

# **Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education**

## **Education and Discipleship During a Pandemic**

During the time of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptation has been a necessity. This has applied to the work of education and discipleship as well. All over the church, pastors and lay leaders have needed to find new ways to reach out to parishioners and communities. We have seen more and more churches use technology like livestreaming and Zoom to establish new digital platforms on which to do the ongoing work of discipleship.

Many churches have even reported a significant increase in the number of people who view online services and participate in digital learning opportunities. Churches have found ways to adapt, and God has graciously used these new efforts to continue to grow the kingdom of God. Many churches also provided Bible worksheets and educational tools sent home to engage children with what they were learning in children's programming and to enable participation in online church services. Many families appreciated how the necessary adaptations created the practice of a special time and faith conversation with their kids—whether it was attending services online or talking through discussions and worksheets.

It has been an unusual year, but in many ways, the challenges of the pandemic have expanded many of our churches' ideas of what it means to teach and reach people of all ages and all abilities using various forms of communication. In an unexpected advantage, being online created additional accessibility for people who previously were unable to worship in church because of physical or mental barriers.

Additionally, many adults appreciated being able to participate in multiple churches online, particularly the delight of hearing different services preaching on the same Scriptures taken from the Revised Common Lectionary. God was able to use our difficult situations to broaden our understanding of ministry, outreach, and inclusion in profound ways during this difficult season.

Now that we are beginning to see more of a return to what life looked like before the pandemic, the tendency could be to go back to what we were doing before COVID-19 as well. This would be a mistake as it would stifle the fruit of innovation that we have seen over the past year. Rather than seeking to "return to normal," what could it look like to continue to innovate for the sake of the gospel? What could it look like to continue to learn best practices from each other?

## **Care and Concern for Educators**

One of the many impacts of the pandemic has been a high level of fatigue and burnout among those who serve in ministry. Many pastors, educators, youth workers, etc. are tired and weary after an extremely difficult year. Aside from the larger issues of increased cost of schooling and seminary, higher student debt, and rising health care costs,<sup>1</sup> clergy and youth workers often feel like they need to be working all the time and do not have time for rest, let alone a whole

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<sup>1</sup> The National Association for Evangelicals found that 59 percent of pastors have no health insurance, and 62 percent have no retirement fund or plan. In 2018, the average total student loan debt for a seminary graduate was \$54,600. See the full report here: <https://blessyourpastor.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NAE-Research.docx.pdf>.

Sabbath. Working in ministry has never been easy, but when the world is as exhausting as it is now, those who tend to the spiritual needs of others are overwhelmed by this burden. The idea of “calling” may sometimes distort expectations of what a ministry job should feel like, the sheer number of jobs that many are performing, and how their larger community could help to alleviate burnout.

According to Alexis, a former youth minister, “Being a youth pastor requires more than my Biblical Studies degree. You are an event planner, a counselor, a graphic designer, a marketing team, a public speaker, and a lot more. The high turnover in youth ministry is not a secret. What I would love to see is the culture around ministry to change, because what we are doing right now isn’t working. Pay your staff better. And if you can’t do that, set up better systems of support for them. Acknowledge that emotional and spiritual work is still difficult, even if it looks to you like only soft skills. I felt like I had a calling. I’ve been told that I do by spiritual leaders I really respect. But it has been such a struggle and I so often feel like I’ve failed God and I’ve failed my kids. I wonder if maybe I was wrong about that.”<sup>2</sup>

We have seen advocacy for churches to provide their pastors some extra time away for rest and renewal after the leadership demands of the past year. However, we really haven’t seen that conversation happen when it comes to youth workers and educators. So, we’d like to give a few words of encouragement for how you can care for the youth workers and educators in your churches and communities.

First, thank them for everything they’ve done to lead and serve through the pandemic. Make sure they know that all they have done has not gone unnoticed. Share stories with them of how God has used them to bless, disciple, and care for people during the pandemic. Second, give them opportunity for extra rest and renewal. This could be an extra week of vacation, the ability to attend another conference, or something else. Find ways to let them know that their personal health—physical, mental, and spiritual—is just as important as everything that they do for your church.

