Report of the General Synod Council on Transformed & Transforming

Note: General Synod Council ministry reports contain updates and progress reported to the General Synod Council in March 2021 for the calendar year 2020. 2021 updates and progress will be reflected in next year’s report.

POLICY WORDING

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities in the work of cultivating transformation that results in faithful and passionate disciples of Jesus.

The RCA will identify potential leaders and encourage and equip potential and existing leaders for missional, congregational, and pastoral leadership. These leaders will reflect the full diversity of the RCA, such as gender, age, race, ability, and cultural backgrounds, with a special emphasis on youth.

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities to participate in Christ’s kingdom mission, both locally and globally.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

Discipleship

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus’s command to make disciples is the church’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. Transformed disciples become more like Christ as they read and reflect on God’s Word, pray and listen to God, spend time in community with other Christ-followers, and engage in Christ’s mission. The RCA’s commitment is to help in providing accessible environments, processes, resources, and relationships that can be used by local congregations to foster, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, more fully devoted followers who willingly and boldly live and love like Jesus.

The discipleship pathways uniquely created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations. Transformation will be manifest in our relationships with one another, our increasing love for each other, our sacrifice for the cause of Christ, our willingness to influence our world for the gospel, and how we advocate for justice with compassion in communities where we live and serve.

Leadership

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

Women and men who are open to being used by God help guide the church as they actively pursue God’s purpose for congregations and ministries. Leaders willingly and passionately live
out their calling and giftedness to accomplish a missional vision that brings a gospel of grace and hope to a lost and broken world.

The RCA commitment is to help develop leaders, based on a foundation of discipleship, who:

- know how to lead themselves—their leadership is focused on their inward journey.
- know how to lead others—they are equipped to lead and influence in a God-ordained direction, increasing their leadership gift.
- know how to reproduce new leaders—they view leadership development as a key component of their call to be a leader.

This commitment to leadership development requires environments and accessible opportunities for growth and learning that will help lead RCA congregations forward in mission.

The RCA vision for leadership sees the leadership potential in all followers of Jesus Christ. It helps to raise up servant leaders who develop a courage and competence to lead in the church and the world in a multiplicity of environments and with an openness to equipping and empowering all people to be influencers for Christ’s kingdom. This leadership vision has a special focus on empowering people who may not have leadership positions, privilege, power, or even access to them, but who have been called and gifted by God to serve boldly. It is a vision that especially is committed to the next generation and developing leaders for the church of the future.

Mission

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations” (Psalm 67:1-2).

Mission becomes a way of life when we reach out to people with the gospel, meeting needs in neighborhoods, cities, and throughout the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we boldly give witness to the hope within us and willingly serve others by becoming the hands and feet of Christ in every corner of the world. The RCA commitment is to respond with God’s love to meet spiritual and individual needs around the globe. It is envisioning the people of the RCA as a movement of faithful followers who live and love like Jesus as they radically follow Christ in mission together.

Individuals and churches experience transformation as they open themselves to be used by God and reach out in giving and receiving, learning and sharing, and extending the kingdom of God through missional engagement. It means bringing the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to those who have never heard the message, mobilizing RCA congregations to connect with global partners for greater kingdom impact, helping resource volunteers for expanding involvement in mission efforts, extending compassion, mercy, and justice in places of discrimination, poverty, famine, disaster, and injustice. In a world of brokenness and need, we offer help, hope, and tangible expressions of God’s love.

OVERVIEW

Transformed & Transforming, the RCA’s 15-year goal, is currently in year seven. Chief operating officer Jill Ver Steeg sets the vision for this goal, leads the team of initiative leaders
who execute the outputs, and holds the team accountable for the ends and outcomes reporting.

The eight initiatives within Transformed & Transforming are Discipleship, Local Missional Engagement, Short-Term Mission, Disability Concerns, Advocacy (which works in concert with and is reported along with Local Missional Engagement), Leadership Development, Women’s Transformation and Leadership, and Next Generation Engagement. In this organizational structure, the Church Multiplication and Global Mission teams collaborate with the Transformed & Transforming team but have their own monitoring ends policy from the General Synod Council (GSC).

For many of the staff, the goals and projects for the 2020 calendar year were similar to years past. However, 2020 quickly became a time of extreme disruption for the traditional delivery system prioritized in Transformed & Transforming. Aside from the limitation of in-person gatherings, the staff quickly realized that ministry leaders were carrying the brunt of the shift to online worship, deaths in their congregations, and extreme fatigue in navigating the change and fear many in their communities were experiencing.

The Transformed & Transforming team adapted, providing COVID-19 resources for ministry and mission. These resources included digital discipleship, adaptive leadership, self-care, lament, and staying on mission during a pandemic. In addition, initiative leaders pivoted to provide online learning opportunities, providing equipping offerings through Zoom and webinars. Through mid-2020, energy was spent in elevating the stories and expertise of leaders in the field who were adapting to new realities, while providing training and support for pastors. This included the development of online equipping and resourcing, including Faithward and its online learning and podcast platform. Transformed & Transforming renewed its commitment to provide resources that reflect our goals of creating nimble, agile resources that are responsive to the needs of our local leaders and congregations.

The social unrest in 2020 also provided an opportunity for the Transformed & Transforming staff to actualize the year-long training they had received with Reesheda Graham Washington on bias. This work included work with ableism, gender and intergenerational equity, and racism. Resources were created and curated for churches that provided places for lament, prayer, and reconciliation. Building an equity-based hospitality framework is a multi-dimensional endeavor, with both internal and external foci. For example, “accessibility” is about who has access to leadership and decision-making as well as how people are welcomed into a space.

In years eight to ten of Transformed & Transforming, Jill will lead this team through the decentralization of leadership in order to build out the vision and execution of Transformed & Transforming, reproducing catalysts and champions across the RCA. Jill is working strategically with the Lilly Endowment to further deepen the work of Transformed & Transforming.

In a decentralized model, the hope of Transformed & Transforming 3.0 is to multiply leaders “closer to the ground” who are able to provide contextualized support for cohorts. Although this work is currently manifesting through the work of guiding coalitions, we endeavor to accelerate that work, providing more opportunities for connection and learning as we equip and release leaders to continue the work. At this time, we are seeing the fruit of this multiplication model through Discipleship in Jeff Allen’s cohort process, Sung Kim’s Leadership Development cohorts, and Liz Testa’s Women’s Transformation and Leadership collaboratives.
As we shift into this model, we recognize our need to create agile, nimble resources that are readily available to ministry leaders, regardless of their geographical context. This requires a shift from in-person gathering only, leading us into a space where we are increasing our expertise in digital learning. This hybrid, “phygital” space (physical + digital) means exploring more robust online options, including classes, webinars, digital cohorts, podcasts, and more. The efforts of this work have manifested most clearly in the work of Faithward, which is currently housing the preliminary work of the online learning platform as well as the podcast network.

Our desire is to create and curate resourcing that both provides equipping for our current leaders and also helps us turn toward learning models for our emerging leaders. By leaning into the best of our in-person gathering practices, while reaching toward digital best practices, we hope to remain a preferred learning partner for our local churches.

The Transformed & Transforming team collaborates regularly with the work of Church Multiplication and Global Mission. Specifically, the team is working on building out discipleship, leadership, and missional engagement in phase two of the church multiplication process.

**DISABILITY CONCERNS**

The vision of RCA Disability Concerns is to welcome and engage the gifts of all people in Christ’s ministry, becoming accessible, inclusive, missional churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves. This is a bold and compelling vision that aligns with Scripture: God’s reign as a unifying embrace of the love and grace of Jesus Christ that reaches all people—every race, tribe, people, and language, every type of disability and special need. Raising awareness and making our churches accessible to people with disabilities establishes a needed foundation, but our own attitudes about disability require even greater transformation. Ministries to and for people with disabilities that are grounded in compassion are important starting points. But such ministries are called then to mature into ministries with and by people with disabilities, recognizing everyone has gifts to serve the purposes of God’s kingdom mission. True belonging and the transformation that God seeks will be realized only when everybody belongs and everybody serves, regardless of ability.

