

Summary Report on Sept 17, 2020
Classis Grand Rapids East
Presented by the Classis Executive Team

Diversity and Inclusion within the CRCNA and Classis GR East
Calvin University Social Research Class Report, Spring 2020

This report was supported by Resonate Global Mission, as part of the undersigned's part-time role as Associate Leader with their Great Lakes regional mission team. Research was suggested by Dr. Reggie Smith, then of CRC Race Relations. The project was conducted, under limitations dictated by Covid-19 restrictions, by students from a Social Research Class led by Dr. Rachel Venema of Calvin University's Sociology Department. More than a dozen leaders of color who care deeply about the future of the CRCNA and Classis Grand Rapids East participated in interpreting the report to the Classis Executive Team and classis leadership as a whole.

The objective of the research was to inquire into the status of racial diversity and inclusion within Classis Grand Rapids East and, more broadly, the potential role of a classis in encouraging and supporting the work of racial reconciliation in and by member churches. The research was framed around foundational statements of the CRCNA and select Core Values and Ministry Priorities statements of Classis Grand Rapids East. The findings of the report are based on these statements, related literature for the class project, and feedback from the above-mentioned leaders of color. The report is organized as follows:

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The *Recommendations for Implementation* on page 8 were adopted by Classis Grand Rapids East in full session on Sept 17, 2020.

(Rev) Al Mulder, Stated Clerk

PART I - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REPORT

(The complete 29-page report appears in a separate document)

1. Introduction, pp. 5-6

To date the CRCNA's experience with diversity and inclusion highlights the following:

- a. The CRC's historical focus is on *horizontal reconciliation* with an emphasis on breaking down barriers and enfolding people and congregations of color into a predominantly white denomination.

Note: *Corresponding with the CRCNA emphasis on racial reconciliation is a lack of emphasis on racial justice (cf. Concluding Discussion, p, 5, 6-c).*

- b. Although the denomination enjoys a growing number of predominantly homogeneous "ethnic" congregations, the overwhelming majority of historically white congregations remain predominantly white.

2. Literature Review, pp. 7-8

For the purposes of this study, available literature regarding Classis GR East is almost non-existent. One exception is the Dougherty & Mulder study on CGRE's response to growing urban diversity, updated in 2009, which "may allow one to hypothesize that the barriers to diversity and inclusion point towards larger structural issues within CGRE...." (p. 8).

3. Research Questions & Methods, pp. 9-12

Due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, research methods were limited to a survey of congregational pastors and interviewing leaders of color in Classis Grand Rapids East.

4. Results from Survey of Pastors, pp. 13-18

The survey was developed in relation to the statement that "The Christian Reformed Church in North America is committed to doing the work of reconciliation and inclusion" (cf. CRCNA website). The surveys were distributed to all member churches, and nine were completed, ordinarily by the lead pastor(s).

#1. What does commitment to diversity and inclusion mean to leaders of churches in Classis Grand Rapids East?

Free response questions included the following themes:

-*all people*: the concept that all people should be included.

-*hard work*: the labor that diversity requires, more intentional than happenstance.

-*education*: antiracism training and other programs which teach about implicit biases and fundamental principles to diversity and inclusion.

-*history*: US History that is intertwined in both institutions and policies.

All but one of the respondents indicated that this ministry was Extremely important or Very important to them personally.

#2. What is the level of commitment to diversity and inclusion represented in the leadership of churches in Classis Grand Rapids East?

The respondents used two themes to describe their congregation's commitment to reconciliation:

-*raising consciousness*. Quote: "The first part of reconciliation is consciousness raising."

-*essential*. Quote: "A commitment to reconciliation and inclusion is essential to building a unified congregation."

#3. What behaviors of Classis Grand Rapids East are consistent with the biblical vision and the CRCNA's mission of diversity and inclusion?

Two main themes emerged:

-*image bearer*. Human beings are created in the image of God.