### **The Mission of Education and Discipleship**

One of the first commands that Jesus gave the disciples after the resurrection was to “go and make disciples of all nations.” The core of the work of the early church was around discipleship. It was the task of going out, sharing the good news, and nurturing people in the growth of their knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ. It is this same important work that the church continues to do to this day.

The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education has endeavored to embody the work of the gospel through the cultivation of disciples of all ages. In the past, the commission has focused on diversity training, certification of lay leaders, and the promotion of educational resources for discipleship. In more recent years, the commission fostered intentional discussions about the meaning and changing nature of discipleship in the twenty-first century, and how to encourage intergenerational discipleship. It also created a directory of Christian

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<sup>2</sup> For more stories of clergy dealing with burnout, see Anne Helen Peterson, “The Contours of Clergy Burnout,” September 24, 2020; <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-contours-of-clergy-burnout>.

educators to better equip and communicate with the church's diverse group of discipleship leaders. Presently, the commission is intentionally exploring tangible ways to financially support the professional development of discipleship and Christian educators through attending professional organizations and conferences such as CERCA (Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America) and APCE (Association of Presbyterian Church Educators), respectively. In addition, the commission is dedicated to affirming the essential program of Children and Worship in the work of sharing and nurturing the gospel.

In 2019, the General Synod affirmed the importance of the work of education and discipleship in the church and with this commission. We are grateful for all of the good work that is being done in our churches in the areas of Christian education and discipleship and for those men and women who are doing this important work. In our rapidly changing world, the unchanging priority of Christian education and discipleship becomes even more important and we are excited to see all of the thought and prayer that is going into discovering and creating new models for this work.

We are seeing the evolution of how churches seek to embody Christ's command to make disciples. Our team reached out to RCA staff and churches to see what trends and best practices are bearing fruit, transforming lives, and mobilizing people into mission for God's kingdom in the places that they live, work, and play.

Two trends we heard early and often: first, information by itself is neutral. To acquire knowledge—to learn a concept, read Scripture, or learn about a spiritual practice—does not change a life. In Matthew 7:24 and 26, Jesus speaks to this (bold added):

Therefore everyone **who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ... But everyone who **hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice** is like a foolish man who built his house on sand (NIV).

Sharing and gathering information can be a part of discipleship but is not, by itself, discipleship. Information does not necessarily lead to transformation, spiritual growth, or increased maturity in Christ. In some churches, gathering more information through classes, reading books, and conferences has become a detriment to discipleship by creating a false sense of growth and change. Secondly, the value of process over program: most people that we spoke to share a skepticism of the latest and greatest program, book, box set, or other resource that proposed to be the "magic bullet" to grow their church, make disciples, and more. Instead, churches spoke highly of discipleship that is more process-oriented and has a more organic and relational feel. Some processes that are bearing great fruit across the RCA include Faithwalking ([faithwalking.us](http://faithwalking.us)), 3DM, and the Congregational Vitality Pathway ([vitalitypathway.org](http://vitalitypathway.org)).

Central to these best practices is a focus on growing in community, specifically in coaching relationships for accountability and support. Another central trait of effective discipleship is a focus on practicality and practice. To follow Christ is innately active and requires a response from us. The most fruitful practices leverage space for information, practice, and reflection on the work.

One last trend that we heard is that conversations about discipleship get stuck sometimes because of how different people and generations prefer to learn, work, and live. We heard countless stories of one generation that believes that discipleship happens in rows in

classrooms while another generation thinks it happens in circles in a more interactive format. We don't pretend that either is the right answer, but we simply acknowledge that some of our churches get stuck because of various generations' styles. Some people end up talking over each other and using the same words to mean very different things.

### **Children and Worship**

Children ages three to nine in more than 300 RCA congregations experience age-appropriate worship each week through Children and Worship. Children and Worship is a cooperative ministry of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). This program continues to be one of the most effective ways of nurturing children's faith and preparing them for worship with the whole congregation.

