

INSIDE THE RCA

Racism for All to See

by Oliver Patterson

Photos by RNS/Reuters

The devastation suffered by victims of Hurricane Katrina reminds us of the prevalence of racism, even within our own denomination.

Perhaps, during the last week of August 2005, God let the rest of the world see the underbelly of the United States: the oppressed, the poor, the former slaves. God made it clear that racism is alive and well, and that institutional structures reinforce it. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,

Oliver Patterson is professor of language and literacy at New York University and a member of First Reformed Church of Jamaica, New York.

journalists reported that the once great metropolis of New Orleans had the appearance of a war zone, with thousands of homes destroyed. Incredibly, as time went on things were not getting better for those who were not able to evacuate, they were getting worse. The pictures of the people revealed the trauma they suffered. I heard a distraught Mr. Jackson tell a reporter: "That's all I had. I'm lost. My wife's gone. I couldn't hold her hand. That's all I had. I'm lost. She's gone. She's gone. She told me to take care of the kids."

Odd Paradox

Mothers held up babies and begged for help: milk, water, formula, medicine. The dead were in the streets. I particularly remember the dead body in the wheelchair covered in an olive green military blanket. Reporters told of horrendous conditions in the stadium and in the convention center filled with the stench of human waste.

Most shocking was that virtually every one of the victims was black. Moreover, there was a weird paradox about what was seen. News crews had no problem getting food and water and moving in and out of the flooded zone. Where were the buses and water for these poor folks? It was clear to everyone that local police and fire departments were themselves victims of the hurricane. Why was so much attention devoted to the relatively small number of criminals who stole televisions and appliances? Most of the people seen on television were stoic. I saw no mass rioting. I saw folks, poor folks, basically waiting patiently for help. I did see people in stores taking water, food, and clothes; yet they too were pictured as looters. It was strange to see both milk takers and television thieves conjoined. Would John Calvin not ethically distinguish between them? Under such conditions wouldn't most folks be "looters"?

As these events unfolded, I was attempting to compose a theological reflection on the

theme "Water—God's Gift of Life" for the meeting of the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. But I was conflicted; at that time, water appeared to be as much a curse as a gift. But I do believe that a powerful stream for disciples of Jesus the Christ is the social justice stream.

As disciples of Jesus the Christ we are mandated "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives" (Isaiah 61:1). There are some difficult and complex issues the Christian community needs to raise if it is to be an instrument of freedom, justice, and equity.

Institutional Racism

Institutional racism exists in a society when there is a persistent and significant gap between and among racial groups in areas such as wealth, income, health, and education. Racism is not accidental. It is historical. It is how the society has been designed, a result of human design. It is reflected in the socio-economic data of a society.

In Ireland, there is a persistent gap in wealth, education, and health between those who are Protestant and those who are Roman Catholic. In Japan, a significant gap exists between the Korean and Japanese populations. In Rwanda, a significant gap exists between the Tutsis and the Hutu.

The Belhar Confession: An Olive Branch

The Commission on Christian Unity and the Commission on Race and Ethnicity over the past five years have presented the Belhar Confession to the RCA in various ways. A study guide is currently under preparation by Christian Unity.

The Belhar Confession is a gift to the world from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Though the members of URCSA suffered greatly under the evil of apartheid, they emerged with an olive branch. To those who held them captive, they offer unity in Christ, a plea for reconciliation, and social justice, not retribution.

Each General Synod over the past five years has featured presentations on the Belhar Confession. All have been received well.

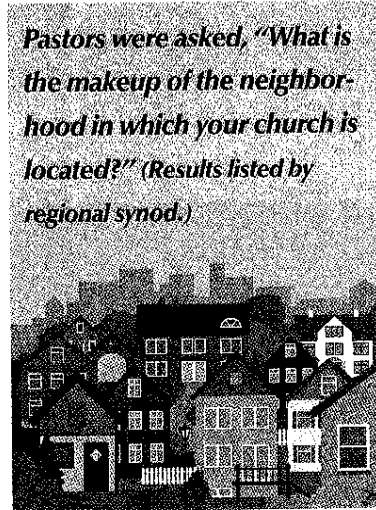
Birthplace: Belhar, South Africa (1982).

