

## **Reflections of Synod 2024 — Race, Racism and the Beloved Community**

Though the CRCNA synod of 2024 was primarily focused on developing rules to ensure that the denominational position regarding human sexuality was fully embraced by all churches, classes, and ministries, another issue was patently evident to me as I watched the proceedings. That issue is synod's lack of attention to, or concern about, the full participation of people of color — especially Black people and descendants of slaves — in the CRCNA community.

### ***Synod 2024 and the Ministry Plan***

The third pillar of the current denominational ministry plan states:

*Diversity and Unity* — 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

Synod's action about this third pillar of the Ministry Plan... Article 84, pg. 911 states:

That synod instruct the COD as part of the “appropriate evaluation and update” process to review the wording and intent of pillar three and underlying materials in light of concerns that the emphasis of this pillar should be on the virtue of hospitality rather than on the fulfillment of ethnicity quotas, and to report back to synod 2025.

For many of us who are passionate to see the church become a full expression of the beloved community – a community of Saints who represent every race, every culture and nation – this synodical statement is greatly disappointing, and reflects a fundamental lack of understanding of the meaning and intent of the ministry plan. The accusation that the current plan is based on quotas is patently false! Taking note of the effective use and participation of members from various cultures is not using ‘quotas’, and to suggest such is to imply that leaders who are not white are viewed as substandard, and only present because of the majority’s commitment to ‘quotas’.

The conversation on the floor of synod, suggested that no numerical values for advancing the cause of diversity or racism should be used as benchmarks by the denomination. It was further stated that churches and classes would be encouraged to simply use hospitality i.e. inviting people of different races and cultures into the denomination, as the mechanism for achieving greater participation by people of different races and cultures. Notably, such an approach is tantamount to saying to others – “I’m inviting you into my house, to play by my rules, so that you can participate in whatever table I have laid out for you”. Such an approach does not honor the God-

given cultures and experiences of people of different races, and in a perverse sense, implicitly uses quotas to uphold and ensure more white leadership participation at synod, and in the denomination writ large. Notably, the makeup of the Synod of 2024 was one of the least diverse synods in recent memory<sup>1</sup>. All four synodical officers – like the Synod of 2023 – were white males. Therefore, regarding this and other matters of race, the Synod of 2024 was a jarring disappointment.

### ***Synodical Action re: Overtures about Race***

In the midst of this disappointment, I also note that the Synod of 2024 dealt with an overture from classis Chicago South regarding the posture of the CRCNA with regard to race and racism. The overture simply referenced the decision of the Synod of 1996 regarding the prevalence of racism, in both its overt and systemic nature, and exhorted the current Synod to reaffirm the decision of 1996.

Rather than a resounding recommitment to the critical decisions of 1996 – which is what I expected – synod punted! Synod did not verbally accede to the overture. Though they said it was appropriate, they also did not recommit to the actions recommended in 1996 – thus, they deflected on the issue. Additionally, while Synod used the words, “we lament” that this issue is still with us, they opted not to exert much energy in responding to this reality. Rather than recommitting to the words of the Synod of 1996, which include the exhortation — that every member, church, classis is fully committed to racial reconciliation, and actively engaged in pursuing it — this Synod simply asked the office of the General Secretary to encourage churches to address the issue.

### ***Creeds, Confessions, and the Belhar***

At another point during the synodical conversation, a motion was made that synod – as well as classes – should continue to encourage, or mandate, participants to recommit to reciting their commitment and belief in the Bible, the creeds, the catechisms, as well as honoring the contemporary testimony – Our World Belongs to God. Though the Synod of 2017 also voted that the Confession of Belhar is also a contemporary testimony for the CRCNA, reference to this fact has been elusive at best. It is curious that the commitment to the confessions and creeds often conspicuously omit reference to the Belhar. It is likely that if this were truly placed on par with the other contemporary testimony – as commanded by the Synod of 2017 – we would move a long way towards engaging African-Americans as equals in a denomination begun as ‘for whites only’.

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<sup>1</sup> Though there were representatives from diverse groups i.e. Korean, Latino, there was a noticeable absence of African-Americans – especially African-American descendants of slaves. Additionally, the pool of officers was notably monocultural.

### ***A missing sense of urgency***

I would note a dramatic difference between the way the CRCNA, and the synods address the same-sex matter, and the laissez-faire method used to address the racism, and systemic racism matters. It can be argued that fighting against the systemic racism issue is at the heart of the Gospel. Because, not to do so, and to actively say or believe that systemic racism is not real, is to impugn the humanity of African-Americans – especially those who are descendants of slaves. If systemic racism is not real, then the very real disadvantages, writ large, of African-Americans must be a function of their own deficiencies. Yet, we know theologically that this is completely false, and to hold such a view is anti-Christian – and certainly violates our confessions<sup>2</sup>.

