness. Persecution continued and intensified in the New Covenant, as the early disciples struggled to establish the church in the Roman Empire.

Scripture speaks of persecution inflicted on God’s people but also of God’s work of deliverance and even of blessing in the midst of persecution.

While God himself does not send persecution, divine revelation indicates that his redemptive purposes can work *through* it—as embodied and fulfilled in the person of Christ, who suffered and died as a result of the complicity of a Roman authority with the wishes of a hostile crowd.

In the Old Testament, the chief instance of the persecution of Israel is their slavery in Egypt. A new pharaoh, who comes to power after Joseph and his generation die, enslaves the Israelites, working them ruthlessly, and, many years later, when Moses requests that they leave Egypt to worship God, another pharaoh persecutes them even more (Ex. 1:1-5:21). God systematically judges the Egyptians and the gods they worship because of Pharaoh's refusal to grant God's people the religious liberty to serve him. As God himself says, "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD" (Ex. 12:12). God shows that he is sovereign over Israel and over the nations that would harass his people.

But ancient Israel is too often disloyal to God the Redeemer. Again and again God warns the Israelites not to practice the religious rites of neighboring nations that would lead them into idolatry. In the times of the judges and kings, Israel nevertheless turns again and again to idols. While God sends punishment and then deliverance, Israel does not respond with faithfulness. While God sends his messengers, the prophets, to call his people back to him, the people repeatedly refuse to heed, and instead they persecute God's messengers (cf. 2 Chron. 36:15-17). Both Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:12) and the first martyr in the New Testament, Stephen (Acts 7:52), emphasize this sorry pattern.

Along the way in the Old Testament, not only the messengers/prophets of God suffer persecution; so do Israelites who walk in God's ways. Psalmists cry out about persecution they face for fidelity toward God (cf. Ps. 9:13; 69:26; 119:84-85). In captivity and exile, those who remain faithful to God and his commands also experience persecution. When three Hebrew young men refuse to bow to and worship Nebuchadnezzar's image, they are thrown into a fiery furnace. But God protects them dramatically, leading not only to their deliverance but also to a heathen king's confessing God throughout his empire and protecting God's worship (Dan. 3). Further, when Daniel refuses to change his prayer practices because of a repressive religious edict by King Darius, he is thrown into a den of hungry lions. But God protects him, and Darius also confesses God's greatness to the whole of his kingdom (Dan. 6).

Though these are merely foretastes of what Jesus would later accomplish by letting himself be persecuted and crucified, they carry with them Jesus' intention for his followers: the ability to remain faithful in the face of persecution, without bitterness toward persecutors, to help God's name be made known to all peoples.

That is the substance of Jesus' teaching on persecution, when in the Sermon on the Mount he tells his listeners (Matt. 5:10-12):

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.—Matt. 5:10-12

A bit later Jesus adds, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:44-45; cf. Luke 6:27-36). While training the twelve apostles to go out into ministry,

Jesus equips them to endure the persecution to come, knowing that God is sovereign and this life is fleeting: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28; cf. Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:1-2, 23-27).

In the New Covenant, persecution becomes the backdrop for the diffusion and display of the power of the gospel. Consider the contrast that occurs with the coming of the Holy Spirit: at Jesus’ crucifixion, his disciples flee. But, in the Book of Acts, after being fully equipped by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the same disciples face persecution boldly, and the power in them works in others to convey the truth of their message. After Peter and John heal a man lame from birth, Peter seizes the opportunity to preach the gospel, and many who hear him believe his message (Acts 4:4). The Jewish religious leaders arrest Peter and John, and Peter also preaches to *them*. Forbidden to speak in Jesus’ name, Peter and John respond with trust in their Sovereign God: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

In the New Testament, Christ-followers forgive their persecutors, loving their enemies as Jesus has taught (Matt. 5:44; 6:14), a response that eventually transforms not only a people but an empire. This is illustrated beautifully in the story of how Stephen witnesses to the truth about Jesus. While being stoned to death, he responds by forgiving his persecutors: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). And there is no need for violence to force or manipulate conversions, or to bring peace with former enemies. God answers Stephen’s prayer and works within the heart of Saul of Tarsus until Christianity’s earliest and fiercest persecutor acknowledges Jesus as Lord and plants many churches throughout the world of his time (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-31; 11:19-30; 12:25-28:31).

God’s story reveals good even in times of persecution. But the Bible does not leave us with the message that suffering through persecution should simply be endured—even welcomed and encouraged—as a blessing. Especially for those of us who are generally free to practice our faith, our obligation is to use that freedom to seek the restoration of right relationship and to pursue that same freedom for others. The writer of Hebrews prompts us with a two-edged message. He reminds believers of how they had once “endured in a great conflict full of suffering” (Heb. 10:32-38). He calls these believers to maintain their faith in the face of suffering. To the others (like most of us, who are not affected by severe persecution or do not face it directly), the message is “Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3). If we have religious liberty, it is intended to bring about God’s *shalom*, and we are called to extend that liberty to others, even to those who are spread far and wide in other parts of the world.

The author of Hebrews and the apostles all knew that because of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and imminent return of the Son of the Sovereign God, the advance of the kingdom has become possible not only through religious liberty but also in religious persecution. In the spirit of faith, hope, and love, the early church could confidently endure persecution while strengthening each other in love. They could even show kindness and forgiveness to their persecutors to help them “escape from the trap of

the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:26). Today God calls each of us, in our own way, to join the Suffering Servant, to endure persecution with courage, to come alongside those being persecuted, and to make intercession for transgressors, even persecutors (Isa. 53:12).

The Bible's final book indicates that persecution will be the lot of God's people until the end of time. It describes the persecution of the church as outright war: "Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus" (Rev. 12:17). God has put a longing and a hope for that lost *shalom* within his imagebearers. Thus, as Christians, we do not simply seek to stop persecution or to embrace religious liberty: we seek *shalom* with God and with others, even in times of persecution, and even when following our conscience endangers the freedoms we hold dear.

B. The story of the church universal: A historical perspective

As we have seen, already during the time of the apostles the church experienced persecution. Persecution continued as a constant threat—and too often a brutal reality—for the first three centuries of the Christian era. Some ancient church leaders wrote to Roman rulers, protesting the injustice inflicted on Christians; others wrote to encourage Christians to stand firm; and others—some leaders and many lay members—suffered gruesome torments and martyrdom. The records kept and copied in subsequent centuries include stories of horrendous suffering and brutality, of faithfulness and apostasy alike, and of the wonder of having this end with the declaration of toleration from Emperors Constantine and Licinius in 313 A.D. Respected church leaders had written, urging that faith and religion must not be forced—that religion coerced is religion corrupted.

This advice was not followed, however. The conversion of Emperor Constantine did not signal the end of religious persecution. While the Christian faith now suddenly and unexpectedly knew the favor of imperial authority and correlative religious liberty, rulers soon decided to use the strong arm of the state to enforce religious conformity. So, while religious persecution had ended for the Christian church, it was inflicted on those judged by the church as defective in teaching and practice. Soon enough, those condemned as heretics bore the wrath of the state because of their views; exile, punishment, and persecution were their lot. When Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the state religion in the 380s, a door opened not only to new opportunities of Christian influence on the empire but also to further use of force against people who did not conform in faith and religious practice. Beginning in the fourth century, Christian emperors persecuted Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites, Samaritans, Jews, and the remaining pagans.

The pressures on people who did not conform continued on an intermittent but often ruthless basis. This alienated Syrian and Coptic Christians—denounced as Nestorians and Monophysites—from the Christian empire, which alternately wooed and then hounded them from the fourth through the seventh centuries. With such constant pressure and periodic persecution, Middle Eastern Christians ended up welcoming the invading forces of Islam when they arrived in the seventh century. Even though relegated to

second-class status in the Muslim realm, these Christians found rule by Muslims less onerous than persecution by orthodox Christian rulers.

Along the way, as generations passed, some who had adhered to Christianity converted to Islam, thereby avoiding the social, vocational, and personal restrictions that fell upon non-Muslims. By the 13th century, though, with Muslim realms under assault from Turks, Crusaders, and Mongols, reaction set in with vigor against Christians. Persecution was ordered or at least allowed by various Muslim rulers; some Christians accepted martyrdom, while others apostatized, converting to Islam. This pattern continued during subsequent centuries, with especially harsh reprisals against the remaining Christians during the past two hundred years to the present.

