Report of the Commission on Christian Action

REPORTS ON CHRISTIAN ACTION

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The Commission on Christian Action met October 19-20, 2001, at Loyola of the Cenacle in Chicago, Illinois, and January 31-February 2, 2002, at the Duncan Retreat Center in Delray Beach, Florida.

THE CREATION AND USE OF EMBRYONIC STEM CELLS

In December 1999 the journal *Science* declared stem cells the "breakthrough of the year." Promising what appear to be miraculous cures but surrounded with ethical controversy, the creation and use of embryonic stem cells presents an area where Christians find themselves divided. However, even in the absence of complete consensus, the members of the church must engage each other and society, exploring the complex new issues presented by science within the framework of our Christian faith.

Background

The Commission on Christian Action presented reports on genetic engineering to the General Synod in 1988 and in 1999. The 1999 General Synod voted to circulate the 1999 report, "Genetic Engineering: An Update" and directed the Office of Social Witness and the RCA Distribution Center to make study resources available to RCA members and congregations (*MGS 1999*, p. 87-98). The 1999 General Synod also directed the Commission on Christian Action to follow the 1999 paper with an analysis of the moral and ethical questions that genetic engineering raises. Recognizing the enormity of issues encompassed by the term "genetic engineering," the commission determined to address individual, specific issues in separate papers. Toward that goal, the commission and the Office of Social Witness presented a forum, "New Genetics: Issues in Science, Faith, and Ethics," on the campuses of Hope College and Western Theological Seminary in 2000 and presented the paper "Genetic Testing and Screening" to the General Synod 2001. The 2001 General Synod directed the Office of Social Witness and the RCA Distribution Center to make this paper available to congregations for study and discussion (*MGS 2001*, R-105, p. 383).

Continuing to address issues raised by new genetic technologies, the commission presents this paper on the creation and use of human embryonic stem cells. Such a paper is timely in light of the recent public debate over the use of stem cells and the recent decision by U.S. President George W. Bush to allow government funding for limited research using human embryonic stem cells. The purpose of the paper is largely educational, since it is vital that Christians be well-informed in order to contribute meaningfully to the debate on any issue of genetic engineering. The paper will first explain what stem cells and stem cell lines are and how they are created. Then it will describe the potential uses for stem cells, including descriptions of experiments that support the belief that stem cells will be useful to human medicine. Penultimately, the ethical questions surrounding the creation and use of stem cells will be outlined, and some biblical principles that may guide decisions about the creation and use of stem cells will be presented. Finally, recommendations about the creation and use of stem cells will be suggested.

The Creation of Human Embryonic Stem Cells

Human embryonic stem cells are continuous cell lines that are derived directly from the inner cell mass of a human pre-implantation embryo. Embryonic stem cells can be derived from several sources.

1) One source of embryonic stem (ES) cells is from embryos created in fertility clinics for couples seeking to use *in vitro* fertilization techniques to overcome infertility problems. Because harvesting eggs is an unpleasant, difficult procedure and the percentage of successful fertilization and implantation events is unpredictable, often more embryos are created than will be used for implantation. Embryos not used for implantation are frozen away in fertility clinics and used if implantation is unsuccessful or if another pregnancy is desired. These "extra" embryos are frozen at the 32- through 64-cell stage (day 5-6, before normal implantation would occur) and can remain frozen almost indefinitely. Currently, depending on the fertility clinic and on arrangements made with the couple, these embryos are frozen indefinitely, discarded, donated to other couples, or donated to research.

2) Embryonic stem cells can also be obtained by using a technique called somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT). In this method the nucleus (the cell structure that contains the chromosomes) from normal unfertilized eggs is removed and the enucleated egg is fused with a nucleus-containing cell derived from an adult. This procedure is more commonly known as the first step in cloning. It has not yet been carried out successfully with human cells. However, given the right conditions, the resulting cell is essentially the same as a fertilized egg in terms of its potential to develop into an organism.

3) ES cells can also be obtained from embryos created in the laboratory for the express purpose of creating stem cell lines. The procedures and techniques for creating the embryos and isolating stem cells, in this case, are identical to the process used by fertility clinics (#1 above) but the intent is different. These embryos are not created for reproduction.

In each of these cases, embryonic stem cell lines are created by removing from the embryos a small group of internal cells, the inner cell mass that would eventually give rise to a developing embryo. With these cells removed the embryo is no longer viable. The extracted cells are then put in culture, given the right mixture of nutrients, vitamins, and hormones and a support for attachment. Under these conditions the cells will continue to grow and divide—thus an embryonic stem cell line is established. The cells can be maintained indefinitely in culture or can be frozen cryogenically for future use.

The cells of the inner cell mass of an embryo are unique compared to cells of an adult organism in that they are totipotent and they retain their totipotency as long they are propagated in culture, if they are given the right mixture of chemicals. Totipotent cells are special and quite rare. They have only been found in these early embryos and in fetuses as the cells that form sperm or egg cells. Totipotent cells are unique in that they have the ability to develop into or specialize to become any one of the 220 cell types that exist in an adult organism; their potential is total (all fates). Adult organisms contain billions of cells that have become specialized to perform unique sets of functions necessary for the body to function. For example, osteocytes of bone tissue maintain the hard, strong matrix of bones. Skeletal muscle cells are specialized for contraction, while most other cells of the body cannot contract. Neurons of nervous tissue are specialized for conducting nerve impulses so there is communication between the different parts of our body. Once specialized, these cells lose their totipotency. They cannot reverse their specialized nature. For example, bone cells cannot become nerve cells. Cells do exist in adult organisms that are multipotent (many fates) or pluripotent (most fates). For example, bone marrow contains pluripotent blood progenitor cells. These cells can develop or specialize to become all types of blood cells—red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets—but they are limited to becoming blood cells. Only totipotent cells can specialize to become any of the cell types found in an adult organism.

Furthermore, if given the right molecules or mixture of molecules, similar to those they would be exposed to as they develop in the embryo, totipotent cells can respond to these molecules by specializing and becoming a particular type of cell. This ability is exemplified by mouse embryonic stem cells exposed to the molecule retinoic acid. Upon retinoic acid treatment, mouse embryonic stem cells specialize to become neural progenitor cells. Neural progenitor cells are multipotent cells that can produce neurons, the mature, signaling cells of the nervous system. Scientists and medical personnel believe, with good reason, that this unique property renders embryonic stem cells unique in their ability to treat or even cure diseases and disease states for which we now have no treatment.

Embryos are not the only source of totipotent stem cells. There are three other sources/potential sources of totipotent stem cells.

