

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

No Longer Business as Usual: The Reformed Church in America Seen through Its Mission Statement

Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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No Longer Business as Usual: The Reformed Church in America Seen through Its Mission Statement

Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell

The adoption of a Mission Statement at the 1997 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) is emblematic of the transitions and new directions within the denomination. For the first time, the widest annual assembly of the RCA endorsed a statement that attempts to convey the mission and vision of this church.¹ Neither the structures nor the polity of the RCA was changed by the Mission Statement. It brought no new organizational flow-charts or restructured committees. However, its adoption and ensuing popularity provide a useful glimpse into the state of the RCA, especially how its structures are perceived and how they function.

The theme of this volume is “organizing religious work.” What I will attempt is not a comprehensive explanation of the organization and various structures within the RCA. Instead, the Mission Statement will be used as a snapshot of the denomination — its trends, themes, and theology. This will not be a “close reading” or line-by-line exegesis of the Mission Statement. Some lines and phrases from the statement will be mentioned. However, the broader ideas represented by the words and tone will be more important than a narrow focus on specific words. The overall symbolic value and impact of the Mission Statement will be the primary focus.

A closer look at this snapshot will display, I believe, an attempt to portray the work of the church in energetic, result-oriented, inspirational, and accessible terms. The picture focuses on the local congregation. According to the Mission Statement, the local congregation is to be the recipient of denominational resources. Its activities are defined as “mission.” At the same time, however, there seems to be an unresolved ambivalence about everything pointing toward

1. A complete text of the Mission Statement is found in the appendix to this chapter.

the congregation. Is there something perplexing about a document with a local, grassroots view of the church being produced and adopted by the widest national assembly of that church? There seems to be a concerted effort to release the local congregation and celebrate the ministry of the local congregation, yet present the denomination as a vital resource for that local ministry. The document's warm, spiritual tone is applied not only to the local church but also to the wider assemblies of the RCA, and even their staffs are now portrayed as having more spiritual and less administrative influence. If the congregation is the focus of the church, then what is the basis for the relationship between the congregation and the wider denominational bodies? Is it voluntarist, based on the resources received, or is it integral to the entire notion of a connectional church?

When first seen through a more theological lens, this attempt to rework the connection between the local congregation and the wider denominational assemblies appears to move away from traditional Reformed theology and its concomitant polity. The Mission Statement's lack of classic theological terms may be attributed to its efforts to use accessible language. It may also suggest the faint presence traditional doctrine actually has in today's church. Yet neglect of theological terminology produces not an "untheological" document but one with an unspoken, modified theology of its own. Is this theology, however, better or healthier theology for the church?

Quick Turnaround

The process that brought about the adoption of the Mission Statement already conveys some of the impetus and ethos of the statement. To amend, alter, or adopt new portions of the RCA's constitution is a long and painstaking task.² The process involves approval at a general synod, followed by ratification by two-thirds of the denomination's classes (the RCA's terminology for the most

2. The constitution of the RCA consists of three parts. It has been compared to a three-legged stool by Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy, and Government: The Bicentennial of the Celebration of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 159. The doctrinal leg consists of the three historic ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian) and the three Reformed "doctrinal standards" (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort). The liturgical leg is represented by the various approved liturgies, especially the liturgies for the sacraments. The governance leg is expressed in the *Book of Church Order: Including the Government, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod, and the Formularies of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2002).

local church assembly), and finally approval again by the subsequent general synod.

Every general synod receives a great many reports and overtures on which it may act immediately. The overtures are usually generated by the classes. Various standing committees and commissions of the RCA submit the reports. The Mission Statement came before the general synod as a part of one of these reports, specifically in the report from the General Synod Council. It was voted on and approved by a single general synod. Because it is not a change in the denomination's constitution, it did not require any further approval. There is absolutely nothing irregular or devious about these procedures. Unlike the usual pattern, however, a major document and new direction were initiated in very short order.

To say that its adoption was a short and relatively simple task is not to say it was put together in a hasty and haphazard manner. Its roots have been traced to a 1994 meeting of the RCA's General Synod Council that approved the nomination of the Reverend Wesley Granberg-Michaelson as the general secretary (highest executive officer) of the RCA. In the following years, according to Granberg-Michaelson, that group began "creating space for working with vision, goals, and long-term direction rather than simply micro-managing the details of programs and budgets."³ By early 1997 the General Synod Council had drafted a mission statement, but then instructed a group of eight church leaders (the general secretary, annual general synod officers, and several RCA pastors) to go "up a mountain" to do the final wordsmithing of the document. Its actual adoption at the 1997 General Synod was still, however, short and relatively simple.

This process for adopting the Mission Statement is already suggestive of a climate in the RCA, especially about attitudes toward structures and constitutional documents. Recall that to delete an inconsequential semicolon from the *Book of Church Order* (the denomination's polity statement of church government, which is part of the RCA's constitution) requires a lengthy and often tedious procedure. By contrast, the Mission Statement, which has received widespread attention, great publicity, and almost creedal status throughout the RCA, was adopted by a single general synod.