Context: Formally adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986, the Belhar Confession arose in the context of confronting a system of government called apartheid.

Purpose: To affirm the unity of the church, reconciliation between peoples, and God's justice for poor and destitute people. Why should the RCA study the Belhar Confession, and why now?

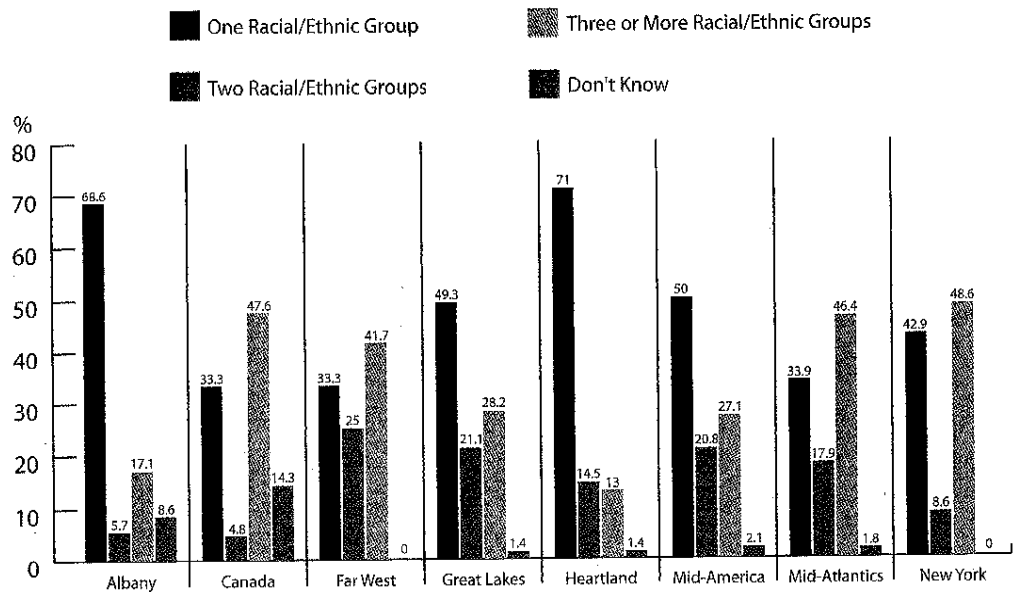
- **Its focus:** There is no mention in the classical confessions of the central biblical principle of God's justice and special care for the poor and suffering. The Belhar fills this gap in the standard confessions.
- **Its content:** The unity of the church, reconciliation of peoples in Christ, and God's justice and care for the suffering and poor are fundamental biblical principles that lie at the core of the Reformed faith.
- **Its origins:** The Belhar Confession is the only confession the global church has from Africa and the southern hemisphere. The Belhar Confession is available online (www.rca.org/aboutus/beliefs/belhar.html).

Neighborhood Makeup of RCA Congregations*



Pastors were asked, "What is the makeup of the neighborhood in which your church is located?" (Results listed by regional synod.)

*From RCA 2005 Race/Ethnicity Awareness Survey; executive summary available online (www.rca.org/leaders/rem)



In the United States there are "apartheid" communities, such as the ninth ward in New Orleans, all over the country—called Harlem, Watts, South Side—where poor black folks reside. In fact, an outsider landing at an American airport picks up the disparity much sooner than those who live and have adapted to the peculiar social patterns of American society. For example, most of the sky caps who carry the luggage are black, most of the ticket agents are white, and most of the supervisors are white men. Wander into a music store at the airport and even the Christian music is segregated racially. However, most Americans neither see it nor question it.

Marilyn Frye explains the inability of individuals to see the oppression of women, blacks, Chicanos, or Asians is the result of looking microscopically, not macroscopically. She compares it to a bird in a cage. If you look microscopically, you might wonder why the bird doesn't fly out of the cage. However, if you step back and look macroscopically, "you see a network of forces and barriers that are systematically related and conspire to the immobilization, reduction, and molding of women and the lives we live."