A covenant with CRC Disability Concerns between the governing boards of the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC)—in place since 2009—has demonstrated a track record of multiplied effectiveness and continues to deepen ministry impact in both denominations and beyond, welcoming all the partners that God provides. The partnership in Disability Concerns continues to provide a model for how the RCA and CRC can serve collaboratively and in mutually interdependent ways to do more together than they could accomplish independently, while also leveraging fiscal and programmatic efficiencies.

In the 12th year of the Disability Concerns partnership, the two staff leaders of RCA and CRC Disability Concerns adapted quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on church and society in general, and people with disabilities in particular—many of whom are in higher risk categories than the population in general due to pre-existing conditions. Several in-person events pivoted to become virtual gatherings, with attention given to providing accommodations for those with hearing or visual impairments, among others. This hands-on learning with the Zoom digital platform also served to support ministry initiatives other than Disability Concerns so that they, too, could welcome greater participation of people with disabilities.
The joint RCA-CRC Disability Concerns Leadership Training, an annual late-summer, three-day, in-person gathering for key volunteers (called disability advocates) transitioned to a virtual event spread over two days, with optional sessions before and after the event. This change allowed for a higher-than-usual number of first-time participants who had been limited previously by geography, finances, or disability-related constraints. The transition to a virtual event also provided the opportunity to engage a more diverse range of speakers and panelists than an in-person event would have permitted, including speakers from British Columbia, Ontario, and Hungary.

Another in-person event in West Michigan—this one on mental health and the church, scheduled for October 2020—underwent a different sort of transformation. The event, known as “Bearing Hope: Mental Health and the Church,” had developed from a half-day gathering to a full day in the previous three years. When the pandemic forced the cancellation of the fourth annual gathering, the planning team (representing a partnership of five faith-based organizations in West Michigan addressing mental health) decided to launch a podcast instead. A vision for the podcast was developed, hosts were secured, and production began early in 2021 to record the first eight episodes of Faith and Mental Health, which launched in March 2021.

The RCA’s Disability Concerns initiative is led by Terry DeYoung. His travel plans for March through June 2020, including two weeks in New York and Jersey and a week in northwest Iowa, were canceled during the early months of the pandemic. Some of those meetings and speaking engagements were conducted virtually later on, but many are still waiting to be rescheduled. DeYoung also was honored by the Religion and Spirituality Interest Group of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities with the 2020 Henri J. Nouwen Award. Presented in June, the award affirmed DeYoung’s lifelong commitment to supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; his impact on the field of religion, spirituality, and disability; and his efforts ensuring that people with disabilities are welcomed, supported, and engaged in learning and living lives of faith, especially in their congregations.

**Progress**

A network of seven RCA regional mental health consultants—established as a pilot in early 2020, spanning four regional synods (Albany, Heartland, Mid-Atlantics, and New York)—continues its work to support and advise ministry initiatives related to mental health and the church. The group’s original vision was to consult directly with pastors, churches, and classes in their efforts to reduce stigma and provide education opportunities, but many of those intentions were put on hold as churches interrupted in-person gatherings. Yet, the rising incidence of mental health challenges in the midst of the pandemic across the population has elevated the importance of this work. These consultants are RCA members who have significant experience, training, and connections in a variety of mental health specialties.

After two reprintings of the second edition of the Inclusion Handbook, a primary resource for churches published in 2013, work on an updated and expanded third edition of the print version of the Inclusion Handbook is nearing completion. The handbook has been retitled Everybody Belongs, Serving Together, and two partners have joined RCA and CRC Disability Concerns in this venture: Christian Horizons, a large faith-based provider of services for people with disabilities in Ontario, and Elim Christian Services, a faith-based provider located in the Chicago suburbs with deep ties to the RCA and CRC. After the print version has been published in 2021,
an online platform with interactive features and learning modules will be developed and hosted by the RCA’s Faithward platform.

The issue of ableism—an unconscious bias and prejudice toward people with disabilities that’s both personal and systemic—continues as an area of focus within Disability Concerns and beyond. In seeking to become a church where everybody belongs and everybody serves, disability advocates and RCA staff are starting to name personal and systemic biases toward people with disabilities, while pursuing the engagement of this challenging issue at GSC staffing levels, including all of the Transformed & Transforming ministry initiatives.

In recognition of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 2020, RCA general secretary Eddy Alemán and CRC interim executive director Colin Watson signed a joint resolution celebrating the progress that has been made by reaffirming the principles of equality and belonging for all, and calling on both denominations to renew their efforts toward full ADA compliance and toward becoming churches where everybody belongs and everybody serves. Congregations that had not already done so were urged to appoint a church disability advocate, adopt a church disability policy, and conduct an accessibility audit. Disability Concerns also sent a series of emails to RCA leaders and churches about the ADA, including video excerpts recorded in May 2020 with Sylvio Scorza, a wheelchair user and retired religion professor from Northwestern College who served as the RCA General Synod president in 1990. Scorza’s president’s report that year focused on the church’s inclusion efforts.

Current Goals

Disability Concerns has been one of four Transformed & Transforming initiatives working since December 2019 on an equity-based hospitality framework to advise GSC staff to be more welcoming and hospitable to historically marginalized people groups. The first significant rollout of the equity-based hospitality framework values was a ten-week pilot learning journey called “From Outreach to Embracing,” led by Denise Kingdom Grier. Some 80 registrants participated in regular breakout sessions throughout the ten weeks focused on disabilities, women, next generation, and racial equity.

In collaboration with the RCA’s Next Generation staff, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns is developing a disability Sankofa virtual experience for 25 young people in their 20s to study the disability rights movement in North America and apply their own advocacy skills in community-based initiatives. Anyone under 30—sometimes referred to as the ADA Generation—understands inclusion to be a birthright, expecting public spaces and institutions to be accessible in every way, yet that is not the case in many churches. Through events like the disability Sankofa and the annual Disability Concerns Leadership Training, this theme will be highlighted in multiple events with a goal of engaging the next generation of church leaders and advocates.

DISCIPLESHIP

The Transformed & Transforming Discipleship guiding coalition defines a disciple as somebody who looks like Jesus (character) and who does the things that Jesus does (competency). This simple definition engages the two “greats” of Scripture—the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. In short, the focus and goal of the Discipleship leadership team and Discipleship guiding coalition is to help RCA churches to define a discipleship pathway that develops and deploys disciples who look and live like Jesus.
The Discipleship guiding coalition (led by Jeff Allen, Pat Dirkse, and Ruth Langkamp) is a collaborative team of discipleship practitioners from across the denomination. The coalition includes practitioners who are male, female, pastors, lay leaders, are from the east and west, are of various ethnic backgrounds, and who are from various mission contexts ranging from urban to suburban, church plants, smaller churches, larger churches, and mission outposts. This coalition of 12 “in the field” practitioners exists to connect leaders in conversation that often point to the provision of content, coaching, and the sharing of proven pathways that help teams move forward in community processes for adaptive change in their context.

Connections and Conversations

The guiding coalition engages in countless connection and conversation opportunities ranging from emails, phone and Zoom calls, and webinar and website interactions to classis and regional events across the vast geography of the denomination. These discussions frequently center around two questions: “What is your plan for discipleship?” and “How is that plan working?” Best practices are celebrated, and opportunities are extended that invite every RCA congregation to put in place a discipleship pathway (process or pipeline) that develops disciples who look like Jesus and who do the things that Jesus does in their context.