This suggests a variety of intertwined attitudes in the RCA. First, it signaled that the way to change, move, or motivate the RCA was not through changing its constitution or restructuring its agencies and offices. Second, the Mission Statement could be adopted and then circulated quickly. Third, its adoption conveyed a rapid, activist, pacesetting approach. By contrast, constitutional change is perceived not simply to be wearisome but also to accomplish

3. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "Why a Mission Statement?" (lecture delivered at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, February 2, 1998), p. 4.

very little. Adopting a mission statement rather than changing the constitution or reorganizing the denominational structures seemed to convey fatigue, impatience, and even distrust of what is frequently perceived as parliamentary posturing, bureaucratic burdens, and tedious procedures associated with the denominational constitution. It does not seem too much to assert that the Mission Statement voiced what was widely known but never before stated so clearly: the constitution of the RCA — its doctrinal standards, liturgy, and polity — has a very weak grasp on the average congregation of the denomination. The impetus for the Mission Statement and its relatively uncomplicated procedure for adoption are themselves symbolic of one of its most memorable phrases, “We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.”

Activist and Optimist

In 1978 a thoughtful and complete statement of faith entitled “Our Song of Hope” was adopted by the RCA. Although it does not have status equal to the RCA’s “doctrinal standards,” it is well regarded as a contemporary expression of Reformed theology. However, “Our Song of Hope” has had very limited impact and received little attention in the RCA, despite efforts to adapt it for use in worship. In the late 1980s there was a denomination-wide effort to discuss and discover a denominational identity. A short “Identity Statement” which rang with a creedlike tone and held the possibility for use in worship emerged from this focus on denominational identity. However, that statement also received little attention and was quickly forgotten. Currently, the Theology Commission of the RCA is attempting to develop a short expression of the Reformed faith for use in worship and publicity. While the assignment is not an easy one, the low profile given to the project and the slow response from the commission seem to indicate that it is not seen to have great urgency. Given the lackluster reception of recent attempts at credal statements in the RCA, perhaps this is no surprise.

What accounts for the less-than-energetic response to these attempts at theologically weighty statements? Perhaps it is because they did not arise from a crisis or a timely and heated theological controversy. There was little sense of groundswell or urgency behind them. Instead, they come largely from the impetus of individuals: theological professors or annual denominational presidents. It is likewise difficult to perceive any large popular demand or crisis-moment that gave rise to the Mission Statement. This statement was also largely the brainchild of denominational presidents and a new general secretary. Why, then, has it received more recognition and acceptance?

Obviously, it is not intended to be a genuinely credal document. There is

no attempt to state afresh the nature of the Trinity or explicate in modern idiom the nature of Christ. As a mission statement, it is more a plan of action than a statement of belief. Not surprisingly, then, its overall tone is pragmatic and task-oriented. Words like “equip,” “unleash,” “alert,” “front lines,” “transformed,” “engaging,” “risk,” “dream,” “proactive,” and “celebrate” give the document an energetic and eager quality. This activist, pragmatic tone seems to connect with congregations and pastors in a manner that more doctrinal statements do not. If the brief process for the adoption of the Mission Statement suggests fatigue with wrangling over polity, then the precedence it has taken over statements with more doctrinal emphasis may suggest a similar fatigue with doctrine. Just as constitutional and polity changes are viewed as cumbersome and irrelevant, so fresh theological conversations apparently are not considered timely or productive.

The vigorous and enthusiastic tone of the statement distinguishes it from voices frequently heard in American mainline Protestant literature today. Terms and images like “post-Christian,” “relinquishment,” “resident aliens,” and “exile experience” have been commonly used to express both the pain and the potential resulting from the erosion of mainline Protestantism’s influence in American life.⁴ The Mission Statement shows little or no connection to this line of thought. There is an air of vitality and confidence in it.

This is not to say that it has a naive or outmoded perspective on American society and the church’s place in that society. The statement describes the world as “lost and broken.” Indeed, the very idea of a mission statement implies that there is much for the church to do. Yet the church seems up to the task before it. The Mission Statement may express some exasperation toward past church practices (“consistories selected more for ministry than management” or “no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business”). However, the themes of exile, weakness, and relinquishment common elsewhere are not found here. Are these themes too dismal and debilitating for the statement? Does their absence convey a belief that the RCA is distinct from American mainline Protestantism and exempt from its plight? Whatever the reason, the Mission Statement opts instead for a more energetic and optimistic approach.

From where does this confident, activist tone arise? In his book *Dutch*

4. Well-known examples of this post-Christian exile theme include much of the work of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, especially their joint effort, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), or Willimon’s more recent collaborative effort with Martin B. Copenhaver and Anthony Robinson, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Walter Brueggemann’s work, such as *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), often carries similar themes.

Calvinism in Modern America, James Bratt classifies the nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed immigrants to the United States into four categories. Although attending primarily to the RCA's sibling denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, Bratt labels the Dutch immigrants who became part of the RCA in the American Midwest as "outgoing, optimistic pietists." In contrast to other Dutch Reformed immigrants of the time, this group was more open to American influences and was more "moralistic, genteel, willing to submerge strict 'Reformed-ness' in general Protestantism in order to spread the faith over the entire nation." Their faith "induced a life of service . . . and service was *the* end of religion."⁵

The roots of the RCA Mission Statement may be found here. The optimistic spirit of American can-do-ism and service is evident throughout it — for example, "a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing," "laity and pastors unleashed," "alert to opportunities around them," "eager and equipped to serve," and "classes that are empowering and proactive." The adoption of the Mission Statement can then be viewed as evidence that this strand of late-nineteenth-century immigrant optimism and activism has gained ascendancy within the RCA.