This ongoing pattern of persecution—always possible, occasionally threatened, and too frequently enacted—ended up virtually extinguishing the Christian presence in the Middle East. What remains today are mere remnants of what were large and vigorous churches. While Coptic Christians have managed to survive to the present, religious persecution has decimated their numbers, which stand now at about 10 percent of Egypt's population. The Church of the East (called "Nestorian" by its opponents) and the Jacobite Church (dubbed "Monophysite" by its opponents) now exist in drastically shrunken numbers and in restricted enclaves, which are currently being expelled by the forces of the Islamic State, committed to exterminating the last vestiges of Christianity in the region.

In Western Christendom, from the early Middle Ages on through the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, the pattern of religious persecution for nonconformity continued. During this long period, religious tolerance was notable mostly by its absence—so much so that the few areas that tried it in the 16th century seemed bizarre exceptions to a sanctified norm. The crusading ideals propounded at the end of the 11th century and sporadically thereafter welcomed the force of arms to reclaim territory and to deal finally with those who professed another religion—whether Muslims in Palestine or Albigensians in southern France.

Our own forebears in the Protestant Reformation did not break this pattern: in Zurich, Anabaptists were drowned in the Limmat River by order of the Reformed city council. Intra-Protestant tensions led to hostilities between Lutherans and the Reformed that helped bring on the Thirty Years' War. Eventually, an exhausted Christendom welcomed the separation of church and state arising from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which brought the era of religious wars to a bloody end.

Since then, Western Europe and the North American nations that emerged have emphasized a distinction between the power of the state and the claims of faith. Religious liberty has been proclaimed and, for the most part, practiced. But during the 20th and early 21st centuries, this pattern has devolved into a secularism that comes off as disdainful toward any and all religious truth claims. Postmodernism, in what has been called our "post-Christian era," demands a toleration that brooks no final truth claims.

This means that the Christian church in the West now faces pressures we have not previously experienced. Though preceding generations might have held to the easy assumption of a common Christian background in our society, morals, and attitudes, that is no longer possible for committed Christians in the present. This pattern could even accelerate and confront us

with religious persecution in the foreseeable future. But when we recall what Christians in other historical periods or geographical regions have endured or are facing today, we are challenged with the undeniable necessity of scaling back our complaints and trying to utilize the freedoms we cherish to protect the religious liberty we still enjoy.

The story of religious persecution and religious liberty in the history of the church offers us much to consider, reasons for confidence as we encounter whatever may yet come, and the invitation to show necessary humility as we reflect on what so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have experienced over the years.

C. The story of confessions: A theological perspective

The historical experience of the church was the seedbed for its confessions. The Three Forms of Unity—the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619)—are received by the Christian Reformed Church in North America as the true teaching on the message of Scripture and of God for his people. They are also received from a place and a time in which very real challenges to freedom of religion or belief were only starting to be worked out politically and in society.

The Belgic Confession (BC) itself, the oldest of these doctrinal standards, was prepared by Guido de Brès (who died as a martyr in 1567) to prove to his Catholic persecutors that adherents to the Reformed faith were not rebels. A year after its writing, a copy was sent to King Philip II with the declaration that the Reformed church stood ready to obey the government in all lawful things but that they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire,” rather than deny the truths of the confession.

The Heidelberg Catechism (HC), a somewhat warmer and more personalized teaching on the faith, was itself written under certain duress to address disunity and widening persecutions in the church. Even the Canons of Dort (CD), finished in 1619, were written before, and in some ways in anticipation of, the terrible religious wars that would sweep through the European continent, concluded (arguably) only with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The basic code of political redress in that treaty, *cujus regio ejus religio* (the ruler determines the religion of the realm), was still very far from what we would consider freedom of religion or belief. Religious persecution in some cases became even more severe after the treaty, as the state religion became the sole prerogative of the ruler, who had an absolute right to impose his faith upon his subjects. Under this principle, foreign rulers had no legal grounds to intervene to protect their coreligionists. Although religion as the basis for interstate warfare was thus removed, at least theoretically, rulers were free to persecute those of their subjects who dissented from the state church.

Our Three Forms of Unity are therefore no strangers to times of serious religious persecution and are the historical results of extreme turmoil, disagreement, and persecution within and by Christian states and groups. From them we can give a picture of religious liberty and its place in a Reformed theological perspective.

The confessions speak resoundingly to the idea that respect of religious freedom for *all persons*—Christian or otherwise—is a biblical imperative. It is rooted first in the opening chapters of Genesis and in the doctrine of the

image of God. “Let us make mankind in our image” (BC, Art. 9; see also HC, Q&A 6), God says in Genesis 1:26. Further, we learn that though “devils and evil spirits are so corrupt that they are enemies of God” (BC, Art. 12), God did not abandon his imagebearers “to chance or fortune” (BC, Art. 13) but keeps watch “over us with fatherly care, sustaining all creatures under his lordship, so that not one of the hairs on our heads (for they are numbered) nor even a little bird can fall to the ground without the will of our Father” (BC, Art. 13; see also HC, Q&A 1).

Still, the fall of humankind terribly breaks that first image. “By their sin they separated themselves from God, who was their true life, having corrupted their entire nature,” and “made themselves guilty and subject to physical and spiritual death, having become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all their ways. They lost all their excellent gifts which they had received from God, and retained none of them *except for small traces* which are enough to make them inexcusable” (BC, Art. 14, emphasis added). That basic disobedience—that breaking of *shalom*, as we described earlier—has spread through the whole human race and through creation itself (BC, Art. 15). It is so fundamental that no good thing, and certainly no salvation, can be realized apart from God’s saving grace (BC, Art. 16-17). Therefore any justification (BC, Art. 23) or good work (BC, Art. 2) is an unmerited gift and free grace of God (HC, Q&A 12-15, 59-61).

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* shows we are a totally fallen, wicked race who cannot of our own power, or of common grace, be saved (CD, Point I, Rejection of the Errors, IV). Yet while salvation is lost to us, except through Christ (HC, Q&A 20), the traces of God’s image linger, and even the tiniest trace of that image *demand*s respect and dignity—demands a reverence of our fellow human person. It is, in fact, these traces (given in common grace) that make possible any human life and society after the fall.²

For our purposes, this means two things:

- Because only God can save, any human coercion of religion is necessarily futile, and probably idolatrous, claiming for the persecutor a power of correction and salvation that can only rightly belong to God.³
- In matters of religion it is the duty and calling of Christians to steward and advocate freedom of religion or belief as fundamental to the recognition of the sovereignty of God.

As a committee, we have often found it useful to frame these confessional insights in terms of *pluralism*. By *pluralism*, we do *not* mean merely that we are all exposed to cultural diversity. In the Reformed tradition, *pluralism* has the deeper normative meaning that God gives us houses of worship, families, schools, and other societal structures to shape human identity and society as a whole. As a gift from a sovereign God, these associations and

² See the CRCNA 1924 position on “Common Grace,” as distinguished from special or saving grace. See *Acts of Synod 1924*, pp. 113-50; *Acts of Synod 1926*, pp. 108-31; *Acts of Synod 1959*, pp. 23, 110-16, 417-24; *Acts of Synod 1960*, pp. 113-15; *Acts of Synod 1961*, pp. 68-70, 561.

³ This prohibition against coercion extends to both state and church. In the CRCNA’s instructions on discipline of members, for example, the denomination urges consistories to foster faithful *discipleship* of “members who have sinned in life and doctrine” (CRCNA Church Order, Art. 81). This process of discipline, even if it results in the exclusion of a member from the church, is focused on turning members toward sincere repentance, not forced agreement.

institutions generally ought to operate freely, *even if* they embody perspectives and practices that Christians reject.⁴

A basic problem of this kind of “principled pluralism,” however, is whether and how multiple confessional communities can be meaningfully joined in a common polity. This problem—or paradox—has vexed believers of many faith traditions, including members of the Christian Reformed Church. Indeed, it led Synod 1958 to revise the Belgic Confession’s position on the role of state (*Acts of Synod 1958*, pp. 28-31, 174-80),⁵ judging as *unbiblical* the original admonition of government to uphold sacred ministry, and to remove and destroy all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist, while further promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ (Article 36 on “The Civil Government”). The substituted paragraphs in Article 36, while calling on government to restrain human lawlessness, punish evil people, and protect the good, confirms government’s task of “removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship” (BC, Art. 36). This should be done, further, “while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority,” so that “the Word of God may have free course” (BC, Art. 36).