Hidden Underclass

Simply replace women with blacks, Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans, and you

have a definition of institutional racism, the systemic network that conspires to oppress people. New Orleans is similar to the majority of American cities in that racism and poverty intersect on a wide variety of levels to produce the cage of the largely hidden underclass that resides in what Kenneth Clark called the *Dark Ghetto*. For example, look at HIV and AIDS:

- According to the 2000 Census, African Americans make up 12.3 percent of the U.S. population. However, they have accounted for 40 percent (368,169) of the 929,985 estimated AIDS cases diagnosed since the epidemic began.

- By the end of December 2003, an estimated 195,891 African Americans with AIDS had died.

- Of persons given a diagnosis of AIDS since 1995, a smaller proportion of African Americans (60 percent) were alive after nine years compared with American Indians and Alaska Natives (64 percent), Hispanics (68 percent), whites (70 percent), and Asians and Pacific Islanders (77 percent).

The latest data indicate that 50 percent of the new victims of HIV and AIDS are blacks. Moreover, since we have entered the new millennium, the gap between whites and blacks appears to be widening in virtually all other social and health areas as globalization pro-

ceeds. It is a remarkable reversal of the trend toward greater equity in the 1990s.

Jobs for working people now are exported to foreign lands and immigrant labor is brought into the U.S. to do traditional work. The prison population is soaring among black men, and now even among black women, not because the crime rate has increased (in fact it's decreased), but mandatory sentencing is keeping folks in jail for much longer periods of time. Similarly, mandatory retention of children in schools on the basis of standardized test scores is escalating the dropout rate; indeed, the focus on test preparation is producing two separate school systems, one test-centered and the other learner-centered.

Roots of Racism

The roots of racism are embedded in the history of a society. Slavery in the United States lasted 250 years; segregation lasted another 150 years, only ending in 1954 with the Brown vs. Board of Education of Kansas decision. That's over 400 years of captivity.

When my father was a child, he would be chased from the Clemson State University football team practices because he was black. When Jesse Jackson recently spoke at Clem-

Shifting Responsibilities

The 1998 General Synod approved three recommendations that shifted the burden for racial justice from the racial-ethnic councils to the denomination, including the establishment of a Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), and bringing the four racial/ethnic councils fully into the General Synod Council.

The objective of CORE was to establish steps that would enable the denomination to work toward the goal of a multicultural denomination freed from racism. In June 2001, the commission presented its action plan to the General Synod that included five components.

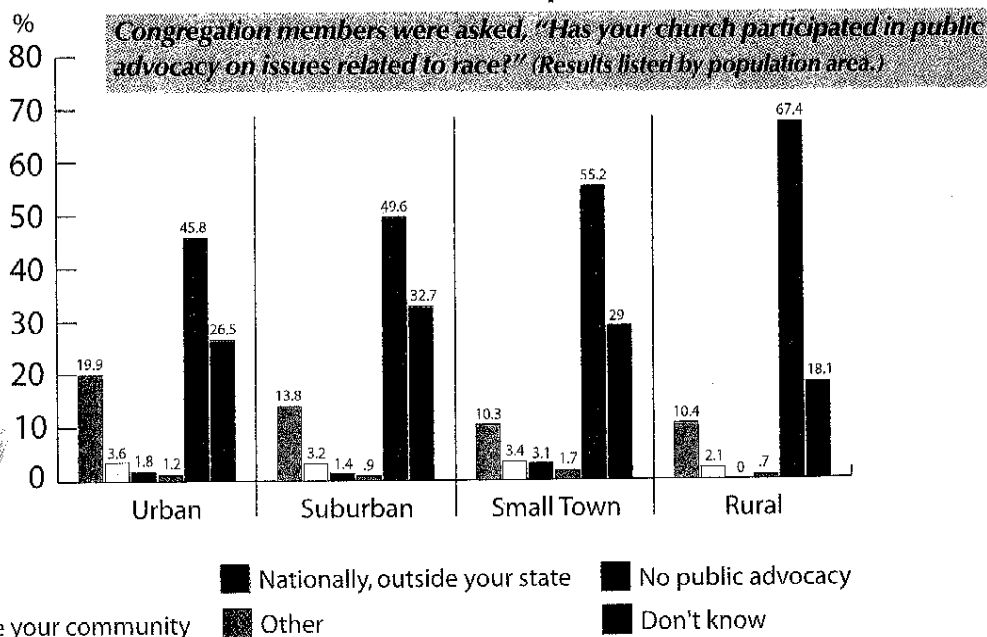
1. Affirming the theological foundations that inform our life and witness as a denomination.
2. Educating ourselves as members of the Reformed Church in America about the history and meaning of racism, our complicity in it, our reasons to oppose it, and the strategies by which we can participate in its elimination.
3. Participating in transformative experiences to reshape our thinking, feeling, and acting, such as anti-racism workshops, cross-cultural dialogues, and celebrations of diversity.
4. Developing lay and pastoral leadership from among the membership of racial-ethnic congregations for ministry within the whole church.
5. Reshaping institutional structures that perpetuate racism within the RCA in order to include and affirm the gifts and ministries of the diverse people who are and will be members of this denomination.