-*all people*. Every person is deserving of equal inclusion and respect.

When asked how important the work of reconciliation is to classis GRE as a community of congregations, also in reference to Classis' own statement re diversity as a value, the pastors said: 6 = very important, 3 = moderately important, 1 = slightly important.

#4. What is the experience of leaders of color in Classis Grand Rapids East?

A variety of responses:

-Classis has more work to do regarding diversity and inclusion.

-People of color often feeling like tokens in the classis, being put in positions of leadership for the sake of diversity rather than individual merit.

-I imagine it's full of lots of kindness but relatively little substance toward systematic reform. (Also see Method 2, below)

#5. What are some barriers to diversity and inclusion within these churches?

-*controversial history*: some deep-rooted attitudes can still feel like barriers for both white members and members of color.

-*struggle to change*: Change can be uncomfortable, so people are often resistant....

-*lack of commitment and/or motivation*: When progress is seen, a community can quickly become too comfortable and dismiss the need for further change. Comfortable as is.

-*hesitation or fear*: We're too scared to enter into the messiness of relationships.

#6. In what ways can the Classis more effectively encourage and/or support diversity and inclusion?

As to the extent to which classis helps the congregations, the responses were as follows:

-re the value statement: 1=not at all, 2=slightly, 3=somewhat, 4=very much so.

-re breaking barriers priority: 8=somewhat, 1=not at all, 1=slightly.

Miscellaneous comments:

-Classis actions could be expanded to include more and/or deeper opportunities for congregational growth.

-One spoke of a classis meeting that helped congregations engage with their neighborhoods in healthy, humble, reciprocal, and life-giving ways that addressed poverty and racism.
-Classis calls our congregations to this value more deeply than our congregation currently holds it.

5. Results from Interviewing Persons of Color, pp. 18-19

The research group was able to interview 7 persons of color (out of 11 names given them) who had some experience in the meetings and ministry of CGRE. The following themes emerged regarding the status of diversity and inclusion in their congregations and CGRE.

#1 Further work to do (5 of 7).

"Some people get it, but the system overall is still set up to operate in a way that privileges whiteness and privileges male leadership."

"I think our classis is interested in being intentional, even if there is work to do."

#2 Tokenism and Undervaluing (5 of 7)

One respondent: "I think some people unconsciously are either thinking 'we need to redeem this situation by having a black pastor,' or 'I don't know if a black pastor will work at our church because of the difficulties we had in that situation.'"

Another: "As a person of color, when somebody asked me to be on a committee or something, quite often it's related to my (race)... versus the fact that I really have the skills they're interested in."

Quote: "If you don't think there is more work to do, you need to sit in on Classis meetings and look around – where are the people of color?"

Another: "...as long as positions of power and leadership are still being occupied mostly by white men... that means people aren't self-reflecting on what gifts other people might be bringing to the table."

#3 Persons of color have a disadvantage (4 of 7)

Phrases like: "I think it's more of the unconscious bias that tends to come out still, where people question my authority... or my ability to do things." And, "... there is this feeling that you constantly have to prove yourself, which might not be experience for Caucasians."

#4 Overall lack of awareness and acceptance of racial issues (4 of 7)

Quote: "We intend well, but the white-dominant culture and the minority cultures have self-awareness blind spots that don't allow to fully connect with one another." Another: "...when it comes to those who are on the margins, we're very good at putting people out and excluding people." Several respondents also commented that some congregants have a willful ignorance or an overall dismissiveness toward racism.

#5 Experience their church valuing diversity and inclusion (4 of 7).

One respondent: "...pastors and others (from my church) who are really intentional about asking me... and empowering me to lead in certain settings." Another: "I had an elder last year challenge... the elders to think about equity and justice even in how they serve their districts."

#6 Some progress in terms of diversity and inclusion (3 of 7)

About their congregation: "...when it comes to racial justice, I think we're much farther ahead in a lot of ways due to the leadership we've had in the last 10 years." Another commented on lots of work still needing to be done in the CRCNA in Classis GRE.