This corrected doctrine means two things:

- Christians should not only expect but actively safeguard confessional diversity as part of the proper task of government in a world marked by the fall.
- Christians should reasonably expect to live and work alongside persons of diverse and contradictory faiths, who are partners—as surely as our Christian brothers and sisters—in our work to build *just* societies.

There is therefore a basic doctrinal call to what some have called interfaith dialogue, or what others in the best meaning of the term simply call pluralist democracy.

The *mission* of God’s people is “to call everyone to know and follow Christ and to proclaim to all the assurance that in the name of Jesus there is forgiveness of sin and new life for all who repent and believe. The Spirit calls all members to embrace God’s mission in their neighborhoods and in the world: to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and free the prisoner. We repent of leaving this work to a few, for this mission is central to our being” (*Our World Belongs to God*, para. 41). And while it is true that the whole world belongs to God, no act of human power, and certainly no political act, can render to God things that are already properly his own. We bear witness to hope, but we never coerce or demand witness in return, lest we claim for ourselves God’s sovereignty and become idolaters.

Nevertheless, this mission is a *public* mission. The mission of God’s people transforms not merely human hearts and minds but also societies and

⁴ See chap. 5 of Stephen Monsma, *Pluralism and Freedom: Faith-Based Organizations in a Democratic Society* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011). For a more philosophical account, see Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁵ See *Acts of Synod 1938*, pp. 16-20; *Acts of Synod 1943*, pp. 107-14, 415-51; *Acts of Synod 1946*, pp. 38, 398-428; *Acts of Synod 1947*, pp. 83-85; *Acts of Synod 1952*, p. 68; *Acts of Synod 1954*, pp. 49-50; *Acts of Synod 1958*, pp. 28-31, 174-80; *Acts of Synod 1963*, pp. 36, 466-67; *Acts of Synod 1964*, p. 71.

cultures. Religion is practiced not just in private but also in public space. Its freedoms are both individual *and* corporate, personal *and* institutional—and both aspects must be safeguarded. The gospel of the Christian church is a public proclamation, one which upends both our social and our private lives. It transforms human hearts, but it also transforms our lives together.

Christians therefore have a calling, delicate and difficult as it may be, to advocate and encourage respect for the public practice of religion within their own societies (*Our World Belongs to God*, para. 53). Where governments repress or deny these freedoms, we understand that they are violating not only their most basic task but also the dignity of human persons afforded them as imagebearers of God. And where governments break this covenant and forbid the true worship of God, Christians are obligated to disobey (BC, Art. 28). Any state repression of public worship constitutes one meaning of *persecution*. Churches, as well as individual Christian citizens, should do what they can to combat this evil.

Religious liberty will one day pass away in the last judgment (BC, Art. 37), when the desire of the nations will find its consummation in the bowing of every knee and the confession of every tongue. In that day the mission of God's people will find its completion, the paradox of confessional pluralism will be resolved, and the image of God restored to fullness in his church. We labor faithfully toward that day, bearing as best we can God's image here and now, and defending the dignity of its traces in all of those around us.

IV. The problem today

A. *Approaching the modern problem of persecution*

The message of these biblical, historical, and confessional perspectives is quite clear: Even if our sovereign God uses persecution for his purposes, we must still view the experience of persecution as a real evil that we have an obligation to confront as a church and as individuals.

What is less clear is *how* to confront the problem. We live in an era of threats to religious belief and practice that is both perilous and profoundly complex. Consider the following real life examples:

- In places as varied as Pakistan, Malaysia, and Sudan, governments often use anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws to subject Christians (and other religious minorities) to a wide range of human rights abuses, including the death penalty.
- Gordon College, a Christian institution of higher education in Massachusetts, was the object of withering public criticism after its president signed a July 2014 letter asking that President Obama carve out a religious exemption from an executive order banning sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination by federal contractors, sub-contractors, and vendors. The public controversy resulted in several government agencies canceling agreements with Gordon; in addition, Gordon's accreditation agency revisited its previously positive review.
- In the past several decades, as many as two-thirds of Christians in the Middle East have left the region in response to direct threats from their governments and extremist groups. In Iraq, the drop has been precipitous: in 1990, 1.2 million Christians lived in the country; by 2013, the number had dropped to less than 200,000. Recent advances by the Islamic

State have pushed even more Christians out of the northern regions of Iraq. Thriving networks of churches in Baghdad that once rivaled those in Constantinople and Rome are now almost entirely forgotten. Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, with their ancient communities of Maronite, Assyrian, and Coptic Christians, respectively, have seen similar declines.

- In July 2015, an Ontario court upheld the decision of a provincial regulatory body to reject accreditation for a law school at Trinity Western University. The decision was a reaction to the requirement at the Christian university that students abstain from “sexual intimacy that violates the sacredness of marriage between a man and a woman.”
- In the early 2010s, Chinese public officials prevented Shouwang Church, a large Christian congregation in Beijing, from purchasing a gathering space, leading many members to worship in public spaces in protest. In 2011, several church leaders were put under house arrest without serious due process, and ordinary members continue to be regularly detained and fined. The case was an early example of recent crackdowns against unregistered churches (sometimes called “house churches”) throughout China.
- In 2010, the pastor and elders of First Hamilton (Ont.) CRC appeared in a hearing before a provincial human rights tribunal to answer the charge that they had refused to hire a job applicant because she was living with a man outside of marriage.

This list could go on for many pages. But we offer these examples simply to illustrate that people of faith and houses of worship face a variety of constraints on their religious practice. In just these few examples, we observe significant differences in (1) the *source* of constraints (government, organized extremist groups, ordinary citizens), (2) the *objects* of constraints (individuals, houses of worship, faith-based institutions, entire faith traditions), (3) the *context* (diverse yet increasingly secular Western governments or authoritarian regimes with little tolerance for minority perspectives), and (4) the *nature* and *effects* of the actions against faith (inconveniences, loss of public status, displacement, confiscation of property, death).

This variation affects the way we approach the problem of persecution. Yet we also see common threads running through these examples. After all, each has to do with *religion* and with a claim to *religious liberty*. So before we press more deeply into the modern problem of religious persecution, we want to carefully define these terms as we use them.

B. *Defining religion and religious liberty*

We start with a working definition of *religion*, which will help us better understand the limits and meaning of *religious liberty*, and what constitutes persecution.

In recent Western history, religion has often been perceived as a set of “private” beliefs and practices in contrast with a neutral “public” space in which religion ought not be taken into account. Some (though certainly not all) commentators talk about the “separation of church and state” in these terms. They mean not only that the state should not support institutional forms of religion but also that religion should stay out of public life altogether.

A Reformed perspective totally rejects this way of thinking. Faith is not merely a set of beliefs and practices that we trot out on Sunday or in the

privacy of our homes; faith is not and should not be compartmentalized. Our Christian commitments permeate all aspects of life, because our God lays claim to all aspects of life. *Religion*, in this theological sense, is our lived experience, both individually and corporately, as imagebearers of this sovereign God. Put another way, *religion* is “the understandings and practices of communities and persons that are lived out of love for and in obedience to God.”

This definition captures several critical points:

- Religion is not merely a belief but a bodily and often public *practice*.
- Religious practices often occur in communities; therefore the organizational forms of religion and its freedoms are an essential part of any definition.
- The primary test of conscience for whether an activity or belief is religious is the person or the community itself, as the meanings and boundaries of the religious can shift from place to place and time to time.
- Religion is ultimately about living lives of “ordered love,” as Augustine would say. For Christians, this way of life is expressed in the great commandments to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But any religion expresses its own loves.

This definition shapes our theological understanding, but we also use the term *religion* in a different (though not opposed) way favored by social scientists. We borrow here the definition from international relations scholar Daniel Philpott: “communities of belief and practices oriented around claims about the ultimate grounds of existence.”⁶ This social scientific approach encompasses a broader range of beliefs and practices than our theological definition, which is rooted in Christian assumptions. As a committee, we often use this definition because religious persecution is an evil for all people of faith, not just Christians.