The Children's Ministry team at New Hope Church in Powell, Ohio, began utilizing Children and Worship again last summer after a ten-year pause with the program. Members of their church are trained as Children and Worship leaders, and the decision was made to re-engage with the program. Children's Ministry team lead Rachel Tate had this to say after they re-launched last summer:

New Hope's first Children and Worship was amazing! The story of The Light was shared. We had 18 K–2nd graders and 23 3rd–5th graders. After years of entertainment and technology driven programs, we were extremely interested in seeing how the children would react to slowing down in Children and Worship. They loved it! The leaders loved it! The shepherds loved it! It was truly wonderful. The children were engaged, well behaved, and happy! The set up was simple. The message was clear. We're so thankful for this program, the leaders who have gone before us, and the space to slow down and literally take time for and with God.

The commission continues to urge the RCA to dedicate itself to the goal of committing substantial resources to the ongoing religious development of children.

### **APCE and CERCA**

The annual Association of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) conference was held in Little Rock, Arkansas, from January 29 to February 1, 2020. The theme of "Getting Outside the Box: Discipleship through Retreat, Mission, and Justice Ministries" continued the above conversations among the 27 Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America (CERCA) members gathered with our broader Reformed ecumenical partners. While the paid position and title of Church or Christian Educator does not exist in the RCA to the extent that it once did or to the extent it still does with our many Presbyterian friends, we can all agree that Christian education still takes place in all of our churches, and providing ongoing opportunities for learning, growth, and resources is important.

The nearly 40-year partnership of CERCA and APCE, combined with the annual APCE conference, is an opportunity for ongoing development for our churches' educators that we continue to lift up as a solidly Reformed event. Whether educators are new or experienced, paid or unpaid, there are always new things for us to learn, and there is value in us doing this together across generations and contexts of how each of our churches engages this ministry of teaching and discipleship. The commission feels so strongly about this that the \$1,000 in funds

that were approved by the 2019 General Synod for the “professional and personal growth of those working in RCA educational/discipleship ministries” were invested back into the Supporting and Equipping Educators’ Development (SEED) Scholarship Program offered through our denominational discipleship office, which awarded two \$500 scholarships to interested attendees this year. The SEED scholarships are available to as many as eight applicants each year, so please make this known to those who could use it at the 2022 event in Chicago at the beginning of February!

Acknowledging the ongoing changes in the church and educational ministries, CERCA, in alignment with the purposes of this commission, will be attempting to create a greater awareness of the networking, support systems, and opportunities for ongoing preparation for ministry for our denominational educators. To that end, one of our long-term ecumenical partnerships called Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Ministry (PREM) or, later, Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Partnership (PREP) is dissolving. Each member denomination will be receiving a portion of the financial assets in hopes that this money will be reinvested in each denomination’s educational ministries. It is this commission’s hope, in support of CERCA, that the anticipated \$43,000 will be returned to CERCA as the body that has been engaged in this ecumenical partnership and could use these financial resources to achieve greater effectiveness in its ministry to support all who are working in RCA educational/discipleship ministries.

# **CERCA ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION (CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS, REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA)**

Pursuant to the action of General Synod 2019 (DE 19-2), the General Synod Council has created a \$10,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of \$1,000 per year in order to provide for professional and personal growth of those working in RCA education and discipleship ministries (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, etc.).

Scholarships will be awarded on a biannual basis (February and August), pending applications and funds available. Applications may be submitted in advance or subsequent to educational opportunities. Preference will be given to those individuals not previously having received money from this fund.

To apply, complete the application below and send it with a letter of support from your consistory (governing board) to Barbara Ellis at the address at the end of this document.

Please print. Attach an additional sheet if necessary.

**Date**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Street Address**

City \_\_\_\_\_ State/Province \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP/Postal code \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

1. What educational opportunity would you like to attend/have you attended, and in what way do you see this benefitting you and/or your church's ministry?
  2. What is the total cost for this opportunity? What amount are you requesting? And what, if any, financial assistance will your church provide?

3. What other continuing education opportunities have you attended/are you currently engaged in?
  4. What role do you envision Christian education/discipleship playing in your future ministry?

**Completed application and letter from consistory should be sent to:**

## **Barbara Ellis, executive assistant**

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