Postmodern Bricolage

After looking for some connection between the Mission Statement and nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants, it may seem odd for us to speculate that the document also shows influences from postmodern theology. Granted, the term "postmodern" is notoriously slippery and overworked. In this context, however, it is intended to convey a pragmatic, nonsystematic, more emotive than rational endeavor. The pragmatic agenda of the Mission Statement itself is clear. The church needs to be about doing, engaging in activity, and achieving results. Failure is understood as a lack of results or imagination, not theological heterodoxy. "What works" is given priority over how it is held together or systematic consistency. Besides the attention to pragmatic outcome, clearly the statement intends to inspire rather than explain. Its use of the terms "vision" and "imagine" along with the activist, enthusiastic rhetoric indicates that it is hoping for people to "catch a vision." The use of the rubric "imagine" throughout the document suggests that the intention is for people to dream and to be caught up in the moment.

5. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 44-45.

It could be argued that the Mission Statement is a fine example of theological “bricolage.” This term, most commonly associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁶ comes from the French word for handyman, jack-of-all-trades, or *bricoleur*. The *bricoleur* is not a master builder, or to shift to more theological language, not a systematician or encyclopedist. This person is able to piece together available resources in a workable, “good-enough” fashion. With bits of string found in the pocket and other readily available odds and ends, the *bricoleur* gets the job done. Likewise, the RCA Mission Statement draws upon familiar, accessible language, bits of string pulled from various pop-culture lexicons. This colloquial accessibility may account for the wide and popular notice it has received.

Other than the terminology for RCA assemblies (consistories, classes, and synods), there seems to be no denomination-specific language in the Mission Statement. Likewise, it is difficult to detect any “classic” themes of Reformed theology in it, such as sovereignty, election, guilt, grace, and gratitude. It is fair to say that this could be the mission statement of almost any American Protestant denomination. This observation need not be understood as a criticism. Yet the statement’s generic quality does seem to be a long way from earlier efforts of the 1980s to find that which was unique about the RCA, the search for a denominational “identity” or “glue that holds us together.” It recalls Bratt’s claim that the optimist-pietist strain of nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed immigrants displayed a willingness to submerge “Reformed-ness” into a more general American Protestantism.

The Mission Statement’s pragmatic, nonsystematic approach indicates that if there is a denominational glue, it is neither a common heritage nor classic theological confessions, but mission activity in the present. Unity and identity are found in a common purpose and activity. What unites the RCA is being engaged in mission. This mission activity is a positive, challenging, and generally uncontroversial theme. By drawing attention to a shared task and activity, the denomination can focus less on doctrinal questions or hot-button social issues that inevitably bring division and splintering.

Polity and Assemblies Redescribed

If the Mission Statement is not very denominationally specific in tone, the frequent references to the various assemblies and structures of the RCA make

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 17-22.

plain the Reformed connection. Terms like "congregations," "consistories" (the governing body of the local congregation), both "pastors" and "ministers of Word and sacrament," "classis," "synod," "staff," and "denomination" are found throughout. The two main portions of the document, entitled "The Vision" and "Living Out the Vision," move through the different assemblies, organizations, and offices of the RCA, beginning with the local congregation and concluding with the denomination as a whole. A brief look at the statement's description and portrayal of these various assemblies and structures may be instructive.

In the RCA's presbyterial polity, the classis has been described (semi-accurately) as a "corporate bishop." The authority and role of a bishop are placed in a collective gathering of ministers and elders from local congregations. The classis is the body to which both congregations and ministers are accountable. The Mission Statement describes it as a community of "nurture and vision." The word "accountable" is used twice in conjunction with it. However, the stronger emphasis of the statement seems to view the classis as the place of "living in communion" where collegiality, relationships, and support are found. This is not an entirely new understanding of the role of the classis, but this relational emphasis is clearly in line with the document's warmer, supportive tone.

The RCA has both regional synods and a general synod, but the Mission Statement does not distinguish between them. In one reference synods are grouped with the classis. In another place the synod is grouped with the staff. When placed alongside the classis, the synod receives a description similar to that just noted for the classis: community, nurture, and accountability. When the synod is placed with the staff, more programmatic and institutional themes emerge in phrases such as "connected to the larger church" and "funnel resources." A tension or ambivalence seems present in the description of the synods. Are they "communities of nurture," or do they have institutional, programmatic functions? Can they do both? Should they do both?

The curious inclusion of staff among the different RCA assemblies merits some discussion. Staff is an interesting and somewhat incongruent addition since it is obviously not a term of RCA polity such as consistory or synod. Staff includes those persons employed by classes, regional synods, and general synods. While the various assemblies such as classes or synods come together temporarily, take on their business, and then disperse, the staff continues to implement the actions of the assembly.