#7 Importance of individual cross-racial interactions (3 of 7)

Quote: "I don't know how many people in the church really can say they have a person of color as a true friend. I think that's where it starts... impacting the larger group and the larger body as we learn to really love one another through meaningful relationships."

6. Summary Findings & Related Reflections (cf. Concluding Discussion, pp. 20-21).

a. Congregational Commitments to Racial Reconciliation.

A number of member churches in Classis GR East have policies and programs in place to combat racism and increase inclusion. The majority of the pastors who responded regard the work of racial reconciliation as very important, and some also are intentional about bringing persons of color into leadership roles. Further, classis GR East has stated goals of racial reconciliation, valuing diversity, and breaking down barriers.

Reflection: What is the potential role and/or feasibility of member churches in encouraging and assisting one another on their respective antiracism journeys?

b. The Gap between Classis Statements and Implementation.

(Cf. Especially Core Values B, 4-6 and Ministry Priorities C, 3-4, pp. 9-10.)

One large disconnect between Classis GR East's mission and reality is a lack of recognition regarding the importance of classis itself participating in antiracist sentiments and programming. This includes the need for greater awareness by church leaders within classis for addressing the reluctance of many church members to face racism head on.

Reflection: What factors have restrained Classis from assuming a more assertive role in dismantling racism? To what degree can these factors be limited or removed?

c. The Gap between Racial Reconciliation and Racial Justice.

The report observed that a second large disconnect is the gap that exists between (1) racial reconciliation as emphasized by CRCNA foundational documents and white church leaders and (2) an emphasis on racial justice as understood and emphasized by persons of color within the classis. As one person of color observed, the term racial reconciliation “precludes discussions about racial inequality and discourages collective action to promote racial justice.”

Reflection: What factors contribute to this imbalance between racial reconciliation and racial justice? How do the Covid-19 pandemic and incidents of police brutality inform our response to this inequity? How much are we willing to change and sacrifice to make our churches and communities more just?

PART II - ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK FROM PERSONS OF COLOR

A total of 15 persons of color, some of whom also were interviewed by the Calvin University research team, were invited to give *additional* feedback. They responded primarily to this question: **WHAT DO YOU WANT PASTORS AND COUNCILS TO HEAR FROM THIS REPORT?**

1. **LISTEN TO US.** Pastors and church councils need to listen to people of color. Hear our frustration. Respect what we say. Hear how people of color FEEL regarding their lived experience in our churches and classis meetings. Also be more present and supportive to leaders of color who already ARE in church leadership roles.
2. **ACCOUNTABILITY.** Classis as a community of churches needs to hold member churches accountable for working toward diversity and inclusion, racial justice and reconciliation.
3. **RELATIONSHIPS.** Emphasize personal friendships and healthy cross-racial/cultural relationships. Leaders of color will not be attracted to participate without relationships. White leaders will not effectively work for justice and equality without relationships. And if this is overburdening POC in our churches, build relationships with neighbors, and co-workers, and members of other (POC) churches.
4. **REAL CHANGE.** Our theology (original sin, redemption, the providence of God) supports justice. We want more than talk; we want real change! Empowering, sharing power, wanting people of color to thrive. We need to commit to actionable, measurable goals.

5. **SACRIFICE.** Recognize that there will be cost involved in moving beyond reconciliation (inclusion) to justice. Some members and leaders are uncomfortable with the emphasis; unlearning, new learning, and releasing control will be required even of the committed.
6. **MENTORING.** Especially pour into first time leadership and for new roles. The onus is on the churches to enlarge the pool of potential leaders. Here too, relationship is key.
7. **VOICES OF COLOR.** How can churches and CGRE structure our interactions and our policies and procedures in ways that ensure that voices of color will be heard. Of course, this especially includes listening to voices of color regarding reconciliation with justice.
8. **PROVIDE RESOURCES.** Expect leadership from appointed leaders, form working groups, contract with experts, set the table for churches to prod and encourage one another on an antiracism journey. Schedule training. Facilitate cross-racial/cultural experiences.

