

**RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF
THE UNIVERSITY TRANSFER COMMITTEE
TO THE GREAT LAKES CITY CLASSIS-
FOR THE MEETING OF MARCH 21, 2015**

by Rev. Tom Stark, Reformed Church in America pastor, retired, Lansing, Michigan,
member, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, MI
(also on website: tomstarkinlansing.com)

The UNIVERSITY TRANSFER COMMITTEE REPORT TO CLASSIS - January 7, 2015, consists of five pages. After this report there are a number of appendices. Appendix A includes the relevant section from the *Book of Church Order* - 5 pages. Appendix B is the University Reformed Church petition to transfer to the Presbyterian Church in America (40 pages). Appendixes C-1, C-2, and C-3 are three papers from my website on complementarianism, the Belhar Confession, and homosexuality- 26 pages. Appendix D is a two-page summary response by the committee to the three main reasons for withdrawal given in the URC petition. Appendix E is a two-page item from the PCA Great Lakes Presbytery.

1. The University Transfer Committee's Recommendation 1. is that the Classis agree that the reasons given by the University Reformed Church for withdrawal from the RCA are inadequate.

a. URC uses the same three main reasons as Peace Reformed Church did in October, 2014, and the five Chicago-area RCA churches from Illiana Florida Classis who were transferred to the PCA last fall.

b. The classis, in the case of Peace Reformed Church, attempted to show that the claims regarding the RCA and complementarianism, the Belhar Confession, and homosexuality were inaccurate at points, ignored certain information, and were speculative as well.

c. While the Great Lakes City Classis didn't consider the reasons from Peace Reformed Church to be valid, the classis still allowed them to transfer to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

d. The Classis could adopt Recommendation 1., but still ultimately transfer the congregation.

2. The University Reformed Church proposal acknowledges that they think some RCA people and ministries are admirable:

". . . we are not arguing that the RCA is an apostate denomination. While we have grave concerns and think there are legitimate grounds for a church like ours to leave, we do not think the situation is yet at the point where all faithful Christians *must* leave. We do not wish to impugn the character, the motives, or the orthodoxy of those who remain. There are many good missionaries, good pastors, and good ministries in the RCA. We are thankful for our Classis Leader, thankful for our General Secretary, and thankful for our Director of Global Missions (to name just a few key positions). We are thankful for

the rich history of missions in the RCA and for the current emphasis on revitalization and multiplication." (p. 8) [but see 3. g. below, fourth sentence]

3. But the URC petition has a long list of dissatisfactions with the RCA, which make the RCA unacceptable to URC. In addition to the "three reasons" they give many examples of disagreement and lack of trust:

a. "We have a deep desire to belong to a family of churches where who we are as a congregation fits squarely with what our denomination does and believes." (page 7)

b. "We want to raise up pastors who do not fear that the ordination process is against them." (p. 7)

c. "We want to work alongside churches that share our convictions." (p. 7)

d. "we want to be in a denomination that sees us as occupying center ground, not some extreme right flank". (p. 7)

e. "in practice, the RCA is already well down this path [of endorsing homosexual activity] and that given the way our classical structure works those who stand for biblical orthodoxy can do little to stop it. We believe laboring in such a mixed denomination undermines the true nature of biblical unity, hinders our witness for Christ, and does not represent the most effective avenue for ministry for URC in the years and decades ahead." (p. 7)

f. "URC would be able to serve with greater integrity and disciple our people (especially ministerial candidates) more effectively if we were in a denomination that shares our complementarian convictions, rather than in one that is moving full speed ahead in the other direction." (p. 12)

g. "our ministry is less than it could be because of our present denominational affiliation. . . . we are troubled by the weak form of confessional subscription in the RCA, the process for examining ministerial candidates, and our formal ecumenical ties with liberal denominations like the UCC, ELCA and PCUSA. We do not recommend our RCA seminaries. We find MFCA an unnecessary burden in pastoral formation. We do not trust our [General Synod] commissions, and we do not resonate with many aspects of the new missional emphasis which, in our opinion, do not think carefully enough about the kingdom of God and the mission of the church." (p. 17)

h. "The denomination has changed in profound ways in the last few years, and though the changes have not been fully felt as of yet, they have reshaped the identity of the RCA The denomination has moved away from churches like ours." (p. 17)

i. "We have often heard from visitors that though they lived in Lansing for years they never thought to visit URC because it was an RCA church or because of things they had heard about liberal leanings in the RCA. How many others might be staying away because our denominational affiliation gives them the wrong idea about who we are and what we believe?" (p. 19)

j. The RCA connection inhibits interest in planting churches, the vision for training up pastors, and placement for new pastors. (pp.19- 20)

k. "we also feel a measure of distance between us and most churches in the denomination". (p. 20)

(We would all probably like our situations to be comfortable, compatible, where we are appreciated, where we are like everyone else. But perhaps individuals and congregations sometimes need a renewed call to prayer, active involvement in the RCA, sacrificial service, and expectancy about God's sovereignty, even in the life of a denomination.)