Content

In discussion with leaders, content is frequently a topic that comes up as churches look to move forward in the development of a disciple-making culture. A website, webinar, workshop, podcast, book, or a classis event are examples of Taste and See content opportunities provided to leaders and churches across the denomination. In initial conversations, guiding coalition members listen first, seeking to understand the unique needs and specific context of the leader and church. In the information age, content is abundant! As a result, listening is of utmost importance in order to discern and offer content suggestions that are helpful to leaders in their particular church and situation. In 2020, the RCA enabled increased access to content through the launch of an online learning platform via Faithward. As a part of this launch, Discipleship rolled out “Discipleship Begins with You,” a nine-month weekly coaching cohort for leaders in the RCA.

Coaching Cohorts

Coaching is, without a doubt, the most important step that leaders can take in their journey of discipleship. Why? It reflects a step of faith that demonstrates a personal commitment to move from “what is” to “what could be” as disciples and leaders. Further, this first step demonstrates humility and an understanding that as a leader, “I cannot expect people to follow me to a place that I have never gone before.” In this light, coaching can best be understood as inviting a Barnabas-like encourager to walk alongside the leader; that encourager is seeking to ignite and catalyze character and competency development that is directed by the Holy Spirit. On-ramp, or pilot, coaching is a frequent first step as leaders take a dip into new water for a brief season (usually six weeks). The frequency of coaching ranges from monthly to weekly (recommended to maximize relational connection and the pace of development) and invites leaders into an environment that provides both grace and truth—encouragement and challenge—to help the leader to grow personally as an example worthy of imitation in their particular congregational family. Coaching options can range from personal, to staff, to a consistory and/or classis, and the duration can be brief (six weeks) or can last multiple years. To start a conversation of
coaching possibilities for your context, contact Jeff Allen (jallen@rca.org), Pat Dirkse (pdirkse@rca.org), or Ruth Langkamp (rlangkamp@rca.org).

**Communities and Change**

While coaching frequently focuses on the development of character and competency in a leader, communities of learning are undoubtedly the most effective proven pathway for igniting adaptive change in a church family system. Learning communities involve teams of a minimum of three people each from multiple churches in a facilitated process that helps each team—called a Guiding Coalition for Change—to identify “what is,” to consider “what could be,” and then to develop objectives, strategies, and tactics to move forward into “what will be” in their particular church context. Learning communities provided in recent years include: Building a Discipling Culture, Growing Young, Cultivating Generous Congregations, Leadership Development, Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal), Faithwalking, Volunteer Engagement, and Local Missional Engagement. The RCA has developed relationships for coaching and learning community proven pathways with a number of partner ministries, including 3DMovements (3DM), Congregational Vitality Pathway, and Organic Outreach. The launch of a 100 percent virtual, online Cultivating a Multiplication Mindset learning community for RCA churches and leaders is planned for the early fall of 2021. For more information or to start a conversation about learning community options that best fit your context, contact Jeff Allen (jallen@rca.org), Pat Dirkse (pdirkse@rca.org), or Ruth Langkamp (rlangkamp@rca.org).

**Progress**

2020 provided challenges as well as opportunities to verify and clarify present offerings and future equipping needs of leaders who demonstrate a multiplication mindset. In particular, the Discipleship team fine-tuned a strategic proven pathway with multiple opportunities for engagement. This pathway is defined as follows:

![Pathway Diagram]

**Current Goals**

Given the above, the Discipleship leadership team and the Discipleship guiding coalition will continue to move forward with the following goals and desired outcomes:

- Delivering “top of mind” awareness of the definition of a disciple as somebody who looks like Jesus (character) and who does the things that Jesus does (competency). (“Top of mind” awareness means communicating about something in a way that is so clear and consistent that people can state it “off the top of their mind.”)
- Delivering “top of mind” awareness of the discipleship focus on the questions “What is your plan for discipleship?” and “How is that plan working?” as well as provision of a
proven pathway and a pipeline for the development and deployment of disciple-making leaders who are engaging in a multiplication mindset.

- Providing tools and resources that make discipleship accessible, practical, memorable, and reproducible.
- Equipping and deploying partner practitioners who provide both “show” and “tell”; demonstrate both invitation (grace) and challenge (truth); and who equip as a “guide on the side” (someone who uses a mentoring/coaching approach) versus a “sage on the stage” (someone who sets themselves up as the expert with all the answers).
- Collaborating and engaging with strategic partners in order to live into a reimagined future focusing on discipleship, next generation engagement, leadership, local mission, and multiplication.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Who: The work of the Leadership Development initiative is guided by a coalition of pastors, regional executives, classis leaders, business entrepreneurs, and marketplace leaders representing different areas of specialized expertise in leadership development. The guiding coalition is led by staff member Sung Kim, who has been in this role (part-time) since November 2018 with support from leadership specialist Eduardo Rodriguez, who has been in this role (part-time) since June 2019.

What: The work of Leadership Development is to catalyze the multiplication of more and better leaders in ways that are smarter and faster than traditional methods of training both emerging and established leaders. Our goal is to develop leaders who demonstrate God-honoring character, emotionally healthy chemistry with others, and uniquely skilled competence where their “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (Frederick Buechner).

Why: We focus on leadership development because great and godly leaders transform the world. They lead teams, departments, and organizations that are more faithful and fruitful in every way. They are “humble, hungry, and smart” (Patrick Lencioni). At the same time, they understand that to lead others, you must first lead yourself.

How: We aim to accomplish our goal by (1) centralizing the most effective, research-based tools and resources and (2) decentralizing training and coaching at every level of the denomination, region, classis, and churches in the Reformed Church in America.

Progress

Leadership Development Cohorts

These cohorts are nine-month training intensives for leaders who long for deeper gospel transformation in themselves and in the world around them. They involve a 75- to 90-minute video call twice a month with a cohort of four to six other pastors. Nothing replaces the power of this simple twice-a-month rhythm for regular training, discussions, questions, and processing. The first call focuses on spiritual direction and emotional wellness. The second call focuses on practical strategies to increase the health and vitality of their churches. This process is also being used to identify and train leaders that can launch their own cohorts to multiply our impact.

- Senior Pastor Leadership Cohort: This cohort was launched on June 18, 2020, with a group of six senior pastors from all across the RCA. Pastors received real-time support,
encouragement, and equipping in areas ranging from staff management to developing a sustainable online ministry. This opportunity not only created a great learning environment but also a space for fellowship and emotional support during the turbulent and demanding season of COVID-19.

- Solo Pastor Leadership Cohort: This cohort was launched on September 24, 2020, with a group of five solo pastors under the age of 35 from all across the RCA. This group provided contextualized support and equipping for solo pastors who have their own unique set of opportunities and challenges—from the stress of wearing multiple hats, delegating tasks, and dealing with isolation to the stress of implementing change, navigating a pandemic, or handling any number of other unpredictable circumstances.

Courses

Leadership development courses are designed to provide equipping opportunities for ministry leaders who want to engage in a learning process to grow and develop their leadership. Courses are done via videoconferencing and span a variety of topics in leadership including self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership.

- Enneagram Made Simple, spring 2020: This six-session-long course launched on February 25, 2020, with eight church leaders who wanted to use the Enneagram not only as a tool to grow in their own self-awareness but also as a tool for their ministry leadership. In these sessions, we provided a framework of the Enneagram, described the nine personality types in-depth, and spoke to the various ways in which the Enneagram can enrich our personal, professional, and spiritual lives.
- Enneagram Made Simple, fall 2020: Due to the engagement and personal growth we witnessed in the spring Enneagram course, we offered a second opportunity for another group of eight church leaders to take this course on October 15, 2020.

Workshops

Leadership development workshops are designed to provide equipping opportunities for ministry leaders who want to engage in a learning process to grow and develop their leadership. Workshops are done via videoconferencing and span a variety of topics in leadership including self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership. All workshops allow for a follow-up one-on-one meeting with Leadership Development staff to discuss how participants can implement what they have learned in the workshop into their own context.