Our understanding of *religious liberty* (or *freedom*) assumes these definitions of religion. The definition has two elements: (1) “the capacity to manifest fully, in public and private, one’s religion without interference from the state”; and (2) “the obligation of the state to protect citizens from anyone who might threaten the expression of those citizens’ faith.” In other words, religious liberty both limits and empowers the state: government *ought not to* restrict religion unreasonably but *ought to* provide a safe environment in which religious persons and communities can thrive.⁷

⁶ Daniel Philpott, “Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2009): 183-202.

⁷ This way of thinking about religious freedom is also consistent with widely accepted international norms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948, states in Article 18 that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” The full text of the Universal Declaration is found online at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>. A similar but expanded definition is found in Article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which both the United States and Canada are parties. The full text of the Covenant is found online at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>. For a deeper discussion and broader resources about religious freedom, visit <http://henry.calvin.edu/civic-engagement/religious-freedom.html>.

This definition assumes that confessional pluralism—accepting that many religious expressions can coexist in the same political community—is an appealing value. Of course, no society will have full agreement on why pluralism is appealing. Still, in pluralist societies, people can come to a *mutual resonance* on political and social virtues that enable their society to function.⁸ People agree on these virtues, although they may disagree on why they think the virtues are important. For instance, we can disagree about the nature of God and why human rights exist or matter but still agree on the value of human rights. In this sense, religious freedom is politically pragmatic. Diverse citizens can best cooperate on common goals when they aren't fighting violently over different views of God or transcendence.

But religious freedom is less obviously a good *theological* idea. Is it not only right but also compassionate to *allow* religious and theological error to persist in a society? Or does not God command the coerced correction of the unbeliever and the heretic? Advocates of religious freedom answer “yes” to the first question and “no” to the second. To restate our argument from our discussion of the Reformed confessions:

- Because God created humankind in his image, each person is owed dignity out of respect for that image, which includes what has become described as “freedom of religion.”
- Because only God has the power to save, any human coercion of religion is necessarily futile and probably idolatrous, because the persecutor claims a power to correct and save that can only rightly belong to God.
- Therefore, it is the duty and calling of Christians to advocate for freedom of religion or belief as fundamental to recognizing both the image of God in humans and the sovereignty of God over them.

What do these convictions mean in practice? Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics: we all bear the image of God. This is the most fundamental theological reason why Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians have joined together to defend religious freedom. We are not indifferent to the truth and to the worship of the true God, but we know that any coercion in faith, any repression or violence, violates the image of that same God. Those in the Reformed Protestant tradition of Christianity add that any coercion is also a denial of the sovereignty of God and that salvation in Jesus Christ can only be received as a gift.

We recognize, of course, that there are potential risks in defining religious freedom in this expansive way. If religion extends to a wide range of beliefs and practices, then religious freedom is a very powerful claim. It is also a claim that can be misused. Three conditions for religious freedom are worth noting here.

- *Religious freedom belongs to real people and communities; it does not belong to the abstraction “religion.”* Religious liberty is always the possession of persons and communities, never the possession of an abstract notion of “religion” as a whole. For example on the surface, cases brought by the Organization of the Islamic Conference to the United Nations claiming “defamation of religion” may seem to be about the public protection

⁸ We borrow the term *mutual resonance* from Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of religion. But in practice these claims are often used as justification for powerfully restrictive blasphemy and apostasy laws. “Religions” as abstract entities do not have a legal right to protection from scrutiny, disagreement, or criticism.

- *Religious freedom protects people and communities from unreasonable restrictions of their faith; it does not protect them from offense and ridicule.* Mere social disapproval of one’s religion, even if one takes deep offense at that disapproval, is not a violation of religious liberty. Religious freedom allows believers to manifest their faith without unreasonable interference; it does not protect them from exposure to ridicule. Christians in North America must be especially careful to disentangle feelings of offense from real threats to religious liberty.
- *Religious freedom is not absolute.* While religious freedom should extend broadly, it cannot be strictly absolute because some religiously motivated behaviors may endanger the basic freedoms of others. Freedom of religion, though a fundamental right governing public justice, *must always be realized simultaneously with other basic duties and rights*, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, and more. Determining the lines where “reasonable” accommodation of religion ends is a difficult challenge and calls for wise legal and political judgment. But drawing those lines is necessary for any state that seeks a balance when the goods of safety, peace, order, and liberty are in tension.

C. *Persecution and religious liberty at home and abroad*

So what do these definitions of religion and religious liberty mean for religious *persecution*? Our working definition of *persecution* is simply “the unwarranted violation of religious liberty.” If religious liberty protects the faithful from threats to their religious expression, then religious persecution occurs when those threats become a reality and the state fails to prevent these violations or even perpetrates them.

Violence or harassment that targets religion can sometimes be very difficult to disentangle from other triggers (e.g., ethnicity, gender, class, caste). For example, the CRCNA’s Office of Social Justice and World Renew have recently highlighted the humanitarian plight of the Rohingya people, who have been fleeing persecution in Myanmar (Burma).⁹ The Rohingya are both an ethnic and religious minority, and they are also generally impoverished. So is the root cause of persecution their ethnic difference? Their Muslim faith in a generally Buddhist country? The desire of the powerful to take the land of the poor? Researchers use careful social scientific methods to try to answer these questions and determine when people or institutions are threatened specifically for their faith. But often religion is one factor among many that contribute to persecution.

This research reveals an ominous quickening of the pace of religion-based persecution over the past decade. Data from the Pew Research Center, a key observer of religious freedom around the globe, suggests that the breadth of social hostilities—violence or harassment by nongovernmental actors—has increased at a particularly shocking rate. In 2007, 45 percent of the world’s population lived in countries with social hostility rates labeled as “high”

⁹ <http://www.crcna.org/news-and-views/human-rights-advocate-speaks-crc-about-rohingya-refugees>

or “very high” by Pew analysts; just seven years later, the percentage had increased to 73. (Government restrictions also rose, but less sharply—from 58 percent of the population living under high restrictions to 63 percent.)¹⁰

These growing hostilities have left few religious traditions untouched. But on nearly every measure, the suffering of Christians has been most widespread.¹¹ Part of the reason has been the rapid growth of Christianity in densely populated areas of the global south and east, where its emerging presence has put the Christian faith at odds with established religions and/or unsympathetic governments. But some of the deepest crises for the church have come out of regions where it has its deepest roots. One of the most agonizing facts about religious persecution today is that Christianity is facing near eradication in many areas of the Middle East, the birthplace of the faith.¹² We have already noted precipitous drops in Christian populations in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, with similar trends in Pakistan, Malaysia, and Sudan.¹³ We are left with a disheartening conclusion: While persecution of the church appears to stoke its growth in some places (e.g., China), persecution often kills the church in others areas—and for long periods of time.

We cannot gloss over the reality that this targeted purging of Christianity is happening largely in Muslim-majority countries from North Africa to southern Asia. We hasten to add that we do not raise the point to suggest there is no basis for tolerance in Islam. But anti-Christian persecution in Muslim-majority countries does pose a profound challenge for interfaith relations—and fostering peace among people of different faiths is an important strategy for addressing persecution. We take up that challenge in sections V-VI of this report.

There is no doubt that religious persecution is on the rise in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. But do we see similar patterns emerging in the very different context of the West?

Many Christian voices in North America have recently used the word *persecution* to describe the experience of people of faith in what seems to be an emerging “post-Christian” Western culture. The paradigmatic example is the Christian baker or florist who faces public ridicule, loss of business, or legal action for refusing to provide services at a same-sex wedding. We need not settle the question of how common this sort of threat might be in the United States or Canada; it is enough to say that, bakers and florists aside, Christians and Christian institutions have faced increasing challenges to their faith practices in recent years. But are those experiences a problem akin to persecution?

In answering that question, it is important to first consider the *context* of the constraint on religious practice. We have already established that

¹⁰ Peter Henne et al., *Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015).

¹¹ One of the first scholars to note these disturbing trends is Paul Marshall, currently a Senior Fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute. See his path-breaking *Their Blood Cries Out* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1997) and, more recently with Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2013). We provide a bibliography of other books on the topic at the companion website to this report.