The mention of staff in the Mission Statement may indicate the arrival or recognition of a somewhat new polity in the RCA. In a very real way, of course, the staff has come to be more associated and identified with the synods (regional and general) than with the occasional convening of the assembly. Al-

though the Mission Statement was primarily drafted by local ministers of the RCA, it originated in the General Synod Council to which all denominational staff report and serve as resource persons. The mention of staff alongside the various assemblies suggests that the staffs of the synods are viewed as a significant power and presence in the RCA. They are accorded status equivalent to the assemblies of RCA polity. On one level, this may not be overly important or surprising. Perhaps the Mission Statement is simply recognizing and voicing what has long been acknowledged. Regular employees, like the staff of synods, cannot help but have considerable, long-term influence. On the other hand, it may also suggest that staff were an important impetus behind the Mission Statement itself. There is a certain irony that in a document that focuses strongly on the key role of the congregation (as we shall soon see), the staff plays such a prominent role and now seems to join congregation, classis, and synod as an important institution and factor in the RCA.

The Funnel Connection

The Mission Statement uses the image of a funnel to describe the connection between the local church on one side and the synods and staff on the other (e.g., “synods and staff that funnel resources to the local church”). Note the direction in which the funnel flows. The synods and staff funnel the resources to the local church. The funnel flows to the congregation. The congregation is to receive from the synods and staff, which are to serve and focus on the congregation. They exist “to equip congregations.”

There is no mention in the statement of the congregation funneling resources to the denomination. The connection between congregation and denomination is now portrayed as based on and presumably justified by the resources provided to the congregation. Congregations maintain their connection to the denomination because of these resources. There is no indication of the denomination setting any terms or parameters for the congregation's connection to it. One wonders what happens should congregations not be pleased by the resources flowing to them through the funnel. Moreover, the Mission Statement seems to overlook the fact that all resources assemblies and staff have at their command were originally funneled to them from the congregations.

The funnel therefore becomes the image whereby the denomination is now asking for entrée into the congregation's “mission,” promising to funnel and provide resources of some sort. To switch metaphors, rather than trying to keep congregations marching in line behind it, the denomination is now asking

if there might be room in the congregation's parade and agreeing to be a beneficial band member.

This attention to the congregation as the focal point and even the *raison d'être* of the staff, synod, and entire denomination should not come as a complete surprise. In the Mission Statement's own words, the RCA is a denomination that is "locally-oriented." The classic doctrine of the church in the Reformed tradition has always had a local weighting. The church is where the Word is preached, the sacraments celebrated rightly, and Christian discipline exercised. However, this notion of the congregation as the target of the denominational funnel is new. The other assemblies of the denomination have traditionally been understood to have different tasks beyond the abilities or reach of congregations. While these other tasks may indirectly benefit the congregation, these assemblies have not previously been articulated as funneling resources toward the congregation.

Of course, countless observers have noted the ascendancy of the local congregation throughout American Protestantism and a corresponding decline in denominational strength and loyalty. Denominational staffs and assemblies have clearly recognized the importance and influence of this trend. However, an acknowledgment of the congregation-centered denomination has usually been mixed with subtle and not-so-subtle warnings and disapproval from denominational loyalists. For example, Edwin Mulder, general secretary of the RCA from 1983 to 1994, wrote in 1993, "It comes as a surprise to some people that Reformed Church congregations are not entirely autonomous. . . . We are a connectional church."⁷ By contrast, the Mission Statement seems to grant approval, apparently without reservation, to the congregation as the "front lines of ministry" and the target of the denomination's funnel. To reiterate, the swing toward the centrality of congregations has been noticeable for quite a while and has generally received some denominational recognition and tepid acceptance. In the Mission Statement, however, the tepidness becomes noticeably warmer.

This is arguably the biggest change represented by the Mission Statement. Instead of being threatened by a lack of denominational loyalty, the statement recognizes, permits, and even blesses the connections that congregations have made on the local level. Furthermore, it commends these connections and activities with the esteemed mantle of "mission." Supporting the Young Life chapter at the local high school, cooperating with a neighboring Methodist congregation on a soup kitchen, or holding joint Lenten services with the Lutheran

7. Edwin Mulder, "The Reformed Connection," *Church Herald: A Publication of the Reformed Church in America*, February 1993, p. 11.

congregation down the street are the ground-level reality for typical Reformed congregations. According to the Mission Statement, these activities qualify as mission. In a denomination in which foreign missions have long been the favored child, conferring this mantle of mission to the congregation is no small happening, and is in fact quite the compliment. The activities of the local congregation are now described as mission, yet the activity most commonly associated with that term — denominationally supervised missionary work undertaken by full-time, commissioned professionals — is never explicitly mentioned in the Mission Statement.

The RCA is described as “locally-oriented, globally connected.” This hints at some recognition of those broader concerns that have traditionally been viewed as the denomination’s role: world missions, formal ecumenical ties, and theological education. As alluded to earlier, before the congregational focus of the funnel image, the broader assemblies of the RCA had generally been understood to carry out different tasks than a local church, often those beyond a congregation’s reach. None of these broader, denominational tasks received more attention in the RCA than foreign missions.

In telling congregations to do mission and affirming their present activities as mission, the Mission Statement keeps before congregations what the denomination does best and what has received the most support and appreciation. If congregations are to be about mission, does it follow that part of that mission must include denominational foreign missions? If there has been an unspoken funnel in the past, it has carried the dollars of congregations to support these visible and popular denominational ventures. In the RCA, foreign missionary activity has traditionally taken a lion’s share of denominational monies. The view from the pew has been that if the denomination does anything, it should be missions. The phrase “globally connected” in the Mission Statement may be a subtle argument that the front lines of ministry are not entirely at a congregational level, and that some dollars must continue to flow through the funnel in the reverse direction.