1) Stem cells can be isolated from fetuses that are miscarried. In a developing fetus, some cells differentiate to form sperm and egg cells. These cells are only present in developing fetuses. At birth these cells have specialized. The cells that give rise to sperm or egg cells are totipotent and are therefore a possible source for stem cells. The cells are surgically removed from a fetus in a process that is technically much more difficult than isolation of embryonic stem cells. After isolation the cells are placed in culture and seem to be very similar to embryonic stem cells. Another problem with isolation of stem cells from miscarried fetuses is that the fetal tissue is usually not suitable for stem cell isolation. Miscarried fetuses often have chromosomal abnormalities or die too long before expulsion so that the cells cannot be isolated or used. Sometimes the fetal tissue is even partially reabsorbed by the maternal mucous membranes. So, although in some cases miscarried fetuses may be used for stem cell isolation, in the vast majority of cases this is not a viable source for stem cells.

2) Stem cells can also be isolated from fetuses derived from elective abortions. The problems of tissue death and chromosomal abnormalities associated with miscarriages are avoided, but the moral and ethical problems that arise in this case are significantly greater.

3) It may be possible to isolate stem cells from adult tissue. In adults there are groups of committed stem cells (progenitor cells). These cells are different from embryonic stem cells in that they are not totipotent but rather multipotent (many fates) or pluripotent (most fates). It may be possible that scientists will find a way to "trick" multipotent or pluripotent cells into returning to a totipotent state. These experiments are ongoing but have not yet been successful. Currently, using multipotent or pluripotent cells will not suffice if totipotent cells are required. But if adult cells are chemically "tricked" into returning to a totipotent state, these cells would presumably have the same potential for developing into an embryo as do cells created by SCNT.

Unless human embryonic stem cells offer benefits or uses that other sources of cells do not, the debate over their creation and use seems rather pointless. But, scientists and medical personnel do believe that human embryonic stem cells offer possible uses/benefits that other cells do not.

The Therapeutic Uses of Human Embryonic Stem Cells

At the level of basic research, totipotent embryonic stem cells could help scientists understand the complex events that occur during human development in ways other cells cannot. Specifically, stem cells could provide an understanding of the molecular process of specialization or differentiation that makes cells change from totipotency at fertilization to the specialized forms of an adult. Understanding the process of specialization also has practical implications for human health. Medical conditions such as cancer and birth

defects are often defects in cell specialization. If the normal processes are understood more completely, we may understand why and how failure of the normal processes leads to disease, and the possibility of correcting or preventing the disease is greater.

A very important potential use for human embryonic stem cells is in treatment of disorders and diseases of the nervous system. Scientists believe, with good reason, that embryonic stem cells might be used to cure people with spinal cord injuries. When mice that had their spinal cords severed experimentally were given embryonic stem cells that had been treated with retinoic acid to form neural progenitor cells, the neural progenitor cells migrated along the old, severed pathways, and the mice began walking again. This presents great hope that the same results are possible for humans with spinal cord injuries. Other experiments show that embryonic stem cells can specialize into the type of neurons that are lacking in Parkinson's disease. This suggests that embryonic stem cells might be able to replace these deficient cells and cure this devastating disease.

Uses of human embryonic stem cells are not limited to diseases of the nervous system. Scientists are working on techniques to grow the pancreatic cells that fail to function in some types of diabetes. Other groups are trying to use blood progenitor cells derived from embryonic stem cells to produce blood cells that could replace diseased cells in people with leukemia or lymphoma.

Another important benefit to embryonic stem cell therapy involves the cells' potential ability to avoid the problem of tissue rejection. If stem cells were derived from a human embryo and placed into an adult, the immune system of the adult would recognize those cells as foreign and destroy them. This is like tissue rejection, a problem faced in skin grafting and organ donation. If stem cells were created using somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) or cloning, anyone could use his or her own cells as the source of the nucleus. When that nucleus fused with the enucleated egg and divided, the cells of the resulting embryo would be genetically identical to the donor. If these cells were isolated, a stem cell line created from them, and they were placed back into the adult donor, the adult donor's immune system would recognize them as "self" and would not destroy or reject them.

Clearly embryonic stem cells raise "hopes of dazzling medical applications" (News and editorial staff, *Science*, 286:2238, 1999) but scientists and non-scientists alike also recognize the highly charged, theologically and ethically complex issues that surround embryonic stem cells. It is vital that Christians carefully, faithfully, and compassionately listen to, learn from, and engage themselves in the debates and discussions that will surely continue to surround this important issue.

Ethical Issues

The issues surrounding stem cell research specifically, and genetics more generally, are so new, complex, and ever-changing that Christians should not expect nor offer any simple, definitive conclusions at this time. Christians hold differing—and often opposing—perspectives on such issues. Conversation, education, debate, and continued engagement with the scientific and political questions are all concerns. At the same time, it is also important to begin to frame the issue within some of the pertinent Christian themes and to advance tentative proposals and responses.

It is true that Christians need to be engaged with the scientific community and conversant about the cutting edge of genetic research. Yet it is at least equally important that we as Christians be grounded in our faith, steeped in the Scriptures, imaginative yet embedded, constantly conversing among ourselves and involved in a robust theological give-and-take. Christians correctly desire to be part of the public dialogue about genetics, but we also need to take care not to be intimidated or to abandon our unique perspectives and resources in these broader conversations.

The issue of embryonic stem cell research is frequently portrayed as pitting interests of human life, in the form of embryos, against the interests of those who suffer from various diseases and injuries. On this view, one perspective holds that embryonic life trumps the alleviation of suffering; the other perspective suggests the contrary. Neither one of these perspectives is sufficiently holistic, complex, or rooted in the full wisdom of Scripture and the Christian faith to address adequately the challenges and possibilities of stem cell technology. Protecting human life and alleviating suffering are both of great importance to Christians, yet each is also too narrow, too private, and too individualistic to address adequately the vast social and theological implications of stem cell technology.

Christians should strive to look at stem cell technology in particular, and genetics in general, against a much broader horizon. They hold the possibility of greatly changing the way we look at children, marriage, sexuality, health, suffering, wholeness, and perfection, along with other implications as yet not even contemplated. No one can foresee the full ramifications for our world or our faith. As Christians we must enrich our theological imaginations with images from Eden, Babel, and the New Jerusalem. We must ponder questions such as: How do we understand suffering? How do we view our bodies? What is salvation? How do we understand our human role as humble creatures, wise stewards, and gifted co-creators?