PART III – A SUMMARY CALL TO ACTION

Multiple concerns are identified in the report and articulated by leaders of color that require new and ongoing address and action by Classis GR East include the following:

1. Demonstrated commitment to racial justice and reconciliation in all its meetings and ministries.¹
2. Classis processes for appointing and/or electing classis functionaries, with a special concern for racial equity.
3. Appropriate and timely support to leaders of color who are serving classis and member churches and ministries within classis.
4. Training for classis and church leaders in antiracism, intercultural competence, racial justice and reconciliation, and the like.
6. Ways and means for ensuring that voices of color have opportunity to speak into the direction, life, and ministry of classis.
7. Ways and means for classis and member churches to hold one another accountable for actionable measures toward racial justice and reconciliation.

¹ Classis GR East's stated Purpose, Focus, and Goals of Classis Meetings includes the following:

"3. **Unity in Diversity.** Our commitment to cultural diversity and racial reconciliation will be reflected in all sessions of classis." Cf. Classis Guidelines, Section IV, A, 3.

PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1. **EXPAND MISSION OF CLASSIS:** That Classis revise and expand its stated mission, namely, “to be a community of congregations that encourage, equip, and challenge one another to be vibrant and missional,” by affirming that this *requires* us as a Classis and member churches to also pray and work for racial justice as foundational to true reconciliation and unity in Christ.

Observations/rationale:

- a. *This calls us to account for our neglect in pursuing racial justice and challenges us anew to live out our values and priorities toward the diverse people and communities in which God has placed us.*
 - b. *This provides a foundational corrective to our history of under-emphasizing racial justice as a critical component of authentic reconciliation and unity in Christ.*
 - c. *The newly approved “CRCNA Journey 2025” names four Growing Edges for all CRC congregations in “our journey with God, with each other, with our neighbors, for mission.” The third Growing Edge is that we desire to “Grow in diversity and unity by seeking justice, reconciliation, and welcome, sharing our faith as we build relationships with and honor the cultures of our neighbors and newcomers.”*
2. **POSTURE OF WHITE PERSONS.** That Classis affirm, as a guiding principle, that in living out its commitment to racial justice and reconciliation, white persons embrace a posture of listening to, collaborating with, offering encouragement, and expressing accountability to African Americans and other persons of color.
 3. **CET RESPONSIBILITY:** That the Classis Executive Team (CET) ensure that evaluation, guidance, and support of Classis policies, practices, and personnel serve our Classis and member churches well in living out our calling to racial justice and reconciliation.
Note: *To immediately engage more deeply in this calling, all member churches are urged to encourage their members to watch the film **Just Mercy**, and to host small group discussions (via an online platform or safely in-person) between now and Jan 21, 2021. Additional access information and discussions questions will be provided.*
 4. **CET COMPOSITION:** That at least two (2) and up to five (5) voting members of the Classis Executive Team shall be African Americans or other persons of color.
 5. **CET REPORT, JAN 2021.** That the Classis Executive Team provide advice and recommendations to Classis at its January 2021 meeting for incorporating the above decisions into Classis guidelines and for initiating a formal evaluation and revitalization process re racial justice and reconciliation (for example, as developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church or a tool developed specifically for use by Classis GR East).
 6. **ALL CET REPORTS:** That all Classis Executive Team reports which are given at Classis meetings include a summary of actions and recommendations regarding our shared pursuit of racial justice and reconciliation.

Excerpts from Classis Grand Rapid East Guidelines

See highlighted paragraphs.

I. FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

(Last edited: August 27, 2013)

A. MISSION

The purpose of Classis Grand Rapids East is to be a community of congregations that encourage, equip, and challenge one another to be vibrant and missional.