- Church Structure and Leadership Workshop: This online workshop took place on April 18, 2020, with 31 church leaders focused on organizing themselves to succeed in their mission. One of the most important topics for churches serious about being effective in their mission is church structure and leadership. It’s true that a healthy church can operate with a poor governance model. It’s also true that a church can follow a great model and still be unhealthy. However, if the goal is to remove roadblocks to effective ministry, empower leaders to lead as they have been charged by the Scriptures, and unleash the greatest number of people in meaningful ministry, then structure matters—a great deal.
- Leading in Times of Change: This workshop launched on August 15, 2020, with 29 church leaders aimed at equipping churches in the ever-changing landscape caused by
COVID-19 as it swept across the globe. The pandemic caused large cultural shifts that churches need to understand and navigate in order to succeed in a post-COVID world.

Consultations

Leadership development consultations allow for more personalized resourcing and support for churches that want to succeed in their mission and want their staff to succeed in leadership. Leadership Development staff have solutions that can help lead a church to write a new playbook that honors its mission and the communities it serves and makes the most of the church's resources.

- In 2020, 19 churches received a one-on-one consultation with Leadership Development staff to implement core leadership development concepts in their church. This personalized equipping allows us to go deeper rather than wider and go beyond the theoretical into real-world situations.

Resources

Leadership Development's resources are all researched-based, centralized, and relevant for today and tomorrow.

- Core Strengths: Core Strengths provides the opportunity for church leaders to better understand and appreciate themselves and the people they work with, which allows everyone to more effectively deal with high-stakes situations and deliver stronger results. Core Strengths equips ministry leaders with the necessary skills to engage in opposing viewpoints, promote healthy opposition, and resolve conflict that can lead to more collaboration and help adapt to future realities. Leadership Development staff are certified Core Strengths facilitators and are able to provide this service at a fraction of the actual cost for churches in our system.

Current Goals

Leadership Development Cohorts

- Rural Pastor Leadership Cohort: After speaking with rural pastors, Leadership Development staff recognized the unique challenges and opportunities of ministering in a rural context. These cohorts will be launched in coordination with rural leaders to provide an opportunity that will help pastors navigate the ups and downs of rural ministry.
- Solo Pastor Leadership Cohort: Due to the strong response of the first cohort, we are poised to provide another cohort experience for solo pastors.
- Women’s Transformation and Leadership Cohort: This cohort will be a collaboration with Women’s Transformation and Leadership to provide the cohort experience for church leaders in their system.
- Latino Pastor Leadership Cohort: This cohort will be a collaboration with the Classis de las Naciones to serve Latino leaders in their region and address the challenges and opportunities in their context. This will also allow Leadership Development to provide its cohort experience in Spanish for the growing number of Spanish-speaking people in the denomination.
Church Planter Leadership Cohort: Pending conversations with Church Multiplication, Leadership Development hopes to provide its cohort experience for church planters in the RCA system. Church planters have an array of challenges and opportunities before them; Leadership Development believes that its cohort experience can provide the support, equipping, and experience that will allow church planters to succeed in their mission.

First Call Leadership Cohort: This cohort is meant to provide first call pastors with the support they need to thrive. The first call experience has often been referred to as a second seminary, where the learning experience is centered on taking theory into practice. The transition can be rocky, so we want to provide the appropriate support, resourcing, and mentorship that allows first call pastors to succeed in their new leadership position and their future ministry opportunities.

Large Church Leadership Cohort: This cohort will be in collaboration with church leaders from southern California and is meant to equip churches with a weekly attendance of 500 people and greater. This cohort will have six to eight church pastors along with three to five of their church leaders. It will be a blended learning process with both virtual and in-person gatherings.

Courses

- Advanced Enneagram: This is a continuation of the Enneagram Made Simple Course, providing an opportunity for church leaders to dive deeper into the true complexity of Enneagram.
- Enneagram Made Simple for Ministry and Teams: There has been a strong request from church leaders to provide a course that trains leaders to use the Enneagram as a discipleship tool that can be used in their ministry context.

Workshops

- Well-being: Building Resilience and Avoiding Burnout: This workshop will help participants question the long-term viability and sustainability of the ways that we work, highlighting ways of working that, if left neglected, can produce stress, conflict, physical and mental ill health, and exhaustion. It will help participants develop skills and practices to help them make changes in their day-to-day lives that will support their well-being and explore ways of working that keep themselves and their communities sustained, nourished, and effective in mission.
- Digital Strategies to Reach the Next Generation: In collaboration with Next Generation Engagement, Everest Leadership Network, and RCA communication staff, Leadership Development will be providing opportunities for churches to develop or strengthen their digital communication strategies, allowing them to make meaningful connections with the next generation.
- Church Structure and Leadership: Due to the strong positive response to the church structure and leadership workshop, Leadership Development will be developing this workshop into an online resource that churches can access anytime and anywhere.

Consultations

- Multi-site: Leadership Development will be providing one-on-one consulting with churches to develop multi-site strategies that promote growth and sustainability.
• Leadership Transition: Leadership Development will be providing one-on-one consulting with churches to develop leadership transition strategies to promote clarity, health, and sustainability.

LOCAL MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC MINISTRY INITIATIVES

Local Missional Engagement

Local Missional Engagement (LME) helps churches discern what God is doing in their church and in their communities and helps explore ways to bring those things together. LME focuses on five pillars for its work for coaching and equipping:

• Faith sharing: The work of evangelism in corporate and individual settings.
• Christian community development: Best Christian practices for community renewal, including asset based community development and robust community partnerships.
• Good neighboring: Practicing the art of neighboring as both a congregation and individuals, in the church and home community.
• Advocacy: The work of biblically centered justice, giving our time, talent, and treasure to spaces that are working to dismantle unjust systems.
• Missional imagination: Reigniting the idea of possibility and hopefulness for the church’s engagement with its community and neighbors, inspiring courageous action and out-of-the-box thinking for kingdom impact.

As part of Transformed & Transforming, LME exists to help churches have dedicated pathways to be agents of change and renewal in their communities. LME is led by Eliza Cortés Bast, who also stewards the Strategic Ministry Initiatives. LME also houses two part-time staff people: Laura Osborne, as the coordinator for interreligious relations, and Eduardo Rodriguez, whose work is shared with Leadership Development, as the specialist for Leadership and Local Missional Engagement. In 2020, with the retirement of Earl James, Eduardo has also acquired the RCA’s advocacy work and staffs the Commission on Christian Action.

Strategic Ministry Initiatives

Strategic Ministry Initiatives encompasses the collaborative and innovative work for equipping in the RCA. Throughout 2020, it has included the stewarding of the Lilly Endowment’s Flourishing Churches grant, titled the Renovations Project. It also includes the development of Faithward.org as a digital equipping space, including supervision and implementation of the online learning platform and podcasts. In addition, it includes the management of the Church Growth Fund’s Flourishing Churches grant process.

Progress

Like many other Transformed & Transforming initiatives, as well as for local congregations, the pandemic and social unrest presented a unique challenge in LME’s missional work with churches. We quickly realized that part of our work was returning to an ethos of care and relationship building with local leaders as we all were trying to make sense of the moment we were in. LME gives thanks to God for the work that we saw this year and for the courageous ways churches tried new ideas and people shared their faith in new ways. Whether over Zoom or via a socially distanced prayer walk in their neighborhood, or advocacy in their local structures, the people of the RCA found many ways to express their missional hearts for their
neighbors and communities. LME celebrates the hard, adaptive work as well as the people who came to faith in 2020!

This year, LME saw the pivot to collaborative online learning opportunities as we hosted learning events in the Mid-Atlantics and the Far West with other initiative leaders in Transformed & Transforming. LME also joined with Women’s Transformation and Leadership to assist with their online gatherings for equipping around mission for Building God’s Church Together. Resources were updated through the LME guiding coalition and LME staff to reflect the realities of local mission in a pandemic space. Materials such as prayer walk guides were re-released through Faithward and other avenues to assist individuals and churches to adapt their missional work while socially distanced. Eduardo continues to assist with the dismantling racism work that is hosted by Women’s Transformation and Leadership as one of five facilitators for the 1 Corinthians 13 Project.