Are We a Fellowship?

Probably no word in the Mission Statement has generated more discussion and concern than “fellowship” (e.g., “the Reformed Church in America is a *fellowship* of congregations”). Fellowship has not previously been a part of either historic Reformed ecclesiology or RCA parlance. Traditionally, it has implied a more independent understanding of the church than the more organic connectionalism of the RCA. Its inclusion in the Mission Statement may simply

be an example of bricolage at work, drawing from accessible and common language. Others, however, suggest that fellowship terminology indicates a significant and troubling turn in the understanding of Reformed ecclesiology.

Fellowship, it is argued, conveys a much more voluntarist notion of church than has been the classic Reformed viewpoint. It implies like-minded persons coming together of their own accord. Just as fellowship can arise spontaneously and informally, it can also dissolve easily and without lasting consequences. According to critics, this lacks an awareness and appreciation of the formal, enduring bonds that undergird the Reformed understanding of the church. Fellowship terminology fails to take seriously the covenant relationships within a congregation and between congregations in the RCA, replacing them with passing, subjective compatibility. A variety of derogatory labels has therefore arisen in reaction to the fellowship terminology of the Mission Statement. A closetful of Reformed bogeymen appear, and critics seem to apply the one that scares them most.

“Congregationalism” is the most frequent slur. This denunciation has a long history in the RCA and is seemingly used whenever denominational loyalty is in jeopardy. When used in this way, the word implies the supremacy of the congregation over the denomination. Every congregation does what is right in its own eyes. Congregationalism is, of course, a historic, recognized, and formalized church polity, albeit not the RCA’s presbyterial polity. Its hallmarks have generally included decision making on a local level and congregational independence. This accusation, then, fails to appreciate that historic congregationalism is not congregational in the same sense as the Mission Statement’s understanding of the local church as the target of the denomination’s resource funnel. Many congregations within denominations with a congregational polity would likely be surprised to hear themselves described as the targets of the denomination’s funnel.

“Sectarian” is another favorite Reformed aspersion used by critics of the Mission Statement’s fellowship terminology. Drawing on the well-known work of Ernst Troeltsch, the term is a correct description to the extent that it conveys the same quality of a voluntarist, believer’s church as does “fellowship.” When Reformed critics use it disparagingly, they are generally attacking a perceived withdrawing, quietist, or separatist understanding of engagement with culture — Christ *against* culture, to borrow H. Richard Niebuhr’s familiar phrase. There is little indication of this sort of sectarianism in the Mission Statement. Given today’s culture wars and ongoing debates about the most appropriate form of Christian engagement with culture, the label sectarian is likely to be misunderstood and to serve only to confuse matters.

“Localism” has been offered as another criticism of the statement’s per-

spective. The use of the funnel image certainly suggests a strong local leaning. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, classic Reformed ecclesiology has a similar impulse toward localism — the Word is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and Christian discipline is practiced on the local level. None of the three RCA doctrinal standards mentions the wider church. Of course, to say a Reformed understanding of the church has always had a localist inclination is not to say that this has been at the expense or neglect of wider church assemblies. The denomination's doctrinal standards may not make explicit mention of the wider church, but certainly it was always implied. Dort, for example, was itself a synod where doctrinal standards were adopted. That monumental synod stipulated the activities and purview of the broader assemblies as those things that the more local assembly could not address. "In those Assemblies, ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted, and that in an ecclesiastical manner. A greater Assembly shall take cognizance of those things alone which could not be determined in a lesser, or that appertain in the churches or congregations in general, which compose such an assembly."⁸ While localism may be intended as a criticism of the Mission Statement's funnel focus on the congregation, there is a sense in which it is an appropriate and fair description of Reformed views of the church.

"Congregationalism," "sectarian," and "localism" all have shortcomings as critical descriptions of the use of "fellowship" in the Mission Statement. No more accurate or appropriate term of critique will be proposed here. Yet acknowledging the deficiencies of these critical labels does not mean that the thrust behind the criticism is incorrect. Despite their inadequacies, these three flawed terms do serve as points that can help to circumscribe the disconcerting position implied in the statement. There is no doubt that Reformed ecclesiology has had a fuller sense of the church being a lasting, interrelated union than is conveyed by the term "fellowship."

More significant is whether "fellowship" connotes a shift in the source and initiative of the church. The Heidelberg Catechism (question and answer 54) says of the church, "the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in faith." The church is formed and sustained by God's activity of gathering and preserving. The church is not primarily a human endeavor. It is not a group of like-minded individuals who come together by choice. As is the case with so

8. Articles of Dort (1619), article XXX, *A Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation*, ed. Edward Tanjore Corwin (New York: Board of Publishing of the Reformed Church in America, 1906).

much of Reformed theology, God is the one who takes the initiative. In this sense "sectarian" may be the most accurate description of the Mission Statement's fellowship terminology despite the unintended undertones of cultural quietism it often implies. The church in Reformed theology is neither a voluntary association, a humanly generated institution, a fellowship of believers, nor a group of people involved in mission or other laudable activities.