This introduction cannot begin to imagine all the theological conversations that may develop around stem cell technology. While discussions about embryonic stem cells that revolve only around the themes of protecting life and alleviating suffering are not comprehensive nor satisfactory, those themes do form the common and dominant framework. That framework of discussion will be utilized in this paper.

Valuing and Protecting Human Life

Life is a gift from God. Valuing and protecting life, especially human life, is of vital concern to the Christian faith. Christians have especially sought to protect and value the lives of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

Christians opposed to the use of embryonic stem cells frequently point to the destruction of human embryos necessary to culture embryonic stem cells. The most common sources of stem cells are human embryos "left over" from fertility treatments. (Deriving stem cells from aborted fetuses is also possible, although less common. For many Christians this opens the door to providing an incentive or encouragement for abortion. In order to keep this discussion more focused, it will concentrate on stem cells derived from embryos.) From this perspective, our Christian responsibility to safeguard life extends to human embryos. Accordingly, the destruction of human embryos is viewed as equivalent to the taking of human life.

Inevitably, this leads to that enigmatic question, When does life begin? or other questions that are similar: Is an embryo fully equivalent to a person? When do human beings receive a soul? This sort of question is simply not adequate to address the multifaceted issues involved with the beginning of life and the status of human embryos. Neither the Christian nor the scientific communities have been able to reach any consensus about this. Just as "When does life begin?" has been unable to bring any resolution to the issue of abortion, so too it is unlikely to bring clarity or understanding to the issue of stem cells. Of course to call this question inadequate is not in any way to deny the earlier statements that life is always of extreme importance to Christians. However, focusing on the question, "When does life begin?" will ultimately detract from genuine exploration of stem cell issues.

If all Christians shared a clear-cut agreement about the status, value, and protection due to even the earliest of human embryos, and if science was able to pin down all that is elusive

about the beginning of life, even this would not end the dilemmas surrounding the use of human embryos for stem cells. While human life holds an extremely high value for the Christian community, life itself has never been viewed as the highest or ultimate value before which all other concerns must yield. In other words, the protection of human life is not a rigid, absolute practice. Martyrdom, self-sacrificial love, and the acceptance of just war, capital punishment, and abortion by some Christians are all instances where Christians have put other concerns and values ahead of human life. This is not to say the use of human embryos for the production of stem cells is such a case, it is only to point out that to try to address stem cell technology on the basis that "life has begun" is flawed.

Even if it were agreed that an embryo is fully equivalent to a human being, this would not necessarily preclude the use of embryos to develop stem cells. First, it may be asked whether maintaining frozen embryos indefinitely, with almost no prospect for gestation and birth, displays any more value or protection for these embryos than using them for research. Secondly, drawing an analogy between the development of embryonic stem cells and organ donation can be instructive. Just as parents whose child is dying might consent to their child becoming an organ donor, might parents give consent for their frozen embryos or embryos slated for disposal to be used in the development of stem cells? It is the parents' responsibility to protect and care for their child's best interests. Yet Christians do not believe our children are our "private property." Because children are entrusted to us by God, we raise our children to help others and assist God's purposes in the world. Christian parents want their children to be a blessing and gift to the world. Parents who consent to the use of their embryos for stem cell development might view their consent in this manner. Parents would be graciously offering a gift to those whose suffering might be relieved. To allow an embryo to be used for stem cell development could be seen as honoring and valuing that embryo in a manner greater than keeping it permanently frozen or disposing of it.

By the same token, because "When does life begin?" is so murky and ambiguous, the attempts to "draw some line" before which human embryos are less valued is equally imprecise and suspect. The developmental process of the human embryo makes it extremely difficult to find any obvious point at which to say that the embryo's status has plainly or significantly changed. The argument that embryos less than fourteen days old (the time when the possibility of twinning is past and implantation in the uterine wall has occurred) are "pre-embryos" seems strangely artificial and arbitrary. Deciding on a time when embryos merit more protection or respect is just as problematic as deciding when life begins.

Relieving Human Suffering

"Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." So Jesus commands his disciples in Matthew 10:8. Christians have always been at the forefront of the medical arts, seeking to cure diseases and to alleviate suffering. Similarly, the Christian faith has been an impetus to increase human knowledge and to explore God's creation. In a discussion of genetics, the church does not want to do as it did during the time of Galileo, providing a theological defense for a false, outdated point of view.

This desire to cure the sick, lessen suffering, increase knowledge, and encourage exploration holds an important place in many Christians' rationale for supporting stem cell technology. These Christians believe that the ministry of healing and wholeness is continued through stem cell research. They point to the incredible potential, the amazing benefits that could come from it. Accordingly, these Christians believe that although human embryos merit deep respect, the possible medical breakthroughs from stem cells warrant the use and destruction of these embryos. The possibility of using stem cell technology to cure diabetes, Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease, or reverse paralysis due to spinal injuries makes

this technology an extremely meaningful and attractive pursuit. The opportunity is greater than simply relieving suffering. It could so profoundly change the quality of life of some individuals that it brings to mind Jesus' proclamation that he has come so that "that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

God has entrusted humanity with incredible resources, creativity, and knowledge. Christians seek to pursue good with these gifts. Expressing creativity and participating in God's creating work is one of the great gifts God has entrusted to humankind. Developing stem cell technology can be understood as part of the human task to be creative. Of course, this role as God's creative agents in the world is to be done carefully and humbly. Yet warnings against "playing God" are often wrongly used to stifle human creativity and exploration. Vaccines and organ transplants, now accepted and received with thankfulness, were once criticized as "playing God."

Other Christians appreciate the potential benefits from stem cell technology yet wonder where the Christian mandate to heal ends, and where a dangerous sort of outcome-based utilitarianism begins. To know ahead of time the desirable result, and then do almost anything to achieve that outcome, produces a precarious "end justifies the means" mindset. Christians must be wary of making ethical decisions on the basis of "cost-benefit analysis." None of us can be indifferent to suffering caused by various diseases and injuries; still a good result—even an amazing result—cannot be justification for wrongful actions. Christians do not endorse the view that simply because science can do something, it should be done. There is an important difference between doing all the good one morally can do, and doing all the good one possibly can do. Genetic engineering pushes humankind into areas where over-reaching our creativity and knowledge becomes a genuine concern. The Christian claim that salvation is in Jesus Christ may humbly remind our world of the risk of seeking too much from medicine and technology, and can work against the illusion that human beings bear ultimate responsibility for overcoming suffering and conquering disease.