4. The Committee's Recommendation 2.- calls for a special committee, brought together by General Secretary Tom De Vries, to "attempt to resolve the issues listed in the petition".

a. If the classis were to ask the General Secretary to set up a special committee, as the UTC committee suggests, I believe it is unlikely to produce any interest in the leadership at URC. I believe it will seem like "enforced reconciliation", and will not result in cooperation.

b. In spite of my admiration for Tom De Vries, I think it is unrealistic to try to involve him in negotiating with URC. He is a prime mover in the RCA's church planting and missional outreach, but his approach is not trusted by URC leadership because he has a broader understanding of what it is to be missional. (The URC petition registers distrust for the RCA's church growth initiatives.) Tom is not a complementarian, which makes him less respected by the URC leadership. [According to Mary Kassian, "complementarian" was coined in 1987 by the committee drafting the Danvers Statement. For myself, complementarianism is not a test of Christian fellowship, but it may be for the leadership of URC.]

5. The Committee's Recommendation 3.- includes a clause about negotiating with URC to continue an RCA campus ministry at Michigan State University:

a. MSU has 49,000 students, including over 6,000 international students. Many evangelical church and para-church ministries are on the campus. But the campus is far from being evangelized. There could be a dozen campus workers added tomorrow, passionate for Christ and making him known, and they would not get in the way of anybody.

b. If a new RCA campus ministry were established at MSU it should have the support of the classis and the Synod of the Great Lakes, with no preconceptions about the form it might take, and with a strong core of support and prayer in the Synod.

c. The issues of funding, property and leadership for a campus ministry should be divorced from the idea of URC having an obligation for funding.

d. URC would presumably see the establishment of an RCA campus ministry at MSU as something they would not wish to encourage, or be identified with, or help pay for.

e. Since the URC petition complains that the identification of the church with the RCA has turned away potential members, I assume that URC will change its name, to remove "Reformed", or add "Presbyterian", or adopt a different name. The PCA has 40 churches in 18 states with "Reformed Presbyterian" in their names, and only 8 churches which use "reformed" without "presbyterian". (The five RCA churches in the Chicago area, which were transferred to the PCA last fall, have dropped "Reformed" from their names, as has Peace Reformed Church in Middleville.)

f. I urge the classis to avoid imposing financial obligations as a form of "punishment".

g. It may be hard, but I encourage the classis to see this situation from a different challenge: I Cor. 6:7- "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CLASSIS:

- 1. Adopt R-1- the three reasons are inadequate.**
- 2. Do Not Adopt R-2- do not set up a special committee with the General Secretary.**
- 3. Adopt R-3- allowing University Reformed Church to leave, but deleting the last clause: "and a continuation of the RCA ministry on the campus of Michigan State University."**

There are also two Appendices:

Appendix 1: Some Things Worth Knowing About the University Reformed Church
(4 pp.)

Appendix 2: Some Things to Know About the Presbyterian Church in America (9 pp.)

Personal note to the Classis from Tom Stark:

1. The Classis should know that, since the first public announcement was made in URC, about three years ago, concerning steps to leave the RCA, I have not been consulted by the staff or leadership of URC about the reasons or steps for leaving the RCA. I also had no conversation with the classis committees for Peace Reformed Church or URC about their reports to classis.
2. I do not attend classis as a representative of URC. I am a retired minister in the RCA and, as such, a member of the Great Lakes City Classis, the only classis to which I have belonged (since 1966). That will not change.
3. URC's staff and leaders are all dedicated Christians. I have known many of them for years. Obviously, I don't agree with them on everything, and that is painful to me.
4. RCA ministers have membership in a classis and a congregation, and may sometimes have congregational membership in a church of a different denomination. This can happen with supply pastors in a different denomination, pastors of union churches, or with RCA retirees, especially those in areas without RCA congregations. My wife Joan

and I are members of URC, and expect to continue to be members if the congregation's affiliation changes from the RCA to the PCA.