This indicates that the use of the term "fellowship" in the Mission Statement is an aberration, a break (intended or not) with Reformed ecclesiology. At the same time, it must be noted that almost immediately after it uses the term, the statement describes the fellowship as "called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world." "Called by God" resounds with the Reformed tradition. If critics maintain that fellowship terminology implies a "lower" ecclesiology than the traditional Reformed position, here a "higher" and more traditional Reformed ecclesiology seems to be articulated. Moreover, "the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world" sounds like a much higher ecclesiology, almost Roman Catholic in tone, than a Reformed perspective. Do these higher and more traditional descriptions of the church balance and mitigate the Mission Statement's use of fellowship, or are they symptomatic of an inconsistent and muddled ecclesiology?

Recalling the earlier discussion of bricolage may be instructive at this point. It may be too much to ask for a consistent and clear ecclesiology from a denominational mission statement. This one uses an assortment of terms that may not reliably fit traditional theological categories. "Fellowship" may simply be a familiar and popular term that carries no great implications to the vast majority of persons and is not viewed as distinctively different from Reformed beliefs. Discomfort with its use may signal our misunderstanding of the statement's audience and intent. A finely honed, theologically precise document it is not. Accessible theological bricolage may be a more accurate description of it.

Intentional or not, however, the use of the word in the statement still reveals a significant development. True, it is a pragmatic mission statement, not a precise doctrinal creed. However, the choice and use of language and terminology matter and will have serious long-term implications. The use of fellowship terminology introduces an unfamiliar element into the Reformed lexicon. Consciously or unconsciously, this sort of bricolage will change the theological vocabulary over time. That an average audience is more familiar with fellowship terminology only confirms that today's society holds a non-Reformed, voluntarist understanding of church. The Mission Statement's usage may simply be a reflection of that perception. Yet by recognizing and conceding this situation, it also results in the sanctioning of the situation.

From Description to Prescription

If up to this point the attempt has been primarily to report on the RCA Mission Statement, this final section will move more overtly to analysis and critique. This analysis will attend to two basic themes. First, despite the attention given to congregational activities in the Mission Statement, it also gives expression to a new conception of the synods and their staffs. These groups are framed in more spiritual and visionary terms. The statement seems to build the relationship between denominational structures and the congregation on the basis of some sort of spiritual authority. Yet at the same time, that relationship is built upon more market-driven images of consumer and provider. Second, we must ask how Reformed ecclesiology is altered in a variety of ways, small and large, by the statement. The most significant of these alterations implies that the initiative for the church is found in human activity. This attention to the church doing mission is likely intended to be motivational but finally may place such high expectations on these activities as to lead instead to weary and disillusioned congregations and Christians.

I believe the Mission Statement has gained widespread attention and influence in the RCA and, to that extent, has been a success. Even if one totally discounts its substance, the broad recognition of it throughout the RCA suggests that the ability of a denomination to publicize and promote themes or causes is stronger than might be imagined. After its adoption, a copy of the document, impressively printed on parchment-like paper, was sent to every RCA congregation. Thousands more copies were requested by individuals, congregations, and other church bodies. Over two-thirds of the RCA's congregations accepted a videotape and study guide for the Mission Statement. The statement has appeared prominently in the denomination's annual "plan calendar." It has been frequently cited in denominational reports and literature. A phrase from it now appears on the bottom of RCA letterhead.

Given the consensus that denominational loyalty has unraveled in recent decades, the statement appears to stand as a counterexample of a denomination being quite successful in bringing its project to the attention of congregations. Although talk of denominational weakness is widespread in the United States, the RCA Mission Statement demonstrates that a denomination's power to publicize and even persuade, its capacity for dissemination, and its ability to secure the attention of congregations should not be underestimated.

The attention the statement has received, however, should not be accounted for totally by the RCA's capacity to publicize. Its content and substance must also be given credit for the interest it has garnered. Its eager, activist rhetoric, its accessibility, and its can-do pragmatism all likely account for its impact.

Most importantly, I would argue that it is perceived less as an attempt to foist a denominational agenda or doctrine upon congregations than most items approved by a general synod. This is the genius of the Mission Statement and the most significant change represented by it. Rather than somehow trying to marshal, mildly chastise, or rein in congregations, it is perceived as freeing and empowering them. They are exhorted to do mission. In turn, they appreciate that the denomination recognizes and sanctions their activities as being mission. Instead of feeling threatened by a lack of denominational unity and allegiance, congregations are given the impression that the denomination acknowledges and accepts its secondary status in congregational life and simply wants to be a useful partner in congregational mission.

Yet what appears to be a denomination willing to relinquish some prominence is described by Don Luidens in the accompanying sociological case study (pp. 410-35) as "managing localism." This may seem strange after the previous discussion of nascent congregationalism or sectarianism. Is the denomination taking a more hands-off approach, or is it attempting to manage and invade the local congregation? Paradoxically, some have even accused the Mission Statement of representing "creeping episcopalianism." In this case "episcopalian" refers to a polity with bishops and not the Anglican tradition. Nonetheless, after just reporting that some of its critics accuse it of being too congregational, how then can it also be episcopalian? Perhaps this is overheated rhetoric, but it gives voice to the concern that, despite initial appearances of blessing a congregation's local activities, the statement really establishes a new and intrusive link directly between the general synod and congregations.

