

# CRC's Native American Classis Celebrates 25 Years



This past September, Classis Red Mesa celebrated its 25th anniversary with an evening of praise, prayer, and speeches at Window Rock CRC. Before September 1982, the Christian Reformed churches in the Four Corners area all belonged to the Rocky Mountain Classis, based mainly in Denver, though there was a separate committee of the classis called the “Council of Indian Churches.” However, as area Native churches grew in number, they realized that the best way for them to become independent and self-sufficient from the CRC’s variously named Board of Heathen Missions, Board of Indian and Foreign Missions, and eventually the Board of Home Missions was to create its own classis, based mainly on local racial and cultural identity. “[T]he vision of the task force that recommended the formation of Classes Red Mesa, was that a more contextually appropriate classis would encourage greater self-governance and self-expression by the native churches and their leaders, which in turn would foster more indigenous leadership,” said former task member



and previous Gallup Bethany CRC pastor, Al Mulder.

So in 1980, 85 years after the first CRC missionaries began their work in the Four Corners area (before it had even been the Four Corners), area churches approached the CRC synod, requesting to separate as their own classis. Ed T. Begay, member at Bethany CRC, was the delegate from Classis Rocky Mountain to Home Missions at the time. “He’s a very savvy politician,” said Keith Bulthuis, Bethany’s current pastor. “In a lot of ways, he set the scene for the

classis to start.” There were several other native leaders who were young, intelligent and forward thinking—including Jack DeGroat, Paul Redhouse, Samson Yazzie—who had watched what went on at the Classis Rocky Mountain meetings, with some feeling of being on the periphery. They wondered, ‘Why can’t we have our own classis?’ Unexpectedly, the synod that year approved the proposed concept of a “classis of Indian churches,” giving three grounds for their decision: a. The identity of Native churches seemed better served by the formation of a Classis of Indian Churches; b. It seemed that such a classis formation would promote cultural interdependence within the whole denomination; and c. They believed a classis of Indian churches would “promote the growth, maturity, and responsibility of the Indian churches” (Acts of Synod 1980, pgs. 35-36). The synod in 1981 then approved a list of changes to the Church Order specifically for the new Indian classis, dubbed Classis Red Mesa.

Among other items, the “cultural accommodations” included a simpler and more understandable “Form of Subscription,” the form that is sworn to and signed by new elders and deacons at their installation, as well as varying standards for the means to becoming a minister of the Word. “I think that Red Mesa opened up the idea that there might be other ways to form a classis than geography,” said Keith Bulthuis. “Because those differences got practiced in Classis Red Mesa, they opened the door for changes elsewhere in the denomination.” Interestingly enough, since the creation of Classis Red Mesa, other classes have formed based on race or language; for example, there is currently a Korean Classis in Los Angeles that conducts all church business solely in Korean. Furthermore, since the creation of Classis Red Mesa, the CRC denomination as a whole has recognized and followed changes in the Form of Subscription, as well as in the different paths that might lead a layperson to becoming a pastor.

Originally, eleven area congregations were organized into Classis Red Mesa, with four more imminent. Currently there are 17 congregations in Classis Red Mesa, with 460 families, 1134 professing members, and 1769 total members, according to the CRC in North America 2007 Yearbook. Of course what the statistics don’t show are the many more individuals who attend Classis Red Mesa churches without becoming members, as that’s not always of local cultural importance. The stats also don’t show the pride and joy many Natives feel at leading their own churches despite sometimes overwhelming obstacles, usually including little full time leadership. “We are a solid biblical preaching church,” said Darlene Litson of Four Corners CRC in Teecnospos, as quoted in ***Learning to Count to One***, edited by Al Mulder. “We are organized in the CRCNA, the first Native American church (on the reservation) to do so. We have graduated from Home Missions support. Our reputation is that we are a strong Navajo church.”

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