The exact moral status of human embryos may remain undecided, but Christians should be hesitant to view them as raw materials necessary to manufacture a product, or a supplier of parts for medical technology. The issue here is much more than a concern for embryos. Instead, there is a concern for a far-reaching, yet subtle form of dehumanization. There is a concern to maintain an understanding of people as more than parts and flesh, and the human body as more than a "thing." It may sound very insensitive to those who suffer, but overcoming disease may be a too limited and narrow perspective, if overcoming that disease distinctly alters the way we view and value the body, human life, and what it means to be human. There is no need for sensationalistic science-fiction scenarios of what the future could hold. Yet the possibility of broad, still unforeseeable, long-term detriment to our social fabric causes some Christians to believe that reluctance and caution toward embryonic stems is the prudent path.

Moreover, while the curing of disease and lessening of human suffering are laudable pursuits, there should be no naiveté about the fact that mingled with these noble pursuits are desires for huge monetary profits and great corporate fortunes. Similarly, those who will potentially benefit from stem cells are certainly the wealthy and privileged. That most of the current stem cell lines were developed from embryos from more affluent societies reveals this connection between wealth and potential stem cell benefits. Such criticism of stem cell technology becomes even more piercing against a backdrop where millions in the U.S. have no have health insurance, millions in Africa with AIDS go untreated, and common diarrhea remains a deadly killer in much of the world.

Those Christians who are reluctant or oppose the development of embryonic stem cells must be attentive not to exhibit a blithe or cavalier attitude toward suffering. Those persons whose suffering might potentially be alleviated through the stem cell technology can right-

ly ask hard questions about this reticence toward stem cell technology. We must be prepared to discuss their questions and hear their cries. At the same time, Christians can express and embody a sort of compassion that may not be willing to relieve another's suffering at an ethically dubious cost, but is willing to suffer with and support those who suffer. The questions surrounding stem cells powerfully and pointedly remind us that suffering is often alleviated only through sacrifice. Too often we look to others, especially the weak and poor, to make those sacrifices, or we grasp for distant, faceless, apparently cost-free technologies that promise to relieve suffering. As followers of Christ, let us first look to ourselves to make the sacrifices that might relieve the suffering of others.

Provisional Proposals

The questions surrounding stem cell technology are complex and clouded. There are a variety of views within the Christian community. This variety and disagreement is evident among the members of the Commission on Christian Action, which is unable to find consensus on some topics. The various sources of embryonic stem cells warrant different moral evaluations.

From Miscarriages: There is some possibility of developing stem cells from miscarried fetuses. With parental consent, this source for stem cells seems the least ethically ambiguous. However, miscarriages often occur because of genetic abnormalities in the fetus, making it unsuitable for stem cell development.

Existing Lines of Stem Cells: In August 2001, President Bush restricted United States federal funding to research done on the roughly sixty stem cell lines said to exist. His intention was to discourage the destruction of additional embryos necessary for establishment of more cell lines, while still allowing research on the existing lines. (The aim of this paper is primarily to inform and instigate greater discussion within the church. Public policy recommendations are a very limited, secondary aim.) Continuing to use the existing stem cell lines for research is generally supported by the commission. Wishing something had not been done will not undo it. Now that these stem cell lines exist, research should continue on those lines. There are Christians, however, who assert that experimentation with the existing lines still shares complicity with the wrongful use of the embryos that established those lines. Additionally, continuing funding and research may erode attempts to place some limits or restrictions on genetic research. Conversely, others argue that public involvement and funding is one way to restrain the control of stem cell technology by private corporations. Government funding may help ensure that whatever benefits come from stem cell technology are more justly distributed.

Disposal and Freezing of Surplus Embryos: The commission is divided on the development of stem cells from surplus frozen embryos or embryos facing disposal. Parental consent potentially helps to address concerns about embryos becoming a commodity, managed by scientists and owned for monetary profit. Would parents who give consent for the use of their surplus embryos be sharing and giving a gift to the world, especially those who suffer from various diseases? Or would they be using the sort of "end justifies the means" utilitarian thinking criticized earlier? Is parental consent a self-sacrificial act of generosity, or is refraining from parental consent a sign of patient trust in God's providence?

If parental consent is given, and especially if embryos are scheduled for disposal, then the use of these embryos could bring great benefit to humankind and can be understood as an honorable end for the embryos. Others believe that letting the embryos die naturally would be the more honorable end. (The creation of these surplus embryos in routine infertility treatments may itself be an ethical dilemma for Christians—one that the commission hopes to address in the near future.) Declining to view embryos, even those that are to be discarded, as a source for stem cells may inhibit the development of an outlook that views

human beings as things and spare parts. By turning down this most reachable path toward an undeniable good, one could hope to force our society to greater scientific creativity and Christians to a renewed devotion to care for the suffering. Although it is not yet possible, research is ongoing to develop totipotent stem cells from less ethically dubious sources such as the pluripotent cells in adult bone marrow. Resisting the use of embryonic stem cells could greatly encourage research to focus on developing stem cells from alternate sources.

Production of Embryos for Stem Cells: The commission is most averse and opposed to the production of embryos for the explicit purpose of obtaining more stem cells. Creating embryos solely for scientific purposes, such as cloning and developing stem cells, seems an especially hasty and ill-advised step toward a perspective that views embryos and potentially all life as a commodity or resource.

Finally, the commission is aware that we live in a "post-Christian" context, where it can be difficult to convey Christian ethical convictions. When partisan politics and government funding enter the equation, determining and articulating a Christian perspective becomes extremely perplexing. Both science and government appear willing to hear from the various religious communities; still Christian perspectives may or may not gain wide acceptance. Success or lack of success in influencing public policy is not the measure of the church's witness. We should continue to try to articulate a Christian perspective and engage the scientific community, government, and others in dialogue. That there is still much debate and disagreement within the church further reveals the need for continued discussion, study, creativity, and prayer. Meanwhile, scientific research continues. Likely this will mean that on some issues of genetics, at some point the question for Christians may no longer be whether some research is ethical, or whether to move ahead, but rather how to respond to new breakthroughs and developments—even if some Christians had been uncertain about the development.