—Oliver Patterson

son, he noted that the football team is 75 percent black but the student body is only 7 percent black and said, "When the football team plays on Saturday, I see one Clemson, but when I look at student body enrollment, I see



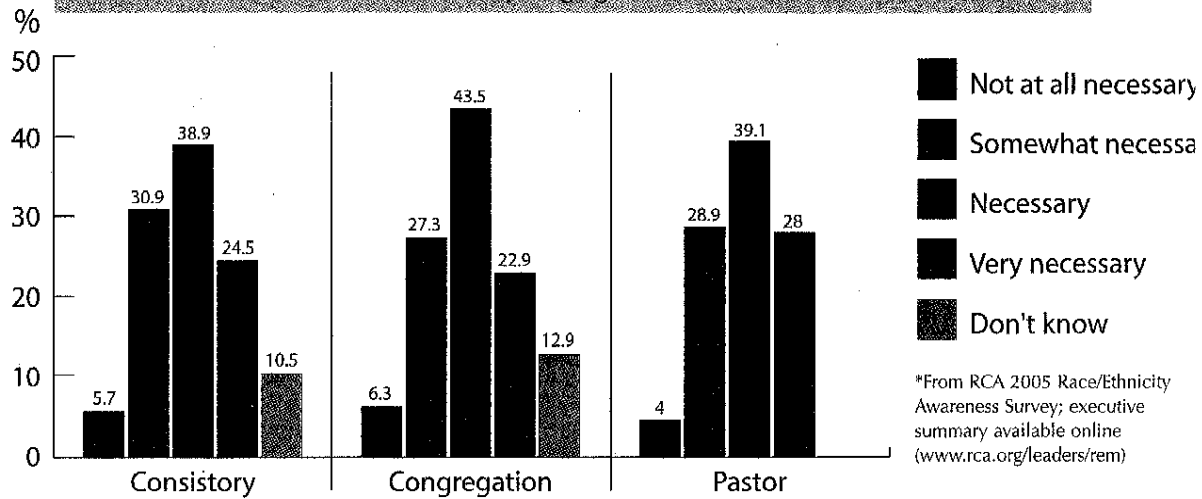
Race-Related Public Advocacy*



*From RCA 2005 Race/Ethnicity Awareness Survey; executive summary available online (www.rca.org/leaders/rem)

Priority Placed on Racial Issues in RCA*

Congregations, consistories, and pastors were asked, "How necessary is it for the RCA to work on issues of race?" (Results listed by congregational role.)



another Clemson. Blacks in South Carolina have gone from picking cotton balls to foot-balls."

When I attended Brooklyn College in 1957, there were twenty full-time black students out of over 20,000 students. My brother, Melvin Patterson, was the first African American accepted into the apprenticeship plumbers program in 1960.

An interlocking network maintains the human bird cage for most black Americans: "ghetto" housing, health crisis, high rates of incarceration, and poor schooling. A major step forward would be to win at least one social war: either the war on drugs, or the war on poverty, or the war on illiteracy. A single victory would unlock a key barrier to freedom.