The shift in online gathering also allowed the LME staff to provide tailored, contextualized consulting and coaching for churches and missional ministry leaders who were looking to both dream and adapt. Eliza and Eduardo were able to use the best of trusted partners and resources such as the Evangelism Leadership Fellows, Amplify, the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), Rooted Good (formerly Matryoshka House), and Faith-Rooted, alongside the work of local resources.

LME also participated in the deployment of disaster relief funds from Global Mission to support the relief efforts of RCA churches throughout North America in addressing the impact of COVID-19 in their local communities. Through Eduardo, we also co-hosted a joint COVID relief fund with the Christian Reformed Church in North America’s (CRCNA) World Renew. This fund also released much-needed funds to churches that were struggling with the local impact of the pandemic. Eduardo continues his work and connection with the CRCNA through a Community of Practice.

The interreligious work also saw a fruitful year, initiating and strengthening partnerships with the CRCNA, Shoulder to Shoulder, the National Council of Churches’ Interreligious Convening Table, Religions for Peace USA, Journey into Friendship, and more. These groups continue to focus their work on the intersection of faith and justice on issues such as the diaspora, immigration and refugees, and more. Laura is also stewarding three learning communities highlighting interreligious work, with emphases on faith sharing, hospitality in the time of COVID-19, and college campus ministry with international students.

Although Transformed & Transforming has always housed many special projects, the work of Strategic Ministry Initiatives was introduced in late 2020. Throughout the year, Eliza had been gathering resources and ideas to implement new strategies for equipping. Much of this work was done through the work of Faithward.org—a digital inspiration of the RCA. The Faithward leadership team saw more than 240,000 people visit the site last year, divided almost evenly among age demographics. Out of the top ten articles most visited, we were grateful to see users not connected with the RCA look for articles on how to become a Christian and learning about God’s love, as well as resources such as the Jesse Tree and Lent devotions. Faithward housed our resources for COVID, lament, and dismantling racism. Faithward had almost half a million page visits during the calendar year.
With many thanks to Barb Ellis of Transformed & Transforming and Matt Seybert in IT, Faithward beta-tested an online learning platform in late 2020, hosting the Women’s Transformation and Leadership leadership collaboratives as well as discipleship cohorts. Faithward also began building the infrastructure to support a podcast network. Our desire is to see thought leaders from throughout the RCA and beyond continue to provide blog-based articles that inform our work as we continue to craft learning content and opportunities to serve the motivated local leader.

In addition, Strategic Ministry Initiatives launched Renovations, a Lilly-funded program that focuses on taking the best of our sacred and treasured traditions and reimagining them for the future of the church. Birthed out of a listening session in 2019, Renovations has gathered diverse field experts and leaders who are shaping the Christian church for the future. This project was intended to launch with in-person gatherings in 2020. However, due to COVID, it has shifted to a digital-first format, with sessions professionally recorded to launch on the online learning platform through Faithward.

**Current Goals**

LME will continue to provide updated resources, through coaching, consulting, and training that reflect local mission in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. This includes webinars, classes, and additional support, both physically and digitally to accommodate our current context. It will also, with the help of its guiding coalition, update printed materials and craft new ones for churches. This also includes unique and innovative approaches to hospitality and community engagement, such as the “Food for Faith” blog and other resources that integrate making disciples, ministry multiplication, and missional engagement. LME will also continue to explore stronger avenues of community development, including partnership with Oikos Accelerator, a program that helps individuals launch social entrepreneurship ventures.

Advocacy will broaden its work by networking “boots on the ground” leaders who are participating in the justice and advocacy space throughout North America. For 2021 and beyond, our hope is to have local pastors and leaders who are on the front edge of this work in the RCA connected with one another and to curate resources and support for their work. In addition, our hope is to continue to elevate the thrust of their work as it relates to the goals of Transformed & Transforming, particularly in the work of a multicultural future free from racism.

As coordinator for interreligious relations, Laura is excited for the launch of the Faith over Fear trainings, as well as the continued work of Journey into Friendships with the CRCNA. In addition, she will continue her work with all of our partners to further the work of interfaith dialogue and how it relates to RCA churches and local communities. Last, she continues to build and bridge resources to help people share their faith with those of another religion for the cause of Christ.

Strategic Ministry Initiatives will continue to build out the digital equipping and resource arm of the RCA, strengthening its offerings by increasing online learning and podcast opportunities. The online learning platform will house both synchronous and asynchronous offerings, assisting leaders to choose when and how their learning can happen. In addition, we will release our recordings for the Renovations Project. We will recruit churches for the learning cohort model, as well as release the offerings for asynchronous learning.
**NEXT GENERATION ENGAGEMENT**

Next Generation Engagement seeks to empower young adults, ministry teams, and congregational leaders to create a culture of intergenerational ministry—that is, all people of all ages serving in leadership positions at the church, classis, and denominational levels. Intergenerational ministry reframes the mental model of young people in the church; we are no longer seeking to “keep” these young people in our congregations. Instead, this ministry seeks to empower young leaders and congregations to serve one another into future ministry endeavors. Anna Radcliffe is the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement, Ruth Langkamp serves as the Next Generation Engagement program specialist, Erika Fleming serves as the administrative assistant, and Becky Getz serves as the communication coach.

**Progress**

More than 32 congregations have participated in Growing Young learning communities over the past three years. This spring, Next Generation Engagement is set to launch another completely virtual learning community in partnership with Fuller Youth Institute and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). We expect to launch with ten more congregations. Next Generation Engagement, in collaboration with the CRCNA, has successfully taken in a process called Generation Spark. Originated by Hope College, Generation Spark is a 12-week-long mentoring process that comes alongside young and older leaders to invest in their spiritual formation and community involvement. We have launched a pilot process with ten congregations. We are also in the process of listening to the 40 former participating congregations to better develop the process for greater effectiveness. Generation Spark is expected to make a denomination-wide release in fall 2021.

Next Generation Engagement has been participating in an ecumenical Christian movement hosted by Fuller Youth Institute called Ten by 10. This movement includes participating organizations like the Barna Group, Orange, and more than 40 denominations. This movement is discerning how to best prioritize the spiritual formation of young people by creating awareness and resourcing for more than 100,000 congregations. The aim of this movement is that millions of young people would encounter the radical love of Jesus.

Next Generation Engagement has begun facilitating more intentional space for children’s ministry leaders. Contractor Shelley Henning hosted three round table discussions to better hear from these leaders their hopes and expectations. Several leaders from around the U.S. and Canada participated in these conversations. These leaders elevated the need for someone to coordinate leaders, create spaces for processing, and develop coaches to continue building out contextualized resourcing and formational experiences for young people. Shelley currently has five coaches from around the U.S. undergoing coaching training. In addition, she hosts monthly conversations for any and all ministry leaders to process. She regularly has between 10 and 30 ministry leaders participating.

Next Generation Engagement has participated in the equity-based hospitality equipping event facilitated by Women’s Transformation and Leadership with nearly 80 participants from around the denomination. We have provided awareness about how leaders can begin the work of next generation inclusion and intergenerational equipping. Following the conclusion of this training, we will offer an exploratory webinar for those interested in developing next generation ministry strategies.
Through the work and support of communications editor Becky Getz and Next Generation specialist Ruth Langkamp, Next Generation Engagement’s online presence aims to resource and equip all leaders to better work intergenerationally. Our priority is about building awareness around the current state of the church as it relates to youth. Over this past year, this resource has expanded to more than 600 subscribers.