R-12
To direct the RCA Distribution Center to make this paper, "The Creation and Use of Embryonic Stem Cells," available to congregations for study and discussion.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-12 (amended):
To direct RCA Communication and Production Services to make the paper, "The Creation and Use of Embryonic Stem Cells," available to congregations for study and discussion; and further,

to encourage the use of the website to make available visual aids, additional scientific information, and a process for discussing these issues. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Reasons:

1. Continuing updates are needed as scientific technology advances.

2. The website allows wider and more economical distribution.

R-13
To encourage congregations to discuss among their membership the scientific background and the ethical questions pertaining to embryonic stem cells, using "The Creation and Use of Embryonic Stem Cells" as a resource. (ADOPTED)

R-14
To direct the RCA Office of Social Witness, in conjunction with other appropriate denominational offices and staff, to plan and convene several gatherings across the denomination during the next two years, for the purpose of discussing "The Creation and Use of Embryonic Stem Cells," and further;

to invite scientists, physicians, theologians, and those whose lives may be directly affected by stem cell technology, to be part of these discussions, but also to make a strong effort for these discussions to include and be accessible to typical church members. (ADOPTED)

R-15
To direct the RCA Commission on Christian Action to listen to and reflect upon these gatherings, and to report back to the General Synod of 2004. (ADOPTED)

CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE INVESTING

In the past ten to fifteen years there has been a significant change in the financial world of North America. It has been described as the shift from "Wall Street" to "Main Street." Average persons are active market investors and the Dow Jones average is as available as the most recent sport scores. Although the financial markets have slipped recently, this does not alter the major changes that have taken place in the financial world. Obviously members of the Reformed Church in America are among those individuals who have become more aware of and involved in the financial world. As Christians, this involvement brings new opportunities and responsibilities.

This paper aims to introduce individuals, as well as congregations that increasingly hold endowments and other investments, to ways their investments can be expressions and tools of the good news of Jesus Christ. With so many options for investments, so many people dispensing advice, and all sorts of legal ramifications in both Canada and the United States, this introduction can only be in the most general of terms. Individuals will have to do their own research and make their own decisions. This paper does not endorse any specific investments or investing strategies. Rather it holds up four important aspects of socially responsible investing—socially or ethically "screened" investing, mission investing, shareholder activism, and estate planning.

Biblical and Theological Background

"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Certainly, Jesus' words could describe those Christians fortunate enough to hold various financial investments. We have been given much. What is required of us?

Socially responsible investing is one aspect of Christian stewardship. God entrusts to our care all that we have, not simply our financial investments. Stewardship entails using our gifts to bring glory to God and advance God's work in the world. Socially responsible

investing tries to use our financial investments to assist and be in harmony with the aims of God's kingdom. Our investments and management of our finances can become ways for us to share the good news of Christ, to love our neighbor, to be light and salt in the world, to be honest and truthful, to care for the poor and vulnerable, to seek justice, to tend creation, to be peacemakers, and much more.

We are invested in the world because God invests in the world. In the beginning, God declares creation to be "very good." In Jesus Christ, God takes our human flesh and lives among us. Through the Holy Spirit, God gathers the church and nurtures it with the Word, water, bread, and wine. In all of this, we see that God is never just concerned with "spiritual matters." God is invested in the tangible creation and calls us to be likewise. As Christians, we are invested in the world, not only financially, but invested, engaged, and concerned about all of God's creation. We are part of the complex economic activity of the world. We earn and spend, borrow and invest, risk and participate in the economy.

Like all of life, economic activity is full of shades of gray, not black and white. There are no "perfect" financial investments. Socially responsible investing is not an attempt to "remain pure" or escape from the gray ambiguities of economic activity. Just the opposite is true. Socially responsible investing continues the traditional emphasis of Reformed theology to bring Christ to every dimension of life. Reformed Christians have never sought to withdraw from society or avoid the complexity, uncertainty, and brokenness of our world. Instead, Reformed Christians have sought to witness in, engage in, invest in, and possibly even transform society. "When participating in the affairs of the world and engaging with secular powers in commerce and dialogue, the church resists the temptation to seek an Eden free from sin and moral ambiguity. Such flight would act counter to the Lord of the church, whose love was incarnate, not only in a human body, but also in a human self immersed in a particular human society to accomplish God's redemptive purpose" ("The Church's Peace Witness in the U.S. Corporate Economy," *MGS 1985*, p. 58).

Socially responsible investing is a witness to Christ in the marketplace. It seeks to invest in those companies and institutions that do good, create jobs, make useful products, increase knowledge, or alleviate suffering. It also believes that investing can be one way to challenge companies and products we question or oppose. At the same time, socially responsible investing recognizes that one aspect of being a good steward is to seek a good return on one's investment. Socially responsible investing is not a dreamy fantasyland where one is completely unconcerned about a good return on investments. It understands the realities of economics, yet believes that doing good can be compatible with good business and good investing.

Socially Screened Investments

Socially screened investments seek to avoid those investments that do not meet an investor's social and ethical criteria. Socially screened investing can also attempt to fill a portfolio with investments that conform to the investor's social goals and values. For individual investors, one of the simplest and most common ways of screening investments is through socially screened mutual funds. These mutual funds apply various social and ethical criteria to investments before including them within that fund.

Socially responsible funds might seek to invest in companies that have an outstanding record of community involvement, generosity, or employee relations. A "positive" screen could also seek companies that produce innovative, beneficial, and commendable products. The most common "negative" screens eliminate investments in companies involved in the alcohol, tobacco, and gambling industries.

These three screens—alcohol, tobacco and gambling (as well as minimal investment in companies involved in the manufacture of nuclear weapons)—have been part of the investment policies of Reformed Church in America. The recent decision to place the pension investments in mutual funds managed by Fidelity Investments now has made such screens impossible. Fidelity applies no social screens when making investment decisions. At the time of this report, approximately $2 million, or less than one percent, of the RCA funds with Fidelity are invested in companies that fail to pass these three traditional screens.

Today all sorts of other screens convey different investors' social concerns. Screens found in various mutual funds include those related to unfair labor practices, involvement in nations with records of injustice, nuclear power, abortion, pornography, animal testing, the entertainment industry, and environmental destruction. Some mutual funds have more stringent screens, while others only restrict the more blatant conditions. For example, one fund may avoid investing in any companies that are military contractors, while another fund may only restrict investments in companies involved in the production of weapons of mass destruction. In addition, most mutual funds' "negative" screens do not screen out a company unless a significant share of its income is derived from unacceptable sources. So, for example, a company that derives one or two percent of its income from the production of cigarettes and the rest of its income from the production of food could still be included in some screened funds.

Many investors have the false impression that screening investments results in lower returns on the investment. This is not necessarily the case. The broad availability of diverse socially screened mutual funds has demonstrated that they can compete with more typical mutual funds and portfolios. Socially screened mutual funds have frequently been among the highest returning investments.