¹² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008).

¹³ Kevin R. den Dulk and Robert J. Joustra take up the causes and implications of these changes in chap. 2 of *The Church and Religious Persecution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin College Press, 2015).

religious liberty is not an absolute, and governments must consider religious practices in light of other compelling public goals. This point implies the importance of *due process*, the fair consideration of a claim to a right to practice religion under publicly available rules, usually by a court or similar public tribunal. It's possible that such a claim may receive due process but that the state may then refuse to protect the right. In such a case, because the claim received fair consideration under rules that attempt to strike a reasonable balance between freedom and social stability, the restriction on religious practice would not be a form of religious persecution.

Consider again the examples noted earlier: Gordon College, Trinity Western University, and First Hamilton CRC have faced very real challenges to their commitment to a traditional Christian view of marriage and sexual intimacy. But they also have recourse to legal institutions and constitutional norms that provide opportunities to seek protection.¹⁴ Their experience would be profoundly different if the context shifted and they were facing local officials in, say, China or Pakistan, where due process is often unavailable and rules governing religion violate a principled pluralism.

Still, while the rule of law in North America and other Western countries often prohibits the worst kinds of persecution, real tests of faith can and do occur in these environments. Scores of state interventions into the activities of people of faith throughout the U.S. or Canada over the past two centuries could be interpreted as persecution. We can think of many contemporary examples:

- The Christian student group that loses access to a public university campus because it requires its leaders to be believers.
- Muslim groups that hit repeated regulatory roadblocks to constructing Islamic community centers.
- Clergy who endorse political candidates from the pulpit and thereby risk losing their churches' tax-exempt status.
- Pharmacists who refuse to obey a state regulation requiring the sale of so-called morning-after and week-after drugs, which they believe are, in effect, abortifacients.
- Incarcerated persons who are forbidden from worshiping together on their holy day.
- Native American tribal leaders seeking restoration of sacred burial grounds that have been bulldozed for road construction.

In each of these examples, there is a genuine public limit on the freedom of individuals or organizations to act on their faith. By our definition each *could be* a type of persecution. But much depends on whether we see the competing claims of government as "reasonable" according to some legal standard. It is beyond the mandate of this committee to review the contested history of those legal standards in the United States and Canada (the report's companion website offers a précis). But suffice it to say here that in all of the recent cases in North America, the constraint on freedom pales in contrast with the

¹⁴ As of summer 2015, Trinity Western's case remains on appeal, and Gordon is seeking compromise with local officials outside the legal system. First Hamilton CRC's case was resolved in its favor because the tribunal concluded that the church did not take the applicant's lifestyle into account in making its hiring decision. Note that the question of whether existing law would allow First Hamilton CRC to take the applicant's lifestyle into account was not addressed.

real violence and abuse that many Christians and people of other faiths experience in desperate settings such as Pakistan, Syria, and northern Nigeria.

The upshot is that North American communities could claim “persecution” in rare circumstances. But we urge restraint in using that word when we compare our situations with the context and severity of persecution that our brothers and sisters around the world often experience.

D. A snapshot of the CRCNA

The Christian Reformed Church has its roots in the United States and Canada but finds itself at the center of the problem of persecution in many places and many ways outside its North American home. As of early 2015, the CRCNA has 239 missionary and development workers around the world, as well as hundreds of partners in ministry. Given the size of the denomination, this global footprint is remarkable. CRCNA field staff are supported by 1,103 churches and 245,217 total members, yielding a ratio of one field staff member overseas per 1,026 members.¹⁵ For comparative purposes, consider that the Southern Baptist Convention’s 4,733 “appointed field personnel”¹⁶ are supported by 15,735,640¹⁷ total members (1 per 3,324 members) and that the United Methodist Church’s 327 “missionaries” (approximately a third of whom serve in the United States)¹⁸ are supported by 7,299,753 domestic members (1 per 22,323 members).¹⁹

Many of these staff serve in countries where there has been considerable governmental restriction and social hostility toward religion. The accompanying maps display the Pew Research Center’s scoring of government restriction and social hostility overlaid with the countries that CRCNA staff are currently serving.²⁰ Darker shades suggest higher levels of restrictions or hostility (the CRCNA does not have a significant presence in lighter shaded countries). The overall impression is that our field staff have not balked at serving in hotbeds of anti-Christian hostility.

¹⁵ 2014 Yearbook (<http://www.crcna.org/welcome/membership-statistics>).

¹⁶ <http://www.imb.org/1307.aspx#.VTvT-SFViko>

¹⁷ <http://www.sbc.net/media/pdf/FastFactsAboutTheSBC.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.umcmission.org/Explore-Our-Work/Missionaries-in-Service/Missionary-Profiles?retain=true&PagingModule=1736&Pg=16>

¹⁹ <http://www.umc.org/gcfa/data-services>

²⁰ In terms of governmental restrictions on religion, Pew considers a range of factors, including lack of serious constitutional protections for religious expression; controls on collective gatherings, public preaching, or proselytizing; limitations or outright bans on religious conversion; censorship of religious literature; regulation of religious dress; religion-based discrimination in eligibility for public benefits; compelled religious education; and state refusal to intervene when disfavored religious groups are faced with mob violence. In countries with the greatest restrictions, religious adherents routinely face physical intimidation or corporal punishment, imprisonment, fines, other criminal sanctions, and even the death penalty. In terms of social hostility toward religion, researchers looked for evidence of mob violence related to religion, religion-related terrorism or so-called “honor” killings, and harassment of religious minorities, among other factors. To recognize violence or abuse as “religion-related” is, of course, a difficult matter; after all, these kinds of conflicts could be rooted in a range of causes. Researchers used careful social scientific methods to disentangle religion from other triggers of social hostility (e.g., ethnicity) while recognizing that sometimes multiple factors can work together to explain the effect (e.g., the intersection of ethnicity and religion).

Social Hostilities around the World

Levels of Social Hostilities in each country the CRCNA serves as of 2013



Government Restriction around the World

Levels of Government Restriction in each country the CRCNA serves as of 2013



Source of country data: Pew Research Center

Of course, these are countrywide statistics; the experience of staff may vary greatly depending on the specific regions in which they serve. In summer 2014, the Henry Institute and the Center for Social Research at Calvin College, at the request of this committee, administered a survey to all CRCNA field staff in World Missions, World Renew, and Back to God Ministries International. We asked a range of questions about demographics, type of ministry, and experience of both governmental restrictions and social hostility; we also provided ample opportunity for open-ended responses and suggestions. (Some visualizations and additional information are available at www.crcna.org/persecution.)

Nearly 20 percent of respondents reported experiencing some kind of government restriction on their work. Many cited limitations on public preaching and evangelism; a few highlighted limits or even outright bans on the dissemination of information through print literature or broadcast media, among other restrictions on teaching, private gatherings, and corporate worship in a church setting. Very few had experienced severe punishment as a result of their activities, but the survey results did suggest that some CRCNA field staff had experienced violence and property confiscation, either directly or, more often, vicariously through affected ministry partners. Field staff in Protestant-minority areas also noted repeatedly that government support for religion (e.g., funding for faith-based education) is unevenly distributed (or not distributed at all, but enjoyed only by majority schools). The most common open-ended responses, however, suggest that staff do not directly experience persecution because they have learned how to avoid or defuse situations that might result in violence or harassment. Field staff are clearly savvy about how to operate in their various locations.

Fifteen percent of respondents to the survey reported experiencing “moderate” or “strong” social hostilities (violence or harassment from nongovernmental actors) toward themselves or close associates. About 10 percent had experienced property damage they could attribute to religious conflict, and the same number attested to displacement, physical assault, and detentions of their closest ministry partners.

Some staff praised specific denominational efforts to address faith-based conflict, including positive feedback for the CRCNA Crisis Management Team, as well as a couple of mentions of the Salaam Project (an initiative to learn about Islam, discussed below). One missionary was happy to note that in contrast to training provided thirty years ago, the “[staff] orientation now includes a lot more cross-cultural and security awareness training.” Others acknowledged how the CRCNA, in the words of one respondent, “maintains presence and supports relief and development efforts whenever it is possible and feasible.” A staff member was pleased with how CRWM “discerned with us and confirmed our call to remain in [the area] while extremist activity increased.”