B. CORE VALUES

- 1. An Extended Church Community:** God's gospel is reflected best in congregational life when, like the early church's koinonia, we develop long-term relationships that sacrificially enfold people into our family. We are God's instruments of salvation, healing and growth. We also work through classis, CRCNA agencies, other denominations, and parachurch organizations. We hold each other accountable as we act as God's voice of grace, heart of justice and hand of mercy.
- 2. Authentic, Passionate Faith:** We value the faith of children, old people, and everyone in between. To pass our faith to the next generation, we need to know, grow in, and experience God's grace in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Church health requires us to live with integrity. We look for God to revive and reform us and expect to be malleable in God's hands.
- 3. Discipleship:** To grow we need mentors who authentically speak of their faith and testify to God's actions in their lives, showing what it means to follow Jesus. In turn, we help children and adults new in faith from the Holy Spirit to develop in their faith, by teaching, discipling, forgiving, and holding them accountable. God holds us accountable for our growth and for how we help others grow. Let us be and make disciples.
- 4. Being Good Neighbors:** God expects us to be salt and light in our neighborhoods and city. God challenges us to implement divine mercy, justice, and righteousness, thereby transforming our neighborhoods. As we do so, we will find brothers and sisters in Christ who will be the neighborhoods' future leaders. If we do not focus on our neighborhoods, we fail to obey God's command to love our neighbor.
- 5. Social Justice:** The church pursues justice for the poor and oppressed. We will fight complicated systems that favor some at the expense of the poor. Pursuit of justice, holiness, and spiritual maturity are intimately intertwined. We will overcome our lethargy, apathy, sense of entitlement, contentment with the status quo, selfishness,

and ignorance. We will understand, give priority to, and address the needs of those with fewer resources and more disadvantages.

6. **Diversity:** God put dazzling diversity into the creation. We commit ourselves to value people from all jobs and professions, religious backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. The church cannot bring about a perfect society, but it is called to be the best possible model with no outsiders who have been consciously or unconsciously excluded.

C. MINISTRY PRIORITIES

1. **To Develop Leaders:** Coordinate training for church leaders, including orientation to classis meetings, and provide links to other opportunities.
2. **To Worship and Pray Together:** Promote corporate worship in classis and as a community of congregations, and mobilize individual and communal prayer for our congregations, ministries and partners.
3. **To Thrive in Our Neighborhoods:** Help us partner with public schools, other churches and businesses to make our neighborhoods better places to live, work, play, learn and worship.
4. **To Break Down Barriers:** Equip our congregations to identify and break down barriers that prevent full participation in the life of our churches.
5. **To Shepherd Each New Generation:** Identify quality resources and provide guidance to congregations for reaching, developing, and ministering to persons in each new generation.
6. **To Press on Together:** Increase knowledge, skill, and participation for disciple-making through regular contact, support for each other, and regular training opportunities.
7. **To Partner Ecumenically:** Equip congregations to develop sister church relationships with neighboring churches and to develop justice and mercy ministries.

Persons of Color invited to give Input re Diversity, Inclusion & Classis GR East Report

Congregational contacts within CGR East

Darrell Delaney	Madison Square
Jackie Frens	Sherman Street
Emmett Harrison	Oakdale Park (formerly)
Shannon Jammal -Hollemans	Oakdale Park
James Jones	Oakdale Park
Paula Seales	Madison Square
David Sung	Living Water
Freida Watson	Madison Square
Mike White	Madison Square

Denominational contacts within CGR East

Colin Watson	Executive Director	Madison Square
Reggie Smith	Director of Diversity	Madison Square
Teresa Jones	Human Resources	Madison Square
Nalini Sukanandam Vander Bosch	Resonate	Madison Ford

Denominational contacts outside of CGR East

Moses Chung	Resonate	Wyoming, MI
Charles Kim	Resonate	Los Angeles, CA
John Mondie	Resonate	African Chr Fellowship, GR