The RCA's Fight

When I served as moderator of the RCA's Commission on Race and Ethnicity, I was frequently asked: What can the RCA do to combat racism? Isn't it naive to believe that a small denomination can have any impact on racism?

I recently traveled to West Africa, and learned of the legend of the Sankofa bird among the Akan people of Ghana. The Sankofa bird represents a return to one's roots in order to recapture what has been lost, so that one is able to move forward with

dignity and integrity. The Sankofa bird is pictured as looking back to move forward.

If the RCA looks back, it has had an influential impact—despite its numbers—upon apartheid in South Africa. At the 2002 General Synod a remarkable presentation was delivered by elder Sarah Smith and the Rev. Dr. Edwin Mulder, who shared their reflections on the context of apartheid in South Africa as well as their experiences there. Together these venerable leaders of the RCA led the international struggle against the sin of apartheid—Sarah, past president of the African-American Council of the RCA, and Ed, past general secretary of the RCA.

The Rev. Dr. Arie Brouwer, another past general secretary of the RCA, in his book *Ecumenical Testimony* provides rich descriptions of the application of Reformed theology to the evil of apartheid:

We who confess Christ need not, and cannot, wait for the revolution to come before we choose. The choice for us is clear. The gospel compels us to step forward and to stand with the oppressed. We must encourage all those in South Africa who are joining together to support peaceful change. We must oppose those, especially in the white churches, who support the system of apartheid. We believe that the gospel requires that we place our support behind the black churches and the SACC, that free-

dom, justice, and peace may come to that land.

Poised to Lead

The RCA is perfectly placed to lead the struggle against racism because of its history, leadership, and mission: "The Reformed Church in America is a fellowship of congregations called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Our shared task is to equip congregations for ministry—a thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

Hurricane Katrina ultimately allows the United States to tell a new tale, for the underbelly—the poor, the former slaves, the oppressed—can no longer be hidden. All has been revealed. If our new narrative brings good news to the poor, heals the broken-hearted, proclaims liberty to the captives, and

releases prisoners, the underbelly will be transformed from injustice and inequality to justice and equity. God does not do evil, but out of evil is revealed injustice and the way to a transformed future of justice.

Tim Costello in *Secrets of Hope* relates this story about the late great Ivan Illich:

Ivan Illich was once asked what he thought was the most powerful way to change society. Is it violent revolution or is it gradual reform? He gave a careful answer. Neither. If you want to change society, then you must tell an alternative story, he concluded.

There are many ways to judge if we have laid the steps for a truly multicultural denomination freed from racism. One measure is to look at the leadership of the church. We know that racism is constructed by human hands and can be deconstructed and

A Historic Word from a Birmingham Jail

(More than forty years ago, activist Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an impassioned letter while incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama. The letter responded to criticism of King from fellow clergy and provided a biblical rationale for his actions.)

...I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country...

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher

moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience...

I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist for love—"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you"? Was not Amos an extremist for justice—"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream"? Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus"? Was not Martin Luther an extremist—"Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God"?...

So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on

Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists...

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows...

—Martin Luther King Jr.
Letter from a Birmingham Jail
April 16, 1963

reconstructed by human hands. However, it is so much easier to do if the hands working collaboratively come from different races and ethnicities.

I recently compared the 2005–2006 RCA Plan Calendar to the 1998–1999 RCA Plan Calendar. What a difference! In 1998, the



The road to freedom and justice is often rocky, but looking back brings sustenance for the continuing job to be done.

staffs of the racial and ethnic ministries were the sole executives of color in the denomination, a total of three. Today, there are three people of color in Mission Services alone, supervising RCA mission programs in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia and the Pacific. People of color also serve as synod executive, synod area minister, and coordinator of social witness.

Most of us have been brainwashed in this society to think stereotypically about our neighbors who are different. So we can expect some conflict as this new multicultural team reconstructs the RCA for this day and time. We can also expect some internal strife within and between the people of color as they adjust to this new environment and work out a new language of honest communication.