Next Generation Engagement continues to deepen its partnership with the CRCNA through many collaborative efforts, including a joint leadership/guiding coalition strategy designed to equip local leaders to advocate for youth and young adults at classis and regional levels. Six regional leaders serve to connect with congregations and classis leaders across the denomination. We have begun developing a joint denominational database locating all CRCNA and RCA campus ministries across the U.S. and Canada.

Next Generation Engagement serves as the lead development team for podcast development for the RCA. We have partnered with Women’s Transformation and Leadership to launch the Lavish Hope podcast. In March, we will release a podcast in partnership with Disability Concerns. Additionally, we will launch a podcast to promote the six defining characteristics of an intergenerational congregation.

Despite the pandemic, we continue to give thanks to God for all of the congregations that have adapted and made strategic changes to include all people in their communities. During a season when mental health has been particularly challenging among young people, this change has led to lasting impact that will exist beyond this COVID year.

Current Goals

Despite the difficulty of this season, we continue to rejoice and celebrate the ongoing goals for the upcoming 2020–2021 year. Over the next year, our team hopes to:

- Build out Next Generation Engagement resourcing for motivated leaders through our newsletter, podcasts, and other social media networks to promote awareness of next generation engagement issues.
- Launch Generation Spark, a mentoring process, to promote intergenerational relationships within worshiping communities; in addition, launch another Growing Young learning community to develop awareness and equipping in congregations to better engage all generations of leaders.
- Begin developing resources and connections for parents and youth leaders to better engage and come alongside the faith formation of youth and young adults.
- Continue developing classis catalysts, through the Next Generation Engagement guiding coalition, to promote awareness of Next Generation Engagement and appropriate equipping opportunities, ongoing needs, and necessary culture shifts for better development of next generation leaders.
- Strategize and soft launch the Ten by 10 movement—an awareness campaign facilitated by the Fuller Youth Institute, joining over 40 denominations and key thought leaders like Barna, Orange, and others to prioritize the faith formation of youth and young adults.

SHORT-TERM MISSION

The Short-Term Mission initiative (previously known as Volunteer Engagement) is focused on empowering, equipping, and engaging RCA volunteers of all ages in service for Christ through
short-term mission opportunities that have a transforming impact on individuals, congregations, and the partner communities in which they serve. We believe that as people serve in short-term mission in the name of Christ, whether in their local community or around the world, that service can have long-term impact on all participants.

This team is focused on supporting congregations and equipping Christians for service with RCA missionaries and mission partners. We work with mission trip leaders and participants throughout the planning process, providing support on-field and helping ensure effective debriefing and follow-through.

Short-Term Mission is led by Stephanie Soderstrom.

Four Areas of Focus

1. Mission Trips: Working with local, long-term ministries, mission teams can help meet needs, build relationships, and share the hope of Christ. Mission trips are available for teams of all ages.
2. Disaster Response: When disaster strikes, RCA volunteers can help provide much-needed support in the months and years that follow. The RCA partners with World Renew - Disaster Response Services for domestic disaster response in the United States and Canada.
3. Individual Volunteer Opportunities: Opportunities are available for students and adults to serve for a few weeks or up to two years alongside RCA missionaries and partners. The Cultivate program, launched in 2018, provides individual opportunities for young people (ages 18–25), to serve alongside RCA missionaries and mission partners for either a summer or a year.
4. Church Equipping: Working with RCA churches, we will offer resources, training, and equipping processes to help them take their next step in short-term mission. These equipping resources will be available to churches that serve through the RCA and those that do not.

Many RCA churches have been engaged in short-term mission trips for years. Short-Term Mission’s vision is to become value-added for these churches as well as churches that are new to engaging in short-term mission. Additionally, we will seek to engage individuals, especially the next generation, in dynamic mission opportunities and internships that allow them to utilize their unique gifts to contribute to the long-term goals of our mission partners.

Progress

Shortly after the beginning of the 2020 calendar year, the reality of COVID-19 and its impact on health and safety, especially as it relates to travel, became apparent. The work of Short-Term Mission has been greatly impacted by the global pandemic. We worked quickly with our partners to cancel mission trips that were planned for spring break and the summer of 2020 and made recommendations to all churches to cancel or postpone trips to all partners. Over the course of the calendar year, we made pivots in order to continue to support and equip our churches and partners as they continue to engage missionally, even when this means doing so without traveling.

The Cultivate program had three volunteers serving internationally at the beginning of 2020. We are thankful that we were able to quickly and safely coordinate their return to the United States.
Since March 2020, Cultivate has been on hold, as many of our sites are located in countries where travel is restricted, where community spread of COVID-19 remains high, or where access to high-quality healthcare is limited.

During the 2020 calendar year, the Next Generation Missional Engagement Scholarship fund awarded six scholarships, amounting to $9,075 and benefitting 31 young people.

The Short-Term Mission team worked with mission partners to facilitate options for virtual engagement with the mission field. Virtual prayer walks were created for three mission partners (Many Hands for Haiti, Sethshabelo Family and Child Services, and the Presbyterian Church of Manaus [IPM]). A virtual partner gathering was held with the European Church Planting Partnership, Hungarian church planters from four locations, and supporting churches from the United States.

Current Goals

As we move forward, RCA Short-Term Mission is focused on continuing to support congregations in sending groups and individuals on mission trips when it is safe to do so. Our goal is to assist as many congregations and individuals as possible in planning mission trips. This will include helping groups and individuals find places to serve, providing equipping resources related to mission trip best practices, offering coaching calls for trip leaders, and awarding the Next Generation Missional Engagement Fund Scholarship. We will also work to facilitate continued connection to the mission field using virtual methods, including prayer walks, gatherings, and one-on-one church connections with mission partners.

In 2021, we plan to release templates for planning mission trips with COVID-19 in mind (currently available on Faithward.org), short video trainings related to short-term mission basics, and continually updated best practices related to COVID-19 and short-term mission.

We plan to continue offering wrap-around support for mission trips with specific Global Mission partners and hope to increase that service when it is safe to do so. We will also recruit young adults for mission service through the Cultivate program and hope to reintroduce the program in the 2021–2022 year with increased safety measures and with partners in locations where it is possible for citizens of the U.S. and Canada to travel.

WOMEN’S TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP

Women’s Transformation and Leadership has been established as part of Transformed & Transforming to help the Reformed Church in America pursue a vision for the full inclusion of women’s gifts and influence in all areas of the church and beyond. Liz Testa leads the Women’s Transformation and Leadership team. Lorraine Parker serves as part-time administrative partner, and Lesley Mazzotta is the part-time education and facilitation specialist. A cross-sector group of RCA leaders serves as the guiding coalition, helping to champion the mission, create and lead new processes, provide critical insights, and contribute as regional facilitators, teachers, and organizers for Women’s Transformation and Leadership.

The past year has required many pivots, and Women’s Transformation and Leadership has kept pace alongside Transformed & Transforming to move from “2.0” to “3.0” in real time, continuing our guiding coalition’s commitment to a Holy Spirit–given vision to go “deep and wide.” By moving nimbly to maximize virtual connections and digital resources, we have expanded
engagement and resources among our ministry’s constituents as well as with Transformed & Transforming initiatives, Global Mission, the RCA racial/ethnic councils, ecumenical partners, and beyond. In doing so, we have multiplied and strengthened our commitment to encourage, equip, and empower women of diverse generations, geographic, racial/ethnic, and cultural contexts to experience Christ-centered transformation, develop leadership skills, and live vibrantly into their God-given gifts and callings as they, in turn, invite others to do the same (disciples who make disciples). An essential component of this endeavor is coming alongside leaders and congregations as they seek to welcome the gifts that women bring; invest in healthy, flourishing ministry partnerships between men and women; and catalyze lasting, sustainable change. By doing so, we usher in a vision of God’s reign where sisters and brothers serve together to build and strengthen the body of Christ for mission in a world that so desperately needs to know the love, hope, grace, and healing that Jesus brings.

