

Celebrating the History of Women's Work

Reformed Church Women began work in New York in January 1875 as an organization called the Women's Board of Foreign Missions. Women began their program of interest in and giving to North American Reformed Church Missions in 1882 and became incorporated as the Women's Board of Domestic Missions in 1909. Consecrated women undertook to support the mission programs of the General Synod in work among the American Indians in 1894, among the mountain people in Jackson County, Kentucky, in 1900, and among Japanese residents in and around New York City in 1907. It is interesting to note that the financial contributions from women in the year 1921 to the missions for the American Indians and mountain people was more than double the amount given by the denomination for the entire mission program in 1882.

The men's and the women's boards continued to work separately until they merged to become the Board of Foreign Missions in 1946 and the Board of Domestic Missions in 1950, each having a women's department. An additional organization called a Joint Committee of Women was also working for missions. Finally on May 1, 1952, the women's departments of both mission boards and the joint committee joined into one department called the Department of Women's Work of the Mission Boards-Reformed Church in America. In June 1957 General Synod voted that a National Department of Women's Work be established to promote the work of the Program Boards of General Synod and that this organization begin to function on January 1, 1960. In 1958 they recommended to each church in the RCA the adoption of this program by the women of the local churches. The new program included a "Guild for Christian Service" and smaller circles for Bible study, service, and action.

Assembly meetings for Reformed Church women began in April 1957 when a group of officers and leaders met at Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania. This assembly set plans for a denominational triennial meeting open to all Reformed Church women. The first Triennial Assembly was held in Holland, Michigan, on the campus of Hope College in April 1962. The total registration of 1,440 delegates came from twenty-three states and many foreign countries.

Anita Welwood was appointed the first executive director of the RCA National Department of Women's Work (now RCWM) in 1959 and served until she retired in 1972. Under Anita's direction over \$6 million was contributed by women to the benevolent program of the RCA, and the first Triennial Assembly was held. Anita served the church at a time when the denomination was not friendly toward women in roles of leadership. Yet Anita's grace and patient understanding played a significant role in establishing the role of women in the church. Anita Welwood died May 3, 1999.

Following a self-study, the organization was updated. Dr. Beth Marcus was appointed executive director of the newly-named Reformed Church Women and took office in January 1973. A major program emphasis of RCW during the 1973-1983 decade was leadership development. It was during this time that the denomination approved ordination of women as members of the consistory and clergy and the Commission for Women was established. Beth retired in July 1986.

Diana Paulsen served as the third executive director from July 1986 to June 1994. During these years the Footsteps Program was introduced, encouraging women to become personally involved in hands-on mission work; RCWM became partners with Mission Services; and the "M" for "ministries" was added to RCW. This name change represented the critical decision to focus on action, not structure, and to become a people-oriented organization. After Diana's resignation in 1994, the office was moved from New York City to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Christina Van Eyl became director in June 1994 and undertook the publication of *Hands, Hearts, and Voices* (authored by Una Ratmeyer, illustrated by Joan Bohlig), which told the stories of women throughout the history of the RCA. She also produced the video *Herstory*. Chris started a process of thinking about RCWM and its future and how women's ministries might be a better fit in women's lives and the life of the denomination. Chris resigned in May 1996 when she was offered and accepted the position of editor of the *Church Herald*.

In September 1996 Arlene Waldorf was hired as director to help move RCWM through change. She and the RCWM leadership team began a process of evaluating the needs of women and carefully negotiating a path to change. Various configurations of committees were called together to envision what the future could hold for all women in our denomination. For three years proposals came before the General Synod and the General Synod Council, until in October 2000 the proposals to establish an Office of Women at the unit level within the denominational structure were passed (GSC 00-83 through 00-85). Upon the establishment of that office, Arlene plans to resign her position of executive director and help complete the raising of funds for the office and its programs, missions, and ministries.

R-51

WHEREAS Reformed Church Women's Ministries benefited from the leadership and love of five executive directors: Anita Welwood, Beth Marcus, Diana Paulsen, Christina Van Eyl, and Arlene Waldorf; and

WHEREAS these five women gave selflessly to the Reformed Church in America their vision and insight, their wisdom and dedication, their good humor and creativity, their organizational skills, their deep love for God and God's people, and their gifts of leadership; and

WHEREAS, under the leadership of these five women, Reformed Church Women's Ministries has had life-changing impact on the life, mission, and ministry of the Reformed Church in America, its women and its men;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the one hundred ninety-fifth regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 8-13, 2001, at Central College in Pella, Iowa, thanks and commends Anita Welwood, Beth Marcus, Diana

Paulsen, Christina Van Eyl, and Arlene Waldorf for their vision, leadership, and guidance as executive directors of Reformed Church Women's Ministries, for their work and advocacy on behalf of women in the Reformed Church in America, for their support of the mission of the church, and for their dedication as servants of God. (ADOPTED)

R-52

WHEREAS the history of women's ministries, organized and recorded from 1875 to the present day, includes countless dedicated women (denominational officers, synodical consultants, presidents, and other officers; Triennial chairwomen and committee members; classical union officers and leaders; clergywomen, elders, deacons, Christian educators, Sunday School teachers, and many more); and

WHEREAS the history of women's ministry in the Reformed Church in America is a continuous one of service, spiritual growth, support of mission, and advocacy for the gifts of women in all aspects of the life of faith; and

WHEREAS significant ministries of the Reformed Church in America and of the wider church, from global mission work to denominational programs to local guilds for Christian service, owe their success to the organized work of women in this denomination; and

WHEREAS this is the final report of Reformed Church Women's Ministries to the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America before its formal dissolution as an organization;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting June 8-13, 2001, at Central College in Pella, Iowa, gives thanks to God for the organized efforts and leadership of the women of our denomination through Reformed Church Women's Ministries and its predecessor bodies, and for the life-giving gifts and commitments to God and God's vision for humankind that women's ministries have brought to the Reformed Church in America over the past 126 years. (ADOPTED)