Resolving the Paradox

While the Mission Statement seemingly signals a new appreciation for the local nature of the church and a genuine unleashing of congregations to move creatively in mission, it also can be seen as a new and more overt flexing of denominational power. Instead of taking responsibility for underappreciated but necessary tasks like ecumenical relations, administration, and theological education, or being viewed as the outside enforcer attempting to foist its program and conformity upon congregations, the statement sets the denomination up as the inspirer, the vision caster, the fresh breeze in the congregation's sails.

This is the perplexing ambivalence that drifts through the Mission Statement. It sets the congregation free for mission and yet portrays the denomination as an essential inspirer of this mission rather than its unobtrusive adminis-

trator. It celebrates the grassroots church and yet was generated by a denominational council, adopted by the widest denominational assembly, and vigorously publicized by denominational structures. It focuses on the local church and yet synod staffs receive mention and are granted an almost official status within RCA polity. It gives the wider church assemblies a warmer, more relational, and spiritual gloss and yet uses the denomination's promotional machinery to advertise this spiritual approach. In the Mission Statement we see the denomination attaching itself to congregations through a document that suggests congregations are almost voluntarily less attached to the denomination.

Of course, denominational structures have often tried to generate excitement among congregations. What is new or now more obvious is the denomination attempting to play the role of spiritual nurturer. This warmer, more collegial connection would have been associated with the role of the classis in RCA polity. Perhaps it is this change that gives rise to accusations of creeping episcopalianism. There is no need to suggest that this more relational, spiritual presentation of the denomination is a Trojan horse, a sinister conspiracy intended to gain easier access to congregational coffers. It does, however, indicate that the denomination realizes it must establish its relationship with congregations on new and different grounds.

The Mission Statement clearly is an attempt to move the denominational structure away from the rational, corporate model and toward a warmer, spiritual connection. While RCA polity has never implied that the denomination's task is to mirror corporate business methods, generally there has been a sense that the denominational structures are more functional than spiritual. Less than forty years ago the title of the top officer of the denomination was still "stated clerk," a title that may convey slightly more than a bean counter but hardly suggests any sort of great spiritual authority or charisma. Certainly few if any would expect someone called a stated clerk to develop or advance a mission statement. Granberg-Michaelson recognized this in saying, "the expectations . . . for the RCA's general secretary . . . are almost schizophrenic. They move in two different and often competing directions: to be the chief executive and administrator . . . and to be a pastoral presence and servant-leader."⁹

The Mission Statement's move toward a warmer, spiritual tone and away from a rational, corporate approach appears at the same time to be a move away from traditional Reformed doctrine and polity. While bricolage from pop lexicons may partially explain the absence of Reformed themes from the document, the absence also suggests a deep ambivalence about the viability of Reformed theology in the future. Reformed themes and doctrine have been

9. Granberg-Michaelson, "Why a Mission Statement?" pp. 2-3.

lumped together, it seems, with a perceived corporate bureaucracy under the label of "denomination." Antipathy toward the latter has bled over to the former. Defending bureaucracy is a task few would want to undertake. However, a hallmark of Reformed theology has been that vocations and tasks such as businessperson, lawyer, executive, or administrator are very capable of providing service to God's kingdom. Trying to put a more spiritual, pietistic gloss on the activities and assemblies of the church may inadvertently shrink the sphere of influence of God's kingdom and narrow the perceived tasks and ways one may serve in the church.

The optimistic, activist tone of the Mission Statement further contributes to the lack of appreciation for a theological heritage. Looking to the future, the statement's exuberance seems to slip into impulsiveness and impatience. Terms associated with the past are perceived as impediments that must be discarded. Yet its popular, contemporary vocabulary seems to bode a very short life span. It leaves the RCA with fewer roots from which to draw for the next mission statement or similar project.

The desire of the denominational structure to cast visions and exert spiritual authority suggests disquiet about the ability of those structures to continue to make a case for themselves and their designated functions. Knowing its support is eroding, the denomination appears eager to recast itself in new terms and tasks. If "administrator" was perceived instead as "bureaucrat" and "theological voice" was understood as a distant doctrinal "enforcer," then "inspirer" and "equipper" become the new, preferred, and necessary tasks. It is still an open question whether these new tasks and roles will successfully rally denominational attitudes or whether the denomination has jettisoned so much of its past as only to hasten greater erosion.

It is a legitimate concern that the Mission Statement fails to appreciate and make a case for the necessity of those unglamorous tasks that denominational structures must do, regardless of the manner. Traditional missions and missionaries continue to require support. Denominational pension and insurance plans must still be maintained. The need for providing theological education remains. Ecumenical relationships may take new forms but are also likely to continue on any denominational agenda. Yet has the Mission Statement made any explicit or effective case for these tasks? Will any denomination and its staff be able to continue these tasks while also attempting to be a warm inspirer and resource provider? It seems improbable.