The popularity of screened mutual funds also means that there are funds aimed at almost every investment objective and strategy, from growth to fixed income, balanced, indexed, bonds, global, small cap, large cap, etc. The variety of options available is amazing and inviting.

It is not the intent of this report to suggest specific screens individual investors should apply to their own portfolios. Our intention is only to introduce and commend socially screened investments, urging individuals to do their own careful and prayerful investigation and decision-making.

Mission Investing

Mission investing is the practice of placing a portion of one's investments in especially worthy causes even if it may mean a less-than-competitive rate of return or higher risk. In an effort to make some of their financial investments available for the economic development of the poor, investors place positive social benefits ahead of higher returns.

Examples of mission investments include community credit unions that finance low-income housing; child care centers; inner-city and rural redevelopment; development banks, both domestically and overseas, that make very small loans to small businesses and even street entrepreneurs; and banks that specialize in lower interest loans for non-profit organizations. Investments in the Reformed Church's Building and Extension Fund, which makes loans for church buildings and renovation, and typically pays investors a return comparable with Certificates of Deposit, can also be viewed as mission investing.

Very small loans can make a huge difference in mission investing. Sometimes as little as a $25 or $50 loan by a development bank to a new business owner in the developing world is enough to put that entrepreneur on the path to success. A $10,000 no-interest loan can

make the otherwise impossible possible for a nursery school or halfway house seeking to buy a building. Lending money below market rate can mean only a small decrease in an investor's return, but it can make a large amount of money available to a needy borrower.

Investors will have to decide what portion of their portfolio to put into such lower return–higher risk mission investment. Ten percent of a total portfolio, based on the Old Testament tithe, could be a goal for mission investing.

Since 1970 the Reformed Church has had a policy of making up to 10 percent of its operating reserves available for alternative investments. One such agency in which the Reformed Church has invested is the Nicaragua Community Development Loan Fund (NCDLF). NCDLF is both a social investment fund in the United States and an alternative form of credit for the poor in Nicaragua run through the Nicaraguan Council of Protestant Churches (CEPAD). When foreign donations to Nicaragua started to dry up at the end of 1991, CEPAD formed an innovative lending partnership with the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua, by which U.S. investors could loan money to Nicaraguan farmers and merchants. Estela Lopez lives in Acahualinca, a Managua barrio near the garbage dump where she finds parts out of which she creates new appliances. Estela, who had never received formal credit, has borrowed four times from the NCDLF to buy new appliance parts for her business. Women like Estela are becoming a major focus of community development programs in Nicaragua, especially in the alternative credit sector. Typically women are less prone to spend income on luxury items, rum, or cigarettes and are more likely to invest in schooling, medicine, and food for their families. Group lending promoted by the NCDLF—including loans to solidarity groups, village banks, cooperatives, and worker-owned businesses—is helping to place the poor themselves in the center of their financial systems, and enables the poor to build sustainable access to resources.

Another such agency is Oikocredit, formerly the Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society. Oikocredit provides loans to enterprises owned and operated by monetarily poor people. By investing in Oikocredit churches, church organizations, non-profit organizations, institutions, and individuals create opportunities for the marginalized to attain self-reliance and build self-esteem. Oikocredit was created to build bridges between rich and poor by making credit accessible to the disadvantaged of this world.

At the heart of the Oikocredit mission lies the conviction that loans for productive business enterprises provide a stronger incentive for self-development than grants alone. The Reformed Church in America has made $100,000 available in loans through Oikocredit. Congregations and individuals can invest in Oikocredit for as little as $1,000. Information regarding the issuing of Oikocredit shares can be found in the Oikocredit prospectus, which is available at the Oikocredit International Support Office and through the website (http://www.oikocredit.org).

Shareholder Activism

As partial owners of a company, shareholders have power, a voice, and access within that company. Company management feels obliged to listen to shareholders because they have a clear interest in the best performance of that company. Shareholders can use this power and access to express concerns about detrimental company policies and practices. Sometimes, investors deliberately choose to hold a small investment in a company, rather than divest completely, so that as investors they can use this small investment as leverage with the company, and sponsor shareholder resolutions.

The desire of companies to please shareholders and avoid negative publicity often means that a small group of shareholders can achieve significant results. For example, a shareholder resolution that receives even 10 percent support among all shareholders still sends

a powerful message to the company and can alter company policy. Many experts believe that shareholder activism in the 1980s was a large factor in the decisions of many companies to alter their business practices in South Africa, which in turn contributed to the end of the apartheid regime there.

Shareholder activism includes letter writing to express concerns about company behavior, seeking to meet and speak with management, sponsoring and supporting shareholder resolutions, proxy voting in support of resolutions, and attending stockholder meetings to vote and speak on issues.

The complexity of the issues and procedures, along with the need to join with other shareholders, makes shareholder activism difficult for an isolated individual. For thirty years the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) has been a leader of the corporate social responsibility movement. ICCR's membership is an association of 275 Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish institutional investors, including national denominations, religious communities, pension funds, endowments, hospital corporations, economic development funds, and publishing companies. The Reformed Church in America is one of the charter members of ICCR. Each year ICCR-member religious institutional investors sponsor over one hundred shareholder resolutions on major social and environmental issues. The combined portfolio value of ICCR's member organizations is estimated to be $110 billion.

From time to time, through its cooperation with the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, the Reformed Church in America will file a shareholder resolution with a major corporation in which the RCA holds stock. Such shareholder resolutions often afford the occasion for church representatives and corporate management to come together to discuss significant ethical issues involved in participating in today's global economy. As stated in a 1985 General Synod report, "Through its economic involvement the church may offer a significant witness in and to its society...The Reformed tradition has emphasized that the essential role of the church in society is not to enhance it own resources but to glorify God, witness to the lordship of Christ, and transform this present social order to the vision and values of Christ's kingdom" ("The Church's Peace Witness in the U.S. Corporate Economy," *MGS 1985*, p. 57).

For several years during the 1990s, the RCA filed shareholder resolutions with Texaco Corporation concerning the company's involvement with the government of Myanmar (Burma), a military regime accused of serious human rights abuses. The minister for social witness and other RCA representatives spoke at annual stockholders' meetings and met with corporate management to discuss the company's role in advocating for human rights in Myanmar. In the fall of 1997 Texaco announced its decision to sell its assets in an offshore natural gas project off the coast of Burma. Such actions can be a sign of the international community's strong support for human rights and democracy and a force for change in oppressive regimes in Burma and elsewhere.