It was also particularly painful to watch the synodical conversation regarding the racism overture take place on the Juneteenth holiday of 2024.

### ***The Words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.***

At the end of the Synod, it was also ironic that the president of Synod quoted extensively from the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he talked about how Black people would continue to love members of the white community even as they continued to push them away and actively campaign to keep them down by whatever means necessary. The Synod president used these words to implore delegates to remain peaceful and loving in their conversations about Synod as they went back to their homes and churches. The plea was focused on remaining loving as the same sex matters were discussed and implemented. Ironically, Dr. King was explicitly referencing the racial crisis in the land when his statement was made. To reference this statement while continuing to ignore our racial crisis is a painful irony indeed!

Finally, I would note that though there were other cultures and races represented at Synod, the near absence of African-Americans – descendants of slaves, the black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, bussing, and the list goes on – was a significant deficiency in the body, and contributed to a less-than-optimal decision-making process, certainly at least when it came to the conversations regarding race.

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Excerpted from personal Reflections of Synod 2024 — June 20, 2024

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<sup>2</sup> See notes in the dissertation of Colin P. Watson Sr – Leading in White Spaces: The Experience of African Americans Pastors as Leaders in the Christian Reformed Church in North America

## ATTACHMENT

Excerpts from the Acts of Synod 1996 (Page 513)

5. That synod. on the basis of the above principles. declare that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God's Word and the Reformed confessions.

Grounds:

- a. The above report demonstrates that the Bible declares this reconciled community to be God's will.
- b. The confessions declare that the catholicity of the church means that Christ "gathers, protects, and preserves" the church out of the whole human race" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21).

-Adopted

6. That synod call the whole church-individual members. congregations, assemblies, agencies, and other ministries of the CRCNA-to respond to the biblical and theological principles regarding the development of a racially and ethnically diverse and united family of God by committing themselves.
  - a. To pray and work for the increased enfolding of ethnic-minority persons into the CRCNA in order to reflect more fully the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada and the United States.
  - b. To ensure the equitable representation and meaningful participation of ethnic-minority persons in leadership and other roles of influence at all levels of denominational life.

-Adopted

Note: The total estimated ethnic-minority membership of 5 percent in the CRCNA compares to an ethnic-minority population of approximately 20 percent in Canada and the United States.

7. That synod call the churches
  - a. To articulate the biblical vision for a racially and ethnically diverse and united family of God by means of the preaching, teaching, and study of the above biblical and theological principles.
  - b. To evaluate their life and ministry with regard to their racial and ethnic composition, the social factors contributing to their composition, the selecting and training of their leaders, their worship style, and their

- ministry to congregational members and to their community in light of their sense of God's vision and call for them as congregations.
- c. To develop racially and ethnically diverse congregations by all appropriate models and strategies, such as
    - i. Established churches becoming more inclusive ethnically and culturally.
    - ii. Planting and developing multiethnic congregations.
    - iii. Sponsoring new congregations that are ethnically and culturally different from the parent congregation, in the same or separate facilities.
    - iv. Developing relationships (e.g., joint worship, workshops, and work projects) with congregations from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
    - v. Supporting persons and programs at home or abroad that are committed to racial reconciliation.
  - d. To witness publicly against racism, prejudice, and related unemployment, poverty, and injustices and in defense of all people as image bearers of God.
  - e. To call individual members to promote and establish interracial and cross-cultural relationships in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities.

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**Excerpts from the actions of Synod 1996 re: Race and Racism and the 2024 response**

The statements from the acts of Synod 1996 include the words:

*That synod. on the basis of the above principles. declare that to be in Christ is in principle to be reconciled as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people and that to ignore his calling to turn this principle into experienced reality is sinful according to God's Word and the Reformed confessions.*

In response to the overture, the Synod of 2024 said the following (Acts of Synod 2024 – page 907):

We lament that racism continues to be present in our world. We wish to build on the work of previous synods. We recognize that churches are already encouraged to engage in racial reconciliation and must continue in that work.

*Recommendations*

1. That synod ask the Office of General Secretary to continue to encourage churches and individuals' growth in this vital area, including the use of God's Diverse and Unified Family as well as related programs such as Hearts Exchanged. 5A
2. That synod encourage churches to utilize the resources mentioned in recommendation one for confession and lament in worship services.
3. That synod declare this to be its response to Overtures 8 and 9.

-Adopted