Even in cases where respondents recognized problems, many suggested that the CRCNA, as an institution, is increasingly willing to engage in these kinds of issues. A staff member suggested that the CRCNA “has become more aware and engaged in matters related to justice, freedom of conscience, and human rights,” concluding that “there is dialogue.” Another was “impressed with the commitment of the church to engage with religious freedom and persecution in other countries,” noting also the “concern, help,

and prayer . . . expressed by churches and supporters” in times of “natural disasters and during social riots.”

Others, however, were unsure if the CRCNA could have a greater role in addressing persecution. One bluntly stated, “I’m not sure what CRCNA can do at this point.” Some points of contention included doubts about the denomination’s ability as a large institution to address individual incidents on a microlevel, as well as paralysis resulting from both theological divisions over just war theory and Christian pacifism and political divisions in North American politics.

Field staff were given opportunity to rank several strategies for promoting religious liberty. The greatest priority was to develop greater resources to guide corporate and individual prayer. Developing better interfaith relationships, strengthening informational networks, and advocating for better foreign policy followed close behind. Other strategies with moderate support included highlighting religious persecution and religious liberty in congregation-based adult education, worship, and *The Banner*. Very few saw much relevance to North Americans petitioning foreign governments or to the CRCNA investing more in physical security for field staff.

The open-ended suggestions revealed a different side to staff views. Most were convinced that the CRCNA needs to have a better contextual understanding of the issues surrounding religious persecution. As a CRWM staff member put it, “I don’t think the CRCNA as a whole understands persecution very well. For one, they haven’t experienced it. They also have a hard time understanding the dynamics involved in why persecution happens, and would likely be content with addressing the symptoms of the problem rather than getting at the root issues.” Others claimed that the denomination needed to understand the nuances of why fighting persecution in certain religious environments, such as the Islamic world, might be difficult or even counterproductive. Four respondents urged that the CRCNA could better educate its domestic congregations, and several others suggested that the CRCNA should speak out for domestic religious freedom.

V. Two goals for the CRCNA

The experience and suggestions of CRCNA field staff lead us into the formulation of several recommendations. They remind us, on the one hand, that confronting religious persecution is an immense—and perhaps bewildering—undertaking. On the other hand, they represent the personal side of our clear theological imperative as Christians to act as moral protagonists in the fight against religious persecution.

So what are the church and its members to do? The challenge in answering this question is to avoid expecting too much or too little. The church as an institution has tremendous capacity to articulate a vital moral concern and a vision for change. The church is at its best when it clarifies God’s purposes and gathers people together around those purposes for mutual encouragement. The church also has a role in organizing people to pursue God’s purposes in the world. But the church is not the state or a school; it is also not an interest group or think tank. It has a key role, but that role is limited—to use a familiar Reformed inflection—to its own sphere.

Our recommendations for the CRCNA are organized around two goals. First, we need to *orient* the church to think seriously about global persecution

and threats to religious freedom. We outline a series of ideas for fostering a moral vision, with an emphasis on liturgical practices, information dissemination, and interfaith opportunities. Second, we need to *mobilize* and organize the resources—both moral and physical—of our churches, and this includes a substantive yet limited role for denominational agencies. These recommendations are far from exhaustive, but they are places to start the church in the powerfully necessary work of dealing with this urgent problem at home and abroad.

A. *Orienting the church*

We begin with a challenge: The CRCNA must orient itself around the problem of religious persecution. The North American church in general has been reticent to address religion-based violence and religious liberty issues. The CRCNA, with its Reformed grounding and oversized global footprint, has every reason to push against the trend.

And in some ways it has done so. The CRCNA is unique because it has participated in two types of activities that are relevant to combatting religious persecution but are rarely both used by the same denomination. Denominational agencies within the CRCNA have invested considerably in ecumenical initiatives, typically favored by mainline denominations, and have given some attention to fostering religious freedom, a focus that is more common among evangelical denominations.²¹

These efforts are admirable, but they are also insufficient. The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) has not addressed persecution directly; neither the Office of Social Justice (OSJ) nor Canada's Centre for Public Dialogue (CPD) has placed religious persecution and religious freedom near the top of their agendas; and the denomination itself has provided few materials that highlight religious persecution as a matter of concern for public worship.

Perhaps the best indicator is attention to the problem of persecution in *The Banner*, the denomination's primary organ for framing key issues and mobilizing opinion. We analyzed all *Banner* content from January 2001 to April 2014. We cast a very wide net for any commentary or reporting related broadly to religious persecution or liberty in North America or abroad. We searched for stories on religion-based violence or harassment, court cases or legislation about religious liberty, opinion pieces on pluralism, the legal status of faith-based organizations, and everything in between. After post-9/11 coverage subsided, *The Banner* settled into a pattern of reporting on these matters only a half-dozen times a year (on average). Most of those reports were brief and passing notes about a conflict in a far-flung region with no serious framing or context for the event.

We call the denomination and its churches to refocus on this problem. To build a movement against persecution, the most fundamental thing the church must do is preach and practice a theology that religious freedom is for *all persons*. Practicing that theology entails being willing to work across lines of difference to develop political and social virtues while allowing freedom to disagree on reasons for doing so. Not only is this political-theological work necessary for a principled pluralist society, but it is also work that no

²¹ To see the contrast between Protestant traditions, see den Dulk and Joustra, *Religious Persecution and the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin College Press, 2015).

ambassador or member of Congress or Parliament is well suited to do. It is explicitly the work of religious communities: churches, mosques, temples, and theological societies. The massacre of Christians must be stopped, but Christian churches do not deploy armies or diplomats. Churches preach a gospel that calls us to *shalom* in belief and action.

1. Pray

Practically, liturgical acts can help reorient the church to preaching a gospel that rejects persecution in favor of *shalom*. Popular books about Christian responses to suffering commonly list prayer as a first response. Indeed, exhortations to prayer are so familiar that they can seem obligatory, a standard line that deserves a few words before moving on to the *real* practical solutions. We do not envision prayer as a brief stopping point before more important matters. We emphasize prayer—more specifically, prayer as part of public worship—precisely because it is a key starting point in building a faith-based movement against persecution.

God desires that Christians pray together to establish communion with him. In the Reformed tradition we also believe that God listens *and* responds to our prayers, albeit in ways that are often mysterious to us. The fact that God listens and responds to us is humbling and emboldening at the same time. It should certainly give us the confidence to call out to God to protect brothers and sisters who are vulnerable to persecution.

These ideas about prayer are theological bedrock, but they are not all there is to say. Our prayerful confessions, intercessions, and thanksgivings are not simply out of our hands once we “give them up to God.” The *process* of prayer—of naming suffering and the people who suffer, of identifying what gives us joy, of confessing where we fail and when we doubt—is deeply formative. To describe it another way, prayer orients our perspective around God’s purposes. Prayer is a living ritual that clarifies needs, focuses attention, and strengthens resolve in believers who pray. Praying *together* is a sacred act of both mutual encouragement and mutual accountability. Public prayer, and public worship generally, *forms* the church liturgically—it not only expands imagination but over time forms our desires, the ordering of our loves.

This leads to a key recommendation:

Recommendation: That synod encourage each congregation to appoint a prayer coordinator or team who will keep up on religious persecution and religious liberty issues, advise officebearers about developments, and foster regular prayer for people suffering religious persecution.

One of the many benefits of public prayer in public worship is that it fixes the objects of prayer in our collective memory. It is deeply reassuring to victims of persecution to be remembered, whatever God’s response to prayer might be. In a February 2015 letter from northern Iraq, Chris Seiple, president of the Institute for Global Engagement, reported the terrible violence suffered by Dominican Sisters there. One sister shared, “We want to thank you for caring about our future when nobody else does. . . . You

give us hope that there is a future.”²² Hope is not an idea; it is a practice. And to be remembered, to be known, and to be loved by a community, not merely by a person, is a powerful liturgical act of the church.

When praying about persecution, we should pray together for *specific* people and places. Persecution is not an abstraction; we should not treat it that way in prayer. Unfortunately, identifying people to pray for is not a difficult task. Church-sponsored missionaries and development staff can be in harm’s way. Church members may also regularly hear of risks to people they know and trust, if members pay attention to newsletters, emails, and other reports from the field. Given the relatively large global footprint of the CRCNA, rare is a North American church member who has more than two degrees of separation from the human toll of persecution.