Estate Planning

When most Christians think about financial stewardship, they think about giving some of their wages and day-to-day cash flow to the church, usually through the offering plate on Sunday morning. Yet for many people, their largest growth in wealth comes not through wages, but through real estate investment, growth in a financial portfolio, and assets received through inheritance. Very few Christians ever consider financial stewardship on these aspects of their wealth, even though it is often where they experience the largest increase over the years.

Part of good stewardship and social responsibility is to consider how to share and distribute this accumulated wealth through estate planning. Of course, and rightfully so, most people consider their heirs in estate planning. The church needs to help them to realize that, as Christian stewards, they also should consider a gift to the church in their estate planning.

In the next few years, the largest-ever transfer of wealth will take place in North America. This wealth will transfer from one generation to another and to our governments in the form of taxes. Part of this transfer of wealth could include support for churches, along with other charities. Today many churches (and almost every charity) have trained persons who can assist with estate planning and provide information on all sorts of instruments to include gifts to the church during one's lifetime or in wills. The RCA Foundation offers such planning to members of the RCA at no cost. It also provides a charitable gift annuity program along with assistance in establishing charitable remainder trusts and other methods of giving. Charitable estate planning is one more way that Christians can invest themselves and their money in the work of God's kingdom in our world.

The commission recommended:

R-16
To direct the RCA Distribution Center to make this paper, "Christian Stewardship and Socially Responsible Investing," available to individuals and congregations for study and discussion.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-16 (amended):
To direct RCA Communication and Production Services to make the paper, "Christian Stewardship and Socially Responsible Investing," available on the RCA website to individuals and congregations for study and discussion. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Reason: The website allows wider and more economical distribution.

R-17
To instruct the RCA Office of Social Witness to raise greater awareness of socially responsible investing among RCA members and churches. (ADOPTED)

R-18
To instruct RCA Communication and Production Services to develop a small, simple brochure about socially responsible investing for distribution to churches and individuals. (ADOPTED)

R-19
To urge the congregations and members of the RCA to avail themselves of the services of the RCA Foundation in promoting and facilitating giving to the church through estate planning. (ADOPTED)

Resources

Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
475 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 10115
http://www.iccr.org/index.htm

The Social Investment Forum offers comprehensive information, contacts, and resources on socially responsible investing.

Social Investment Forum
1612 K Street NW, Suite 650
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: (202) 872-5319; fax: (202)822-8471
http://www.socialinvest.org/

Oikocredit USA
Terry Provance, Executive Director
PO Box 11000
Washington, D.C.
Phone: (202) 265-0607
http://www.oikocredit.org/
Email: office.us@oikocredit.org

THE DECADE TO OVERCOME VIOLENCE

The 2001 General Synod directed the Commission on Christian Action "to study ways by which the initiative for the (World Council of Churches') Decade to Overcome Violence can be incorporated into the mission and ministry of the RCA and to report to the General Synod 2002" (*MGS 2001*, R-24, p. 87).

When the General Synod gave that directive no one could have foreseen that violence would so directly and so powerfully affect our lives. The events of September 11 and their aftermath have brought home the urgent need for the church to minister to the victims of violence and to witness to the Christ who is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) in a broken and often terribly violent world.

The Decade to Overcome Violence has its origins in the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998. Delegates called on the World Council of Churches to work strategically with the churches on the issues of non-violence and reconciliation. The aim is to help foster a culture of nonviolence, working with other international partners and organizations and examining and developing approaches to conflict transformation and just peace-making in the new globalized context.

The church is called to address not only overt acts of violence but also the more covert forms of violence—poverty, psychological abuse, political and economic oppression, and systemic injustice. The peace to which the church is called to bear witness is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of shalom—restored and reconciled relationships among humanity and with God so that all of God's creation might flourish.

In order to move peacemaking more toward the center of the life and witness of the church and to build stronger connections among churches, the goals of the Decade to Overcome Violence are:

- Addressing holistically the wide varieties of violence, both direct and structural, in homes, communities, and international arenas; and learning from local and regional analyses of violence and of ways to overcome violence.
- Challenging the churches to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence; to relinquish any theological justification of violence; and to affirm anew the spirituality of reconciliation and active nonviolence.
- Creating a new understanding of security in terms of cooperation and community, instead of in terms of domination and competition.
- Learning from the spirituality and resources for peace-building of other faiths; working with communities of other faiths in the pursuit of peace; and challenging the churches to reflect on the misuse of religious and ethnic identities in pluralistic societies.
- Challenging the growing militarization of our world, especially the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

The Decade to Overcome Violence is not a program developed and orchestrated by the World Council of Churches; its heart and soul are in the member churches and their peace and reconciliation ministries that inspire and encourage other churches to seek the same goals. The aim of the World Council is to help encourage and link churches in their ministries of peacemaking.

The Reformed Church in America is already involved in a variety of peacemaking ministries:

- Each week in hundreds of congregations God's people gather for worship where the Word is faithfully preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and the needs of the world are brought to God in prayer. In worship God's people witness to and participate in God's mission to the world. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor. 5:19).
- RCA congregations responded (and continue to respond) to the attacks of September 11 by ministering to the victims of violence, caring for the caregivers, giving generously to help refugees and the victims of war, and opening their sanctuaries for ecumenical and interfaith services of prayer for peace.
- Congregations are carrying on ministries of reconciliation and peace-building in their own contexts and neighborhoods—addressing domestic violence, racial tensions, economic injustice, and violence against creation; facilitating police-community dialogue; working at inter-faith dialogue; ministering to people in prison; and participating in conflict-resolution training.
- Print and audiovisual resources for peacemaking have been developed and made available through the RCA Distribution Center, www.rca.org/material/peace.html.
- Additional study and action suggestions have been sent to congregations in an annual "Peace with Justice" resource packet and posted on the RCA website.
- A variety of denominational networks for information-sharing and coordinated action are helping to provide resources, training, and opportunities for various peacemaking ministries. These include Middle East Peacemakers, Caring for Creation Coordinators, and the Office of Social Witness "Action Alert" mailing list.
- Through Reformed Church World Service the RCA has actively supported the "People-to-People" peace process in Sudan.
- The General Synod has called on the church to make racial justice and reconciliation a priorty (*MGS 1998*, pp. 119-134), encouraging congregations to develop model ministries for breaking down barriers between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Peacemaking is an integral part of the RCA's understanding of mission. "Discipling All Nations," the guiding document for the denomination's mission programs, affirms:

We advocate for peace and work for justice and mercy. We dialogue with others to call upon rulers and civil authorities to heed the prophetic standards of the gospel. We advocate for peace in places of war and violence and seek justice and mercy for the poor, the oppressed, and those afflicted by natural disasters (Isaiah 58 and Micah 6:8).