Measurable Progress

All denominational staff has undergone anti-racism training. The RCA hopes to develop a cadre of RCA trainers who will conduct these workshops at churches, classes, and

synods. Workshops are tailored for those who are privileged and for those who are oppressed. One of the strangest results of racism is internalized racist oppression, which is the psychological acceptance by the oppressed of the negative stereotypes held by those in power. When I was in South Africa, the one possible gift of the RCA that most intrigued them was anti-racism training. It would be wonderful if we joined with our ecumenical partners in providing this diversity training worldwide. We could be leaders both in our communities and internationally in promoting reconciliation and healing.

We are in the process of producing a major Christian education program with the Christian Reformed Church. It will be the first such program with significant involvement of people of color at every stage of its development. This does not guarantee that it will be excellent, but it is an inclusive model of curriculum development, one that will be studied, replicated, and improved.

Five years ago many congregations of color were without pastors. Today the majority of pulpits are filled with very capable pastors who not only serve their churches and their racial-ethnic communities but are serving throughout the denomination on boards, synods, classes, regional synods, and commissions. They are part of the growing networks emerging throughout the denomination.

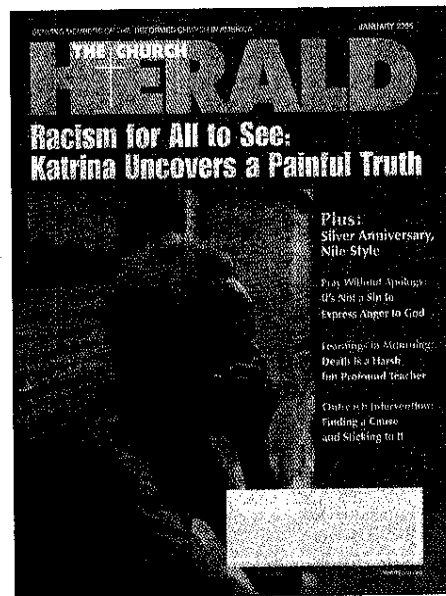
With so much to be done in this field the work often becomes frustrating. After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, many colleges invited Tulane students to complete their academic year with them. Yet this invitation was not immediately extended to the historically black colleges and universities in New Orleans: Xavier, Southern, Dillard. Some of us worked hard at our institutions to extend the helping hand to all. Though today is frustrating, I am old enough to remember the segregated south of my parents in Clinton, South Carolina. The road to freedom and justice is often rocky, but, like the Sankofa bird, looking back brings sustenance for the continuing job to be done at both local and international levels. ■

UPFRONT FLAK AND FLATTERY

"I do not appreciate the inference that I'm a racist."

—Drew Howe
Frederick, Maryland

**...online...
Expanded
Flak and Flattery
(herald.rca.org)**



JANUARY 2006

It's Not About Race

"Racism for All to See" lacked focus and was a cheap, exploitative rant, at the expense of Katrina's black victims, to provide a setup for why Oliver Patterson hales America. I do not appreciate the inference that I'm a racist. Patterson said, "The devastation suffered by victims of Hurricane Katrina reminds us of the prevalence of racism, even within our denomination."

Absent from Patterson's article were the selfless acts of people who left their jobs and families to help the victims of Katrina or the millions of dollars donated by people from all over this country and time volunteered to help with local relief efforts. None of it was earmarked as being "white only."

Drew Howe
Frederick, Maryland

I concur with Patterson's assertion that racism was on display in New Orleans. After all, the racist hurricane only hit black areas and affected only people of color, bypassing white people altogether. New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin was a victim of his own police force, most of whom walked off the job. The last time I saw this kind of racism on display was when Washington, D.C., mayor Marion Berry was caught, make that framed, with hookers and crack. The only racism I saw was the welfare state and the us vs. them men-

tal that black misleaders continue to perpetuate.

Richard Brown
Shawnee, Kansas

As sad as the Katrina situation has been, there is not one "former slave" among the victims. Many may have been poor, many may have been black, but if there was any oppression, it was by a Democrat-controlled state and city government that ruled for over sixty years and offered only indecision and incompetence.

Ronald T. Gross
Sahuarita, Arizona

I have been a fireman for forty-one years and an active member of the Reformed Church for almost as long. I have also followed the multiple Katrina

disasters closely and was a tad upset over Patterson's diatribe about it. I don't think most of the tens of thousands who helped in the relief effort were thinking about race; just that fellow human beings needed help.