Another approach to praying about persecution is to focus regionally rather than personally. Churches might consider the ready-made resources of organizations such as Voice of the Martyrs, which provides a useful “Prayer Map” to prompt churches to focus prayer on regions with urgent need.²³ We can imagine the denomination adapting a similar map to the ministries of the denomination.

2. Worship, Bible study, and adult education

Prayer is a significant yet not isolated way to respond specifically to persecution. Preaching the Word and experiencing the sacraments do the same. Collective worship at regular intervals, particularly on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, can focus congregational life around stories of persecution that are often lost in the busy day-to-day of church life. Adult education classes, Bible studies, prayer gatherings, and other small groups are also places to gather and disseminate information, including the plight of the persecuted.

The denomination has done relatively little along these lines. The OSJ has highlighted the International Day of Prayer and made resources available to churches (http://www2.crcna.org/pages/osj_religious_persecution.cfm), including some liturgical materials (e.g., prayer litanies, some suggested songs, and a video about persecution in Syria and Iraq). But these resources are not extensive and need updating. Hence we make another overall recommendation:

Recommendation: That synod direct the Board of Trustees to instruct the Office of Social Justice to continue and expand the practice of urging every congregation to participate in the International Day of Prayer, devoting worship services that day to the pressing issue of religious persecution.

In addition to broad-based efforts such as the International Day of Prayer, the CRCNA should develop its own internal resources for orienting church life around the issue of persecution. To start the denomination down that road, the study committee itself has produced original resources to serve as springboards for adult education and Bible study. These resources include the following:

²² Chris Seiple, letter to “Friends of The Cradle Fund (TCF),” February 19, 2015. Subject: “You Can Cut Our Throats, but Our God Is Stronger than the Sword,” Trip Report, Northern Iraq, 7-11 February 2015.

²³ See <http://www.persecution.com/public/prayermap.aspx>.

- *Bible Study on Religious Persecution*: Naji Umran, Ken Van De Griend, and Ruth Veltkamp have developed an extensive Bible study on persecution that could be used individually or in small groups. The Bible study results partly from their work on the study committee, but it also draws from their experiences in missions in different parts of the globe (Umran in Egypt, Van De Griend in Southeast Asia, Veltkamp in Nigeria).
- *The Church and Religious Persecution*, coauthored by study committee members Kevin R. den Dulk (Calvin College) and Robert Joustra (Redeemer University College), explores both the nature of persecution and the role of the church in addressing persecution. The book, part of the “Calvin Shorts” series, is brief, accessible, and written with church-based adult education in mind.

Readers can find information about both resources (among others) at www.crcna.org/persecution.

3. Intercultural, interfaith, and ecumenical efforts

It is one thing to know the statistics on violence and abuse targeted at believers worldwide. It is another to *empathize* with the people behind those statistics, to make their plight a part of one’s own story. Stories about the suffering of specific people and organizations that are known and trusted do a lot to help us accomplish the latter. And there are no better institutions for telling those stories than houses of worship.

One critical but often overlooked way of sharing such stories is through ecumenical and interfaith opportunities. After all, people of all faiths suffer persecution; the violence suffered by religious minorities is often “equal opportunity.” When radical groups like the Islamic State cut their deadly swath through Syria and Iraq, it has frequently been *other Muslims* who have suffered. This is not to make light of the suffering of Christians, Yazidis, or Baha’is but to make the point that reformist or heterodox Muslims often suffer alongside people of other religions. In many Muslim-majority countries, days will likely come when those who stand between harm and Christian religious communities will be reformist Muslims acting on the best in their faith to defeat the worst of human tyranny.²⁴ These people also deserve our prayers and support.

Within the denominational structures of the CRCNA, the EIRC oversees and engages in both ecumenical and interfaith initiatives. Even so, the EIRC faces limits in what it can offer regarding questions of religious liberty and religious persecution. Its mandate itself does not highlight persecution, religious freedom, pluralism, or even simply peace across lines of difference. And while the CRCNA has extensive bilateral ecumenical contacts with particular Reformed denominations around the world (under the category of “ecclesiastical fellowship”), few of these churches are located in places of current conflict: the CRC has ecclesiastical fellowship with three such denominations in Nigeria and with one each in Indonesia, Myanmar (Burma), Cuba, Egypt, and Sudan. Three of the churches in the second category, “in formal dialogue,” are located in countries

²⁴ Examples of this kind of heroism already dot the landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. Ayatollah Masoumi-Tehrani, who has made extraordinary gifts—at real peril to himself—to besieged Baha’is in Iran is only one example.

where persecution and/or interreligious conflict have recently occurred: Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan. However, the “in formal dialogue” status is more limited in scope and does not rise to the level of close cooperation. Neither of these categories of church relationship offers much likelihood of close familiarity with actual instances of religious persecution.

More promising are the possibilities opened by the CRCNA’s wider ecumenical engagements. Since the CRCNA is a member of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), we have ongoing contact with hundreds of Reformed churches around the world. Many of them are situated in nations or regions where interreligious conflict and/or persecution has recently occurred—such as the Middle East. In the main, though, these churches have relatively small memberships in comparison with ancient Christian groups of the region that have usually borne the brunt of recent persecution. The EIRC should try to help keep the CRCNA and OSJ updated on developments, challenges, and conflicts faced by other WCRC churches when and as they face persecution. Trying to do so, however, will be difficult given the limitations of the WCRC’s small staff, which must carry on all of the organization’s endeavors. As recent WCRC initiatives have shown, it may be unwise to add further responsibilities to the already overburdened WCRC staff.

Perhaps a more promising venue for such an endeavor is the Global Christian Forum (GCF). The GCF is the broadest of all ecumenical organizations, with participation from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Charismatic, mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Holiness, and African Instituted churches. Within the past year (2015), the GCF held a conference dealing with the main themes of this study committee. Several of the representatives in attendance at the conference came from churches that have recently experienced or are threatened with persecution and martyrdom. The personal and ecclesiastical contacts made possible through this conference, with the rich resources offered by the position statements it enacted, offer the CRCNA much to consider as it seeks to understand and address the problem of religious persecution in the world today. While the staff of GCF is even more limited in number than that of the WCRC, this recent conference offers possibilities for the CRCNA (both the EIRC and OSJ) toward keeping contact with and disseminating much more information, not only about other churches in the world that are facing regular, ongoing threats of persecution but also about initiatives taken by churches elsewhere to stand in support of and solidarity with persecuted churches.

With regard to interfaith initiatives, the EIRC is only beginning to step into this area. In 2010, the EIRC adopted (with synod’s approval) a mandate for interfaith dialogue. While various interfaith initiatives have been taking place over the past many years, the EIRC recently recognized that it was not able to devote enough attention to developing this component of its mandate more fully. Synod 2015 approved that the EIRC set up an interfaith subcommittee, which will meet regularly and seek to enhance and carry further what can be done by the CRCNA in this area, reporting to the EIRC.

And there are bright spots in the CRCNA’s work in this area. The CRCNA’s Salaam Project, which offers training programs and other resources to teach the church about the Muslim faith and engages with

Islamic communities through interfaith dialogue, is an emerging model worthy of extension and emulation.²⁵ Previously a collaboration of several CRCNA ministries, the program is now housed within Home Missions and focuses primarily on major urban areas in Canada (Montreal, Toronto/Hamilton, Calgary, and Edmonton) where there are large populations of Muslims. Still, the program's resources are open to the wider CRCNA.