Women’s Transformation and Leadership lives out this vision via five interwoven pathways: innovation, connecting, equipping, equity, and legacy.

**Innovation**

Women’s Transformation and Leadership is an innovation incubator of new ideas for women-based initiatives as well as broader church culture shifts that help welcome women’s gifts more fully and shape change in gracious, intentional ways. We create space for our guiding coalition’s dreams and visions to be cultivated, developed, and launched. Examples in this past year include developing the Lavish Hope: Stories of Resilience and Overcoming podcast and creating interactive, transformational virtual gatherings that have 1) increased the impact of already-planned projects such as the Women of the Bible Study series, 2) sparked new foci such as spiritual direction and dismantling racism, and 3) fostered hopeful, supportive interpersonal connections among a far-reaching cross-section of diverse ministry leaders in the midst of a traumatic and isolating season.

**Connecting**

Women’s Transformation and Leadership encourages women of diverse contexts and callings through the She is Called/Ella es Llamada campaign and network and offers transformational spaces to grow through Honoring Our Stories and Rekindle in-person events and virtual gatherings. During this season of pandemic restrictions, we have increased our digital presence via Facebook groups, Instagram, a quarterly e-newsletter, and resources available on our website and Faithward, and we continue to offer our She is Called T-shirts via our “pop-up shop” in Queens, New York, that Lorraine Parker oversees. We collaborate with RCA seminaries, the Commission for Women and other commissions, other Transformed & Transforming initiatives, and GSC staff to empower women in ministry and intentionally include their gifts, influence, and leadership in our assemblies.

**Equipping**

Women’s Transformation and Leadership supports established and emerging women leaders through the She Is Called leadership collaboratives and Purposeful Living process (currently in English and Spanish). We support motivated leaders via the She Is Called Women’s network with coaching, sponsorship, and spiritual direction opportunities as women seek God’s calling on their lives and become well-equipped, confident, Jesus-centered leaders who, in turn, do the same for others. We create global mission experiences that are women-centered, offering North
American women and men the unique opportunity to meet our global mission partners in their contexts, learn about global women’s history and contemporary issues, and develop a Christian response as leaders and ministry influencers.

**Equity**

Women’s Transformation and Leadership ensures all women have barrier-free access to RCA resources and opportunities. We equip congregations and other contexts to welcome the gifts women bring and to nurture thriving ministry partnerships between men and women through the Building God’s Church Together ministry. We created lasting change via the We Are Speaking call to action statement, and we continue to provide tuition assistance to part- and full-time, in-residence and distance learner female seminarians through the historic Beth E. Marcus Scholarship Fund. We are expanding into equity-based hospitality and dismantling racism initiatives, drawing the circle wider to include generations, disabilities, and race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds.

**Legacy**

Women’s Transformation and Leadership celebrates the rich history of women in the RCA, past and present, laity and clergy, from all different backgrounds and contexts, through the “RCA Women: A Legacy of Leadership” booklet (updated with 33 new women in spring 2021), women’s Sankofa journeys, Women’s Stories Day (in partnership with NBTS’s Reformed Church Center), the She Is Called/Ella es Llamada campaign, and the newly forming Women’s Oral History Exhibit on the RCA website.

**Progress**

**Virtual Responses to Pandemic**

When COVID-19 began to affect North America in March 2020, Women’s Transformation and Leadership quickly realized the need to pivot and create opportunities that continued to connect, encourage, and equip RCA leaders for this challenging and uncertain time. We created weekly virtual gatherings that helped leaders find innovative ways to offer ministry support to their congregants despite masks and social distancing, in the midst of pandemic restrictions and shut downs. These gatherings created sacred space for people to reflect on the personal and community challenges they faced, finding solidarity, prayer partners, and creative ideas for concerns ranging from online worship planning to rising domestic violence rates. From these initial sessions, longer-term thematic series were created. Overall, from March to December 2020, 72 virtual gatherings with a total of 1,510 participants were held.

The themed series include spiritual direction, dismantling racism, and the Women of the Bible study series. To attend to pressing mental and spiritual health needs, Lesley Mazzotta has offered spiritual direction sessions, one-on-one and in small groups. One group of 12 women leaders continues to meet weekly. When the racial tension in the U.S. reached a fevered level in late May 2020, Women’s Transformation and Leadership offered virtual gatherings for storytelling and reflection, which has grown into a multi-faceted ministry, including the dismantling racism prayer discipleship track and an equipping track that connects with the racial justice and advocacy arm of Local Missional Engagement. Women’s Transformation and Leadership took the She is Called Bible study series, volume 1, that was slated for print release in conjunction with Women in Ministry Sunday on May 17, 2020, and pivoted to offer it as a free
digital PDF for the whole church to access; as of February 23, 2021, it had been downloaded more than 600 times and received an inspiring nearly 55,000 page views on Faithward.org. This study guide proved to be especially inspiring to women seeking to dig deeper into God’s call on their lives in this season, using nine biblical stories to catalyze their transformation and growth as leaders. An average of 65 people gathered weekly from July to September for a virtual “master class” hosted by Women’s Transformation and Leadership and taught by a different author each week, including Tim Breen, Rob Dixon, Denise Kingdom Grier, Dustyn Keepers, Micah McCready, Pam Otten, Denise Posie, Alisha Riepma, and Terry Ann Smith. A bi-weekly “reunion” series continued from October to December with an average of 20 women per session, co-led by Pam Otten and Liz Testa. As the pandemic continues to restrict travel and large group events, all of these virtual offerings will continue to go “deep and wide” throughout 2021.

Connection Events

Women’s Transformation and Leadership was actively traveling in early 2020, prior to the March shutdown, with visits to Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, for workshops with students, faculty, and staff and chapel worship; Mission 2020 in Orlando, Florida, meeting with the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries’ executive committee women and serving as She is Called ambassadors; NYC-area events including meetings with our South Africa mission sisters, Denise Kingdom Grier and Keabetsoe Sekoboto; and our final in-person event before the shutdown, “Rekindle NYC: Sisterships in Mission,” highlighting four women living into their missional callings (Lesley Mazzotta, Deepika Srivastava, JJ TenClay, and Caroline Verkaik) and drawing attendees from 19 different churches across the tri-state area.

Spring 2020 Virtual Events

Three events scheduled for spring 2020 moved successfully to virtual formats:

- The Transformed & Transforming event with the Classis of California, focusing on small churches, local mission, and women and men in ministry. This led to The Rock Church in Los Angeles doing a summer series around Building God’s Church Together.
- The fourth annual Women’s Stories Day, “The Courage to be Honest,” with Lynn Japinga, Lynn Min, Pamela Pater Ennis, and Irma Williams, co-hosted with the Reformed Church Center of New Brunswick Theological Seminary.
- Women in Ministry Sunday (May 17, 2020) was reimagined for a virtual audience, complete with companion resources and the Women of the Bible study series, volume 1 made available digitally. At the invitation of Sally Ann Castle, Liz Testa worshiped with Community Church of Douglaston in Queens, New York, preaching for their live virtual service.

Equipping Processes

Equipping processes continued throughout 2020 given their mostly virtual format. One major advancement in 2020 has been to move leadership collaboratives (LC) to the Faithward Learn online learning platform as of fall 2020.

The following seven She Is Called one-year leadership collaborative were completed or launched in 2020:

- Midland Reformed Church, Midland, Michigan, cohort led by Cheryl Heal
- NYC area multicultural/multiracial cohort led by Marilyn Correa and Lesley Mazzotta
- Regional Synod of Canada cohort led by Jennifer Lucking
- Central Plains Classis cohort led by Andrea Godwin
- Chicagoland cohort led by Jewel Willis Thomas
- West Michigan cohort led by Marcia Bosma
- Pacific Northwest cohort led by Rebecca Wulkan

Sixty-seven motivated leaders have been impacted by these small group cohorts.