Richard Cardozo
Westbury, New York

Does the Church Herald proclaim the truth? At times it seems more interested in political correctness and liberal agendas than truth. Patterson writes about racism and states "Most shocking was that virtually every one of the victims was black." Is this and the rest of his article the truth or the product of political correctness gone awry? From the *Los Angeles Times*: "The bodies of New Orleans residents killed by Hurricane Katrina were almost as likely to be recovered from middle-class neighborhoods as from the city's poorer districts, such as the Lower 9th Ward," according to a *Times* analysis of data released by the state of Louisiana.

We have a Savior and are no longer helpless victims. Truth sets us free. Is it asking too much for truth from the *Church Herald*?

Jeffrey Bart
Holland, Michigan

JANUARY 2006

Challenges to Gospel and Culture

The *Church Herald* is to be congratulated for risking the essay on institu-

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tional racism. Oliver Patterson presents a [helpful] primer on this problem that is misunderstood by too many and denied by some of our highest government officials.

While the January issue explicitly explores this challenge of gospel and culture, another is implicitly evident in the contrast between Carl Ver Beek's proposal for closing churches and Jack Cherry's pastoral care of struggling congregations. The former [Platform] exudes our cultural values of capitalistic consumerism, while the latter [Question of Faith] evokes our kingdom values of spiritual discernment. The January *Church Herald* reflects the gospel and culture struggle within our denomination around issues of leadership and power, homosexuality, Christianity and patriotism, witness and suffering.

John Rottenberg
Kentwood, Michigan

Handwritten signature and "End here" text.

JANUARY 2006

Less Is More

"Closing Time" by Carl Ver Beek reflects the height of a proposal for denominational arrogance. Ver Beek implies that the denomination should have a plan that includes the closing of some "mature churches."

What the article misses is that this is not a denominational issue. This is a church decision. It also misses that denominational policy mandating salaries, benefits available only from the denominational monopoly, assessments, etc., has placed financial challenges on churches. To me, the solution is withdrawal from the denomination. The *Book of Church Order* does not sanction this, but let's remember, it is a private sector document.

Brent T. Sjaardema
Hawthorne, New Jersey

The push for church multiplication and revitalization is a good focus, but we cannot forget our fifty-family churches. My father, a retired RCA minister, and my mother went to a larger, growing church for a number of years. A couple years ago he became very ill and almost died, which left him homebound. My mother received a form letter from the church signed by the minister informing her that due to

lack of attendance they were being disenrolled from church membership.

They now attend a small church where they have a sense of closeness with a congregational family. Bigger is not always better. Multiplication and revitalization should never replace caring for our church family or caring for our fifty-person churches.

Tim Hakken
Grand Junction, Michigan

JANUARY 2006

Flag Waving

I thought T. Kenneth Lewis and Brion Brooks both made interesting points in Flak and Flattery.

I agree that veterans should be honored for their sacrifices and believe that services on Memorial Day and Veterans' Day are not inappropriate. On the other hand, too many people put country before God, and that includes many church-going folks.

I come to church to worship God, not country. If I ever find myself in a church where the service opens (or closes) with the pledge to the American flag, as happened to a vacationing friend, I would leave. If I want to worship "flag" I will go to a town meeting!

Linda Waddington-Tully
Nutley, New Jersey

There is a good reason the national flag is proudly displayed opposite the Christian flag at the front of the sanctuary in the Reformed church where my family worships. We owe a great debt to all who have served, with many paying the ultimate sacrifice. We hope Brooks understands the reason he has freedom to worship is partially due to the sacrifices made by those he seeks not to honor.

Gene and Cheryl Ludens
Springfield, South Dakota

When I put on a U.S. Navy uniform in 1952, it did not mean that I was losing my faith in God. God comes first in my life. However, I also have great respect and honor for our country. I thank God for the privilege of living in the United States of America.

I do not worship the flag; I honor it as a symbol of freedom.

John E. Harmelink
Rock Valley, Iowa

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