Discipling the Forces of Poverty. We believe the heart of God is grieved by the injustice of humanity. God brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty (adapted from Luke 1:52-53). We believe the abject poverty of a quarter of the world's people, most of whom are women and children, demands the advocacy of the church for mercy and justice. We are committed to challenging the injustice and racism of our systems, to being peacemakers, to working for the preservation and restoration of creation, to alleviating hunger, to providing disaster relief, to empowering communities.

The commission recommended:

R-20
To encourage RCA congregations and institutions to teach, practice, and model nonviolence both for their own members and in service to their communities; to encourage congregations to include in their peace and justice ministries efforts that address structural, institutional violence and economic injustice; and further,

to encourage congregations to participate in the Decade to Overcome Violence by sharing their ideas and experiences with member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC-U.S. Office, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115; email: worldcoun@aol.com).

The advisory committee recommended:

R-20 (amended):
To encourage RCA congregations and institutions to teach, practice, and model nonviolence both for their own members and in service to their communities; and further,

to encourage congregations to include in their peace and justice ministries efforts that address structural, institutional violence and economic injustice; and further,

to encourage congregations to participate in the Decade to Overcome Violence by sharing their ideas and experiences with the RCA Office of Social Witness; and further,

to instruct the Office of Social Witness to share this information with RCA congregations and the World Council of Churches. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Reason: It is valuable to make this information available to RCA congregations as well as to the World Council of Churches.

R-21
To encourage congregations to receive an annual "peacemaking" offering in conjunction with Peace with Justice Sunday, designating half of the offering for peacemaking ministries in the local congregation or community and half for a denominational peacemaking program to be named each year by the General Synod Council; and further,

to direct the Office of Social Witness and Communication and Production Services to develop educational and promotional materials for the annual peacemaking offering. (ADOPTED)

R-22
To request that the minister for social witness and other appropriate staff explore the sharing of peacemaking resources and programs with other World Council of Churches member churches, especially the Formula of Agreement churches.

A motion was made to amend the recommendation:

R-22 (amended):
To request that the minister for social witness and other appropriate staff explore the sharing of peacemaking resources and programs with other World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches member churches, especially the Formula of Agreement churches. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

R-23
To request the Office of Social Witness and Reformed Church World Service to cooperate in identifying and developing resources and models for congregational workshops on the church's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The advisory committee recommended:

To request the Office of Social Witness and Reformed Church World Service to cooperate in identifying and developing resources and models for congregational workshops on the church's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and other acts of terrorism.

A motion was made to amend the amendment:

R-23 (amended):
To request the Office of Social Witness and Reformed Church World Service to cooperate in identifying and developing resources and models for congregational workshops on the church's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and other acts of terrorism both individual and institutional. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Reason: Providing resources may help the church respond to events of September 11, 2001, as well as to other acts of terrorism.

Future Work

The commission plans to continue to address ethical issues raised by new genetic technologies. The commission will also be considering issues of energy conservation and energy policy.

The commission expresses the gratitude of the church to Terry Troia and Eddie Aleman, who are completing their terms of service on the commission. Their gifts of energy, insight, and compassion have enriched the work of the commission, and we trust, will continue to enrich the ministry of the wider church.

Report of the General Synod Council's Congregational Services Committee

REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF SOCIAL WITNESS

Obeying the command and trusting the promise, the people of the Reformed Church in America seek to be Faithful Witnesses to Christ's resurrection, ministering to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works.

The work of the Office of Social Witness is one part of a common effort in Reformed Church to live out ministries of worship, discipleship, equipping leaders, and outreach in a wholistic way, as faithful witnesses to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Our joint summary report, Faithful Witnesses, is found in this book in the section titled Evangelization and Church Growth; this is the detailed report of the Office of Social Witness.

MAKING DISCIPLES

Under the guidance of the Word and Holy Spirit the church is called to form people whose lives are shaped after the life and teachings of Jesus. They will follow Jesus in ministering to those in need, standing with those who are oppressed, and comforting those who sorrow. They will follow Jesus in being a people who are called to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). The making of Jesus-followers and cross-carriers is a lifelong process and belongs to the entire community of faith. Through worship and teaching, through prayer and in ministry to those in need, in our witness in the world and in our life together, we are called to help each other grow up in every way into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Equipping Disciples to Witness for Justice, Peace, and the Care of Creation

With the assistance of Robin Hoy, associate for social witness, the Office of Social Witness continues to enlist and equip additional "Caring for Creation Coordinators." Nearly fifty coordinators are now serving as resource persons for congregations by providing resources and opportunities to learn about environmental issues and the biblical theology of creation; helping churches and families with ideas for more creation-friendly lifestyles; and providing information about important legislation on environmental issues.

Several RCA Caring for Creation Coordinators participated in an ecumenical conference, "On Earth As It Is in Heaven: Witnessing to the Healing of God's Creation," held in May 2001 in Washington, D.C.; a newsletter by and for coordinators is published periodically; and Earth Day Sunday resources on the theme, "Caring for God's Creation: Making the World Safe for Children," were developed in cooperation with the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group and posted early this year.

The General Synod has several times encouraged Reformed Church congregations to participate in Bread for the World, a Christian citizens' movement that helps hungry people by writing, calling, and visiting U.S. decision-makers regarding legislation that addresses hunger and its causes. The Office of Social Witness continues to encourage congregational participation in Bread for the World's annual Offering of Letters and in the Covenant Church program. The office helped to sponsor regional Offering of Letters workshops and facilitates RCA participation in the Bread for the World national gathering in June.

Resources for worship, study, and action were sent to each congregation following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Additional resources for equipping the church's peace-with-justice witness were posted on the RCA website.

The Office of Social Witness also maintains a mailing list of RCA members who receive periodic "action alerts" on various issues, and it responds to numerous requests for information on social issues and for resources to equip congregations for their witness in society.

General Synod Referrals

The General Synod requested that the Office of Social Witness compile a summary of previous statements on genetics and related issues and make this available to the church (*MGS 2001*, R-110, p. 384). The synod also directed the Office of Social Witness to explore with the larger Christian community the ethical and theological issues raised by new genetic technologies (*MGS 2001*, R-111, p. 385).

A brochure listing the previous General Synod statements on genetics as well as suggested study resources available from the RCA Distribution Center was sent to each congregation. Congregations were also invited to identify people (such as genetic counselors, scientists, health professionals, and ethicists) who could serve as resource people or represent the denomination in ecumenical forums and dialogues.