In addition to the one-year LC, a new ten-week learning journey was developed and piloted. Purposeful Living: She is Called edition (Vida con Propósito; Edición Ella es Llamada), co-created by Karla Camacho and Asbei Sonia Loera Castro, is unique in that it is the first such process written first in Spanish and now being translated into English to be our first Spanish-native bilingual curriculum.

An exciting need and opportunity arose in 2020. As women felt God calling them to more education and equipping for ministry through the Women of the Bible study series and the NYC women’s leadership collaborative, Women’s Transformation and Leadership partnered with New Brunswick Theological Seminary to create the She is Called cohort of NBTS’s fully online two-year certificate program in Church Leadership and Theological Studies. Ten RCA women from New York and New Jersey are journeying together through this eight-course program as they discern becoming preaching elders, master’s degree candidates, and better prepared ministry leaders, with expected graduation dates of May or December 2022.

**Current Goals**

*Connection Events*

As pandemic concerns continue to curtail in-person events, Women’s Transformation and Leadership will continue our current virtual gatherings as long as needed. We are also developing “signature events” and exploring safely distanced transformational leadership events. This includes a virtual Rekindle event in spring 2021 and potential small group retreats in New York/New Jersey in fall 2021, and a women’s Sankofa journey through New York state (most likely for spring 2022).

*Purposeful Living Cohorts*

Purposeful Living Cohorts are planned in the United States’ southwest region for spring 2021 (Spanish or bilingual for young girls, multi-age women leaders, and one with a focus on trauma healing), and other cohorts will potentially form in New York City and other regions as requested.

*Resources*

The *She Is Called Women of the Bible* study series, a Building God’s Church Together (BGCT) resource, has been created as a companion to the four-part BGCT study that helps congregations embrace women and men serving together in healthier, vibrant ways. Editors April Fiet and Travis West and artist Crystal Wright (an RCA member and watercolor artist) are the main team for this three-volume series that takes biblical women’s stories deeper, creating a study that is meant for everyone to engage in. It meets an articulated need in the church for fresh, accessible studies for all, coming from a Reformed perspective. Women’s Transformation
and Leadership is praying for the same enthusiastic response to the virtual resources with the release of the English and Spanish print editions of volume 1 in spring 2021, with chapters contributed by a diverse group of RCA and ecumenical pastors and scholars. In addition, an online process on Faithward Learn will become available for self-guided or cohort engagement with synchronous and asynchronous learning options. Fundraising for volumes 2 and 3 began in late 2020, and we have raised $10,705 to date, moving toward our goal of $15,000. Work on volume 2 is in process, with most chapters submitted and the editing process under way. The anticipated release of Volume 2 is summer to early fall 2021. New She Is Called “& Me” T-shirts will be designed for the new list of biblical women and continue to help raise funds for women’s leadership development.

The Building God’s Church Together four-part study is also being prepared for the Faithward Learn platform by Lesley Mazzotta in consultation with Rob Dixon and April Fiet, with contributions from Pete Watts and Israel Camacho, and will be available by late spring 2021 for synchronous and asynchronous learning.

*Lavish Hope, Stories of Resilience and Overcoming* podcast, hosted by Liz Testa, has launched its first series of eight episodes, which are being highlighted weekly through the end of March 2021. This podcast is part of our focus on going “deep and wide”—deeper with our RCA constituents and wider with a broader audience of churched and unchurched people, many of them in the 18–35 age bracket. Season one’s guests include a diverse group of women and men serving in an inspiring variety of contexts: Jael Serrano Altamirano, Rachel Lohman, Niccie Kliegl, Micah McCready, Donna Owusu-Ansah, Vanessa Pollock, Mario Sprouse, and Lauralyn Vasquez. Each one offers tips and tools to help listeners embrace lavish hope and build resiliency as Christ-followers in today’s world. The production and marketing teams have done a phenomenal job of creating a top-quality finished product.

*She Is Called Global Mission Experiences*

Planning for upcoming She Is Called global learning experience trips continues, with much of the leg work completed to put details in place as soon as COVID guidelines allow global travel. Tentative dates are set for November 2021 for another She Is Called Holy Land trip for men and women leaders (partnering with Sally and Josh Vis), as well as ongoing conversations with our missionary colleagues Lia and Thiago Dantas in Brazil to offer a global experience with a women-centered, medical mission focus in 2022.

*Intentional Focus on the Multicultural Future Freed from Racism*

The development of an equity-based hospitality framework for Transformed & Transforming that embeds cultural agility around gender, race/ethnicity, generations, and disabilities into our initiative areas and leadership, with ripple effect into other ministries, continues to be led by Liz Testa. The initial team, comprised of Terry DeYoung, Earl James, and Stephanie Soderstrom, has expanded to include Anna Radcliffe, Ruth Langkamp, Grace Ruiter, Eduardo Rodriguez, Lorraine Parker, and Lesley Mazzotta as we have moved from the design to the implementation phase.

In addition to developing key definitions, a set of guiding values, and resources focusing on biblical hospitality, we contracted with Denise Kingdom Grier to facilitate *From Outreach to Embracing: a Model for Equity-Based Hospitality*, adapted for us and based on her doctoral work. Seventy-eight registrants from across the RCA and CRC are going through this ten-week
learning journey from mid-January to mid-March, engaging Denise’s four-movement process grounded in the Gospel of John and centered around four Transformed & Transforming-based hospitality foci of disabilities, generations, race/cultural backgrounds, and women, with three additional themes of class, laity/clergy, and inside/outside the church interwoven throughout. Off-ramps are being developed from this journey to offer participants concrete next steps to deepen their learning and bring resources back to their home contexts.

As part of her work with equity-based hospitality, Liz serves the GSC staff as a resource and guide to help ensure cultural agility and embracing of diversity is lived into. As such, she sits on the communication campaign teams alongside Christina Tazelaar and other colleagues as they create and shape content for the various themes, with goals and benchmarks pertaining to each one.

In response to the pressing racial and ethnic justice concerns that emerged between April and June 2020, there has been a Spirit-led focus on addressing racism, which was planted in 2020 and is beginning to take root and grow in 2021. In collaboration with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE), the Commission on Christian Action (CCA), Maple Avenue Ministries, and New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), Women’s Transformation and Leadership helped catalyze responses calling the church to stand in solidarity with Asian Americans suffering bias attacks and to create intentional processes for dismantling racism, particularly as it pertains to Black people in the United States. Women’s Transformation and Leadership guiding coalition member Denise Kingdom Grier introduced us to the 1 Cor. 13 Project (www.1cor13project.com) as a way to engage this challenging work.

From that has emerged the dismantling racism prayer gatherings, led by Nancy Boote, Micheal Edwards, and a diverse group of leaders. Plans are also in place for various learning processes in 2021, including a cohort of white ministry leaders to go through the one-year Beyond Words: Count Us in Movement with Leah Ennis as the group’s coordinator and support from Pete Watts, who introduced this opportunity to our team. Liz Testa and Eduardo Rodriguez are creating a bridge between the discipleship-based dismantling work toward more action-focused missional engagement next steps.

Another key connection in 2020 has been the bridge building that has occurred with Lorraine Parker’s new responsibilities as administrative assistant to the African American Black Council (AABC), opening up a clear pathway for exciting collaboration opportunities and alignment of priorities.

**VIBRANT CONGREGATIONS**

*Note: Vibrant Congregations is a joint ministry of the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA).*

Vibrant Congregations exists to help congregations take fresh steps in ministry and mission. We invite congregations into a hopeful and welcoming space where they can discern a pathway to God’s given future. In this space, they find hope rooted in God’s will for their congregation. We also provide behind-the-scenes research and work to make this possible.

Central to this work is taking a congregation through a discernment process to discover their best partner to journey with them to their God-given, hope-filled future.
Vibrