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REPORT OF THE VISION COMMITTEE

I. Introduction

The Vision Committee was appointed in the wake of the 2005 Meeting of the General Synod. Its creation was occasioned by an address to the General Synod by the outgoing president of Erskine College and Seminary, John Carson, who challenged the Synod to engage the broader culture. The Committee was given the mandate to “prayerfully reflect upon . . . the current state of the ARP Church in the present day setting, and to report . . . on ways that the ARP Church can be more proactive in impacting society with the Gospel.” The Committee consists of John Cook (chairman), John Carson, Tom Shoger, Boyce Wilson, Rob Patrick, Curt Young, Brad Anderson, Greg Hamer, David Sides, Floy Jumper, Ann Aheron, Patsy Ratchford, Wilfred Bellamy, Tom Patterson, and Bill Evans.

The Committee has been guided in its deliberations by certain core convictions about the nature and task of the church. We believe that the church is called to be a holy community—chosen by God before the foundations of the world, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. As in all ages, the church as the people of God is called to be “holy,” that is, separate from the sin and brokenness of the world (see 1 Peter 2:9). Unlike ancient Israel, however, in the current age between the first and second advents of Christ, the church is also called to be actively engaged in the world by showing God’s love and grace to that needy world, and by modeling the wholeness and transformation of life and thought that are to be found only in Jesus Christ and in obedience to His Word. This holy community is marked out and strengthened by the preaching of the Word, by the administration of the sacraments, and by the practice of biblical church discipline. It is called to make disciples of all nations, and it is to be driven by a passion for God and His glory. All this implies that the church will only have a decisive impact on the world when it is *different* from the world. Jesus underscored the importance of this difference between the church and the world when he spoke of the church as salt and light in a darkened world (see Matthew 5:13-16).

II. The ARP Church in the Context of Contemporary Culture

The Committee believes that this is a critical time in the history of the ARP Church. Although the ARP Church has faced many challenges in the past, the current broader cultural situation is decisively new and different. Previous generations of ARP’s lived predominantly in an American South in which the culture was heavily influenced by Christianity. There was considerable overlap between the assumptions of the prevailing culture and the moral teachings of the churches. Church attendance was regarded as a mark of respectability in many communities, and the pronouncements of the church were treated with respect. One may speak of a synthesis of southern white middle-class culture and the ARP Church, in which the definition of a “good Christian” was as much cultural as it was biblical. The effects of this on the church were both positive and negative. The church had a position of prestige and influence at the center of culture from which to speak, but the church also was often unduly influenced by the prevailing culture. Now, however, much of that has changed. We are entering a “post-Christian” period in which Christian faith is excluded from the public square and relegated to the realm of private preference. Historic Christianity is even scorned by many influential cultural leaders of our day. The older synthesis of Christianity and respectable, middle-class southern culture has to a great extent broken down. Christians not only have difficulty influencing the broader culture, they even struggle to gain a hearing for their concerns.

Despite this challenging context, the ARP Church has much for which to be thankful. We have a “goodly heritage” with our historic emphases on the kingship of Christ and the free offer of the Gospel. The ARP Church is blessed to have educational and missions agencies that have touched many lives over the years. Members of the ARP Church have given sacrificially over many years to maintain these works. In fact, it seems that the ARP Church has done more with limited resources than perhaps any other denomination in North America. Despite various struggles over the years, the ARP Church has not been rent by schism, and many sense a spirit of love and mutual concern within the body. For all this we can and should give thanks.

But all is not well. The ARP Church is not growing. Total membership figures have remained more or less static for a number of years, and recent years have seen declines in the active member

rolls. The number of small rural churches without an economic base for population growth and the average age of congregants in many ARP congregations do not bode well for the future. The Committee has identified four factors that appear to contribute to this lack of vitality.

There is, first of all, a lack of theological unity and the emergence of recognizable factions within the ARP Church. What sets these factions apart is, in many cases, different views of culture. Some seek to continue the older synthesis of Christianity and middle class southern culture; as the culture moves in an increasingly secular direction they tend to follow the culture and so lean toward theological and cultural liberalism. Others adopt a broad evangelicalism that emphasizes relevance to the contemporary culture and adopts many of the trappings of that culture while minimizing Reformed distinctives. Again, the danger here is one of cultural captivity. Still others seek to recapitulate a Reformed identity that is rooted in the distant past. The danger here is irrelevance. Finally, some attempt to follow a path that is both authentically and meaningfully Reformed and also responsive to the contemporary cultural context. If these differences cannot be negotiated and transcended successfully, our hopes for productive engagement with the broader culture will be undercut.

Second, the ARP Church is tolerant of mediocrity. Some have observed that we are “addicted to niceness,” and that we tacitly condone a lack of excellence so that feelings will not be hurt. This indifference to excellence is evident in a variety of areas of the church’s life. The ARP Church is not widely known for producing great preaching on a broad scale. Presbyteries are often not uniform in their examination standards for new ministers. In many congregations the basic pattern of ministry remains unexamined and unchanged for decades. As a result of all this, many church members have low expectations, and a corresponding lack of enthusiasm for the church. Furthermore, because church discipline is rarely practiced in some quarters of the ARP Church, church membership is “easy” and is therefore valued little by some. All this is evidence of what has been called a “culture of negligence.” It betrays a lack of passion for the church and, most of all, for the glory of God. Our besetting sin as a denomination seems to be that we are “neither hot nor cold” (see the letter to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-17).

Third, there is a crisis of biblical instruction in the church. Catechetical instruction is no longer a vital part of many congregations. Generations have grown up in ARP congregations without systematic, clear, and detailed instruction in basic Christian beliefs. The level of biblical and theological knowledge in some quarters of the church is distressingly low, and certain other denominations are putting us to shame in this area.

Fourth, one often senses a “moralism” at work in the ARP Church. Many members seem to live on a level of “works righteousness,” as if being a Christian is simply a matter of being a good person. This leads to complacency and self-satisfaction that is poisonous to the vitality and health of a church historically rooted in the doctrines of God’s sovereign grace.

From this, we see that, despite our outward orthodoxy, the problems that beset us are to a significant extent theological. The Committee believes that theology matters. It is the living out of right belief that separates the church from the world, and it is the theology of the church that defines the friction points of conflict between the church and the world. The relevance of the church is determined not by how well the church adapts to the culture of the world, but by how well it lives out in the midst of the world the culture of holiness demanded by Scripture. And so the question must be asked: Is the ARP Church shining as a light in the midst of the darkness of a fallen world culture, or is it merely blending into the cultural climate of the day? The fact that a clear answer cannot be given to this question is indicative of the state of the problem.

III. Proposed Responses to the Current Situation

As we confront these pervasive problems, we must recognize our total dependence upon God’s grace and our own powerlessness to effect change. The church is a supernatural organism, the body of Christ empowered and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The power that transforms the church will come from God himself and not from us. Nevertheless, we as God’s people have a responsibility to be obedient and to press forward in obedience to God’s Word. We must do God’s work in God’s way. We must eschew the use of the weapons of the world (see 2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

We must also approach God with a spirit of repentance. As we have seen, the pressing threats to the health of the ARP Church at this point in history are as much internal as external. Any strategy

for broader cultural transformation must begin with the repentance and the transformation of God's people.

In obedience to God's Word we must work diligently to cultivate a "culture of holiness" within the ARP Church. Such a "culture of holiness" will involve a renewed commitment to the full authority of God's Word in the life of the church. We must not just pay lip service to Scripture; we must look to it constantly as our standard and guide. We must make the message of Scripture a daily part of our lives through the study, teaching, and memorization of Scripture. This culture of holiness will also involve living corporate and individual lives that are characterized by purity and integrity in our relationships with self and others. Certainly our broader culture is permeated with sexual stimulus and innuendo, and as Christians we must stand apart in order to live lives of wholeness and integrity. Just as Ezra confronted the distressing problems of the post-exilic community by emphasizing both knowledge of God's Word and obedience to God's Word (see Nehemiah 8:1—10:39), so must we.

We must recover a passion for God and for His truth. We must never be satisfied in giving less than our best to God. We must have a "holy dissatisfaction" with anything less than excellence in ministry and congregational life. And finally, we must step out in faith as a holy people to engage the broader culture with the claims of the gospel. Confident of God's transforming and empowering grace, we must seek to be faithful in the locations God has placed us.

To the end that God's people may be empowered to be disciples in the midst of our broader culture, we present the following:

- **The Way of the Cross**—If we want to see the Holy Spirit empower our denomination let us do the one thing the Holy Spirit always and everywhere blesses; let us preach and live with integrity the faith once delivered to the saints. We must remember that the transforming power of God is particularly manifested as God's people take up the cross and follow Christ in the way of suffering and self-denial (see 2 Corinthians 4:1-12; 12:9-10).

- **Worship**—Because God rules over all, and Christ is the King to Whom all authority is given by the Father, worship must be understood as the offering of one's whole life to God (Matthew 28:18; Romans 12:1; Colossians 3:17). Thus, true and proper worship is much more than a one-day-per-week matter! Faithfulness in worship demands that we commit ourselves to the private exercises of worship and family worship, that we prepare our hearts and minds for corporate worship, that we train our children to be lovers and worshippers of the one true God, and that together with our families we are faithful in worship on the Lord's Day.

- **Powerful Preaching**—Reformation in the church always begins with the teaching and preaching of God's Word. Churches committed to honoring Christ and serving him faithfully must make a strong, biblical pulpit ministry their first priority. Impotent pulpits produce impotent churches.

- **Christian Education**—A major focus of the church both on the congregational and denomination levels must be the training of people in biblical knowledge and Christian doctrine. All Boards, Agencies, and Committees of the Church on the General Synod, Presbytery, and Congregational levels should make it their focus to communicate and exemplify a biblical and Reformed worldview in their respective work. Erskine College and Seminary should intentionally aim to disciple their students with a kingdom perspective and a biblically Reformed world and life view. Both the College and the Seminary should encourage students to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life, and they should model the integration of Christian faith and learning.

- **Multi-Generational Ministry**—A Reformed ecclesiology embraces every generation. The church is perhaps the one place where multiple generations gather on a regular basis. Yet we are in danger of losing a significant portion of the younger generation. The ministry of the ARP Church must be intentionally multi-generational as it seeks to equip mature adults, younger adults, adolescents, and even very young children with instruction in God's Word and in Christian truth that is appropriate to each age group. Conferences and educational materials should emphasize the relevance of the Gospel for all generations.

- **Culturally Responsive Ministry**—The ARP Church, through its educational ministries, should seek to produce disciples who are able to communicate the truth of the Gospel in both the context of the church and in the world.

- **Strategic Planning Process**—The time is ripe for a comprehensive strategic planning process that will evaluate the current ministries of the General Synod in light of the present and future challenges facing the ARP Church, and propose a strategic plan for the future.

IV. Recommendations

1. That the Report of the Vision Committee be approved.
2. That the Presbyteries, Sessions, and General Synod Boards and Agencies be encouraged to study and discuss this report, with a view to strengthening the ARP Church for its mission. Further, that Presbyteries be asked to present a report to the 2008 meeting of General Synod on the results of such study and discussion.
3. That the Moderator appoint a Strategic Planning Committee (to, at his discretion, include some members from the current Vision Committee) for the General Synod, and that this Report of the Vision Committee be referred to that Strategic Planning Committee upon its constitution. The stated purpose of this Strategic Planning Committee will be to evaluate the current ministries of the General Synod in light of the present and future challenges facing the ARP Church, and to propose a strategic plan for the future.
4. That the Committee be dismissed from its labors.

Respectfully submitted,

John D. Cook, Chairman