An overlooked area is the role of individual CRCNA churches, as well as the denomination as a whole, in the longstanding ministry of care and hospitality for refugees. World Renew has a robust refugee sponsorship program, and various denominational ministries, including OSJ and Canada's Centre for Public Dialogue, provide additional resources for refugee ministry. OSJ has gathered the stories of specific congregations, recording rich testaments to this ministry.²⁶ The denomination spoke to refugee issues in a 2010 report to synod, though primarily in the context of migrancy of labor. We see a real opportunity for these various efforts to highlight religious persecution as one of the root causes of refugee migrations. In a story about Fremont (Mich.) CRC's refugee ministry, a leader in a partner organization stated,

Churches today face an uphill battle in our attempts to understand and build bridges cross-culturally. Refugee ministry is an opportunity to learn to appreciate and accept cultural differences. Involvement in refugee ministries means changed attitudes and changed lives for both church members and the refugees involved. Church partners start asking bigger questions: Globally, why are countries producing refugees? What can we do to help? And ultimately what injustices can we help change locally?²⁷

We know that interfaith dialogues and other forms of cross-cultural engagement could help enhance awareness on the part of CRCNA members and congregations of other religious traditions and thus overcome fear and/or stereotypes. The charge of xenophobia or Islamophobia is too easily applied to North American religious communities. But meeting, dialogue, and friendship with our neighbors of other religions will not only provide a defense from this charge but can also prevent reactionary and dangerous violence often done in the name of religion.

These kinds of conversations across lines of religious difference have proliferated throughout North America and Europe in recent years. While they take a variety of forms, the best formats have a pluralistic, not relativistic, spirit. Pluralistic formats assume that differences are real and fundamental, that people have deeply held beliefs that lead them to think and act in distinctive ways. The conversations expose participants to each other as human beings—as creatures who bear God's image, despite our differences—and build empathy for people who face suffering. Interfaith experiences can also have the practical effect of broadening the social movement for religious freedom to include the full range of faith traditions that suffer the scourge of persecution.

²⁵ See <http://www.crcna.org/salaam>.

²⁶ See http://www2.crcna.org/pages/osj_refugeestories.cfm.

²⁷ Quote from Jotham Ippel, formerly the program director of the refugee ministry of Bethany Christian Services; http://www2.crcna.org/pages/osj_thach.cfm.

Recommendation: That synod instruct the EIRC and direct the BOT to instruct World Renew and the Centre for Public Dialogue to consider their work with interfaith and refugee groups and to strategize ways in which to communicate about the injustice of persecution with the rest of the denomination.

B. *Mobilizing the church*

The CRCNA can help to reorient our moral focus around persecution. But a movement against persecution also needs to organize people to advocate (“call forth”) its purposes, to *mobilize* churches to act in line with moral concerns and information. Our churches are remarkably well-positioned to mobilize against global persecution.

Persecution is a much bigger problem than the experiences of a single church or denomination. A problem of this magnitude requires a systemic or political response. At the same time, many governments do not have a great incentive to tackle the problem. Some are great violators of religious freedom themselves. Others have competing interests—trade, security, etc.—that they rank over religious freedom. To influence government leaders to see differently, citizens have a role, especially when democracy allows it.

We are not suggesting that the CRCNA needs lobbyists, lawyers, or public relations specialists to push domestic legislation or greater attention to international human rights covenants. Professionals are already working in a host of religious liberty and antipersecution groups around the world. Churches have the greatest influence when their advocacy is strategic, not tactical—that is, when they present a moral vision and communicate the breadth and depth of support for it rather than getting into the nitty-gritty of whom to lobby, where to litigate, or how to craft policy language. Church members as *Christian citizens* can and should be engaged at both the broadest and most specific levels. But churches as *institutions* should shape the moral vision of their members and speak prophetically to the larger society while refraining from the technical and specific work of public policy.

Where does that leave agencies within the CRCNA? On the one hand, we can think of no other matter pertaining to public justice *for* and *within* the church that is more important than its own freedom to practice and proclaim the gospel. As the key offices within the CRCNA committed to fostering public justice, the OSJ and the CPD in Canada clearly have a role of mobilizing the denomination around the issue. On the other hand, these organizations are not intended as a denominational interest group or public interest law firm.

A first step would be for these ministries to make religious persecution one of their top three priorities. The OSJ and CPD have committed tremendous resources in recent years to immigration, climate change, and the rights of indigenous peoples, and the study committee recognizes those issues are timely in public discussions and relevant to church members. But we find it difficult to suggest that these important matters ought to crowd out an issue like persecution, which has quite a direct impact on the church itself.

A second step would be for these ministries to demonstrate their commitment by devoting staff resources to the problem. We could imagine designating a larger part of a staff person’s portfolio to the collection and distribution of up-to-date information about persecution to CRC congregations and to those who join the OSJ network. In addition, it would be a step forward to

identify champions in CRC classes or congregations who could serve as point persons through whom regular information about persecution could be distributed to ordinary members. A network of contacts could work with pastors and worship coordinators to facilitate more frequent reference to and intercessory prayer about situations of persecution being faced by fellow Christians.

Recommendation: That synod direct the BOT to ask the Office of Social Justice to ensure the collection and distribution of up-to-date information about persecution to CRC congregations and to those who join the OSJ network.

Even so, the study committee does not perceive a need for intensive capacity building within denominational agencies. One reason is cost; we are cognizant of stretched budgets in the denomination. But perhaps more important is that key groups associated with the denomination, including the Henry Institute at Calvin College and the Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C., already focus much of their attention on issues of religious persecution and religious liberty. To add a layer of denominational effort would be redundant. This suggests, however, that the denomination could do better at collaborating with these other organizations to adapt their work to the efforts of the church.

To communicate in this context requires going outside church circles. Our churches ought not hesitate to encourage parishioners to engage elected officials or to support high quality advocacy groups and think tanks focused on this issue, including the Pew Research Center, the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, and Voice of the Martyrs. Other sources include the Henry Institute at Calvin College and university-based institutes at Notre Dame, Georgetown, and Emory.

If churches or parishioners find themselves in conflict with the state over their religious identity, they should have quick access to serious political and legal representation. Several public interest law firms are especially skilled at addressing religious liberty claims, including the Becket Fund and the Center for Law and Religious Freedom at the Christian Legal Society. The CRCNA itself enlisted the aid of some of these organizations in crafting "Model Church Facilities and Wedding Policies," which can help churches in the United States prevent conflicts over restricted access to property for weddings or other events. Readers can find out more about these and other resources at the committee's companion website. The point here is to focus on acting as a church—to teach, to cajole, to recruit volunteers, to advocate—but not to cross a line into work that belongs with other institutions.

VI. Recommendations

- A. That synod give the privilege of the floor to Kevin R. den Dulk, chair, and other members of the study committee when the report is addressed.
- B. That synod encourage each congregation to appoint a prayer coordinator or team who will keep up on religious persecution and religious liberty issues, advise officebearers about developments, and foster regular prayer for people suffering religious persecution.

C. That synod direct the Board of Trustees to instruct the Office of Social Justice to continue and expand the practice of urging every congregation to participate in the International Day of Prayer, devoting worship services that day to the pressing issue of religious persecution.

D. That synod instruct the EIRC and direct the BOT to instruct World Renew and the Centre for Public Dialogue to consider their work with inter-faith and refugee groups and to strategize ways in which to communicate about the injustice of persecution with the rest of the denomination.

E. That synod direct the BOT to ask the Office of Social Justice to ensure the collection and distribution of up-to-date information about persecution to CRC congregations and to those who join the OSJ network.

F. That synod accept this report as fulfilling the mandate of the Committee to Study Religious Persecution and Liberty and dismiss the committee.

VII. Conclusion

The global experience of religious persecution is one of the great moral challenges of our time. It is terrifying in scope and brutality—and thus bewildering. The goal of this report is (1) to ground our thinking in both Scripture and history and (2) to propose practical strategies for denominational response. We should no doubt be prudent; it is easy to be counterproductive, especially when responding to a problem as deeply complex as persecution. But while we should be concerned about doing more damage than good, we ought not let that concern paralyze us. We are *called* to act—all of us.

Yet for all our effort, all our focus on outcomes, we must remember that our calling is faithfulness to God’s purposes and promises. To be faithful does not necessarily mean we will see clearly the fruits of our activity. In places where religion-based conflict is deeply entrenched, we shouldn’t even expect to see change in our lifetime. When the prophet Isaiah calls out, “How long, Lord?”²⁸ God does not offer a timetable. But he does make a promise.

Committee to Study Religious Persecution
and Liberty

Jane Bruin

Kevin R. den Dulk, chair

Robert Joustra

Jonathan Kim

James Payton, Jr.

Stephen R. Snow

Naji Umran

Ken Van De Griend

Ruth Veltkamp

²⁸ Isaiah 6:11