

Outgoing Reformed Christian leader looks back

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (RNS) The history of Christian denominations is pockmarked by centuries of doctrinal disputes and stormy schisms.

Then there are Christian leaders, such as the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the soon-to-be outgoing general secretary for the Reformed Church in America, who have taken a stand against such feuds.

The 65-year-old said he made the decision to step down prayerfully, believing he's completed the contributions he was called by God to make in the RCA.

Despite long-standing fissures in Christian unity, Granberg-Michaelson is a tireless drum major for ecumenism, said the Rev. Jerry Dykstra, executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

"He has proven himself to be a true ambassador at many ecumenical sites, yet maintains a strong focus on the Reformed Church in the North American context," said Dykstra.

Kind words for a man who initially questioned if he was qualified to be the RCA's general secretary.

Granberg-Michaelson said, "I remember telling those who, when first asked about it, I didn't grow up in the RCA and didn't grow up in a RCA church community, and I haven't pastored a traditional RCA congregation."

His reservations didn't dissuade the General Synod. It turned out Granberg-Michaelson's patchwork ministerial career was the stuff this

denomination of 177,500 needed, synod officials agreed before his installation as the RCA's fourth general secretary in 1994.

Ten years earlier, the native of the Park Ridge suburb of Chicago graduated from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Mich., the same year he was ordained an RCA minister.

Now, after serving as the RCA's chief ecumenical officer, financial administrator and sounding board for pastors, Granberg-Michaelson plans to step down from a position he says has been "deeply meaningful" to him.

Meanwhile, the RCA's General Synod Council is searching for the next general secretary. Granberg-Michaelson will continue to lead until a successor is chosen next year.

As he looks in the rearview mirror of his life, working as general secretary is a high point of Granberg-Michaelson's ministry, despite working a weekly average of 60 to 70 hours.

It's a workload guided by encyclopedic knowledge and fueled by a passion for Jesus.

"It was one of the most unexpected things that ever happened to me," said Granberg-Michaelson. "I never envisioned myself in this kind of a position, nor would I have imagined staying in it for 17 years."

Granberg-Michaelson's eclectic portfolio includes serving for eight years on the foreign policy staff of U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Oregon, and as managing editor of the social justice magazine Sojourners from 1976 to 1980.

In 1981, Granberg-Michaelson and his wife, Karin, moved to Missoula, Mont., where he founded New Creation Institute, a nonprofit that works on issues of Christian responsibility to the environment. From there, Granberg-Michaelson served for six years on the World Council of Churches staff in Geneva, as director of church and society.

He also is co-founder of Christian Churches Together, a forum established to foster unity and to witness among evangelical, orthodox,

Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, historic Protestant and ethnic churches.

Granberg-Michaelson also played a behind-the-scenes role in the June merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council into the World Communion of Reformed Churches, a union that represents 80 million Christians from 108 countries, in nearly 230 denominations worldwide.

Those who know Granberg-Michaelson say he has helped make the RCA less insular by strengthening links with an array of Christian communities around the world. He also is known as a confidant to burned-out pastors and a torchbearer for expanding the RCA's multiracial and multicultural mandate.

"It's one thing for people to have ideas, it's another to implement them," said the Rev. Edwin Mulder, who served as general secretary from 1983-1994.

"He's continued to have a vision for churches in the world, and it isn't just for the Reformed churches. That's an important part of what we need to continue to be because it's so easy for denominations to become parochial."

Granberg-Michaelson said his boyhood church, the independent, evangelical, nondenominational South Park Church in Park Ridge, Ill., shaped his bridge-building drive.

To be sure, there are challenges the RCA must grapple with in the future, Granberg-Michaelson said.

That means listening to God's voice and sensing his direction, even if there's a tendency to initially say "no" to what God has in mind.

"I could only do this thing with the deepest knowledge of God's call, and that's what sustained me," said Granberg-Michaelson.

During his free time, Granberg-Michaelson enjoys fly-fishing at Yellowstone River in Montana, where the angler is fond of cutthroat, rainbow, brown and brook trout. He also is writing a memoir, with the working title, "Born Again At 4."

"It plays off the story of my early childhood," he said.

Granberg-Michaelson forgoes taking credit for where the denomination is today.

"A denomination is a servant of the local church," he said. "It needs to connect to the broader church in the world. Keeping that focus remains a huge challenge."