Along with inspirer, the Mission Statement also makes the denomination into equipper. The synods and staff must funnel resources to the congregation. In a rather unexpected turn, the spiritual tone here takes on a much more economic, goods-and-services quality. These days, of course, mission statements are

a common part of the corporate world for small businesses, industrious executives, and huge corporations. Moreover, this greater spiritual authority of the denomination still relies on a vigorous promotional blitz. Is the funneling of resources to congregations by the denomination truly a basis for some sort of inspirational connection or is it just plain consumerism? If the RCA wants to base its connection to the congregations on its ability to fill the funnel with good resources, can it really provide them? A recent study done for the RCA said,

Consistories are most likely to desire assistance from classes, regional synods, and the general synod with issues that concern them and with their primary goals for congregations . . . recruiting new members, managing facilities, developing outreach programs. . . . Unlike more traditional denominational services . . . [these] are issues that are usually idiosyncratic, issues that “play out” differently from one congregation to another. They are ultimately local issues that must be addressed locally.¹⁰

Conclusion: Who Establishes the Church?

Although the RCA Mission Statement is not part of the RCA constitution and does not attempt to be a confessional document, it carries all sorts of implicit theology closely related to an understanding or definition of the church. As previously noted, its tilt toward localism is not entirely new or unfamiliar to Reformed theology. It is, however, more pronounced in this document. The congregation is now the target of the denominational funnel, as opposed to the more traditional, mutual to-and-fro that occurred between congregations and the broader assemblies. There may be, however, an even more fundamental shift in the notion of what constitutes the church.

The attention to doing in the Mission Statement — inviting, growing, renewing, directing resources, feeding the hungry, engaging the world — gives the impression that the church is established and maintained by human activity. The activities the statement holds up are certainly laudable and worthwhile. They do not, however, constitute the church. A Reformed perspective proclaims that the church is “called and gathered” by Christ.

The activist, pragmatic tone of the statement presents a church that is a grassroots endeavor. The statement attempts to counter the prevalent and neg-

10. 1998 *Consistorial Reports: Significant Events, Concerns, and Goals of Reformed Church Consistories*, Prepared for: *The Task Force on Responsibilities and Purpose of Regional Synods and Classes* (Holland, Mich.: Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research at Hope College, 1999), p. 76.

ative “top-down” impressions of the denomination by focusing on congregational action and directing the denominational funnel toward the congregation. Actually, the different assemblies in Reformed polity — classis, regional synod, and general synod — have traditionally been considered wider assemblies, not higher ones. Decisions made at a synod, for example, come from a broader base but not from the top down. In order to counter this top-down misperception, however, the Mission Statement shifts to a more grassroots tone. The difficulty with this grassroots understanding of the church is that, in a very real theological sense, the church from a Reformed perspective is a top-down endeavor. It is top-down not in the sense of hierarchical, heavy-handed, or bureaucratic structures, but because the initiating and sustaining of the church are of God. In Christian theology, of course, God’s top-down initiatives are frequently manifested on a grassroots level, as the incarnation so tellingly reveals. In trying to correct a hierarchical, bureaucratic view of the various denominational assemblies and elevate the congregation, however, the Mission Statement instead stumbles toward a voluntarist notion of the church. The church is considered to be constituted by human mission activity rather than the call of Christ. As one person quipped of the Mission Statement, “It is all immanence with no transcendence.”

In claiming that the statement leans toward a voluntarist basis for the church, I am not trying to be a doctrinal purist, maintaining the Reformed tradition simply for its own sake. Nor am I attempting to sound holier-than-thou, ridiculously claiming that the statement leaves God out of the church. A grassroots church, however, is always going to be measured by the state of the grass rather than by trusting in the initiative of God, the call of Christ, and the sustenance of the Holy Spirit. Although the Mission Statement is meant to energize, motivate, and unleash, might it not instead lead in the long run to frazzled, disheartened, and anxious congregations who falsely believe that the church rises and falls with their success and failure in mission?

Appendix: Reformed Church in America

Our Mission

The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry — a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing — following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God.

The Vision

- Imagine . . . laity and pastors unleashed, hungry for ministry; congregations mission-minded and inviting, authentic and healing, growing and multiplying, alert to opportunities around them.
- Imagine . . . classes and synods as communities of nurture and vision — accountable, responsible, sustained by prayer, alive to the Spirit.
- Imagine . . . a denomination, locally-oriented, globally connected, that prays in many languages and beholds the face of Christ in every face; a denomination renewed and renewing, raising up leaders, always directing its resources toward the front lines of ministry.
- Imagine . . . hurts being healed, the lost being found, the hungry being fed, peace healing brokenness, hope replacing despair, lives transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.
- Imagine . . . the Reformed Church in America, engaging the world.

Living Out the Vision

The vision will be lived out . . .

By congregations focused on ministry — creative, confident, healing, and radically attentive to the world outside its doors.

By consistories selected more for ministry than management, attuned to the Spirit, eager and equipped to serve.

By ministers of Word and sacrament open to dream, prepared to lead, willing to risk.

By classes that are empowering and proactive, living in communion, each accountable to all, and all to Christ.

By synods and staff that funnel resources to the local church and keep us connected to the larger church.

By all people of the RCA, a network of relationships, a fellowship that celebrates its gifts and confesses its failures, and where the ministries of all are valued and cherished.

To live out this vision by consistories, classes, synods and staff, our decision-making will be transformed by a pervasive climate of worship, discernment, and biblical reflection. We will no longer do business as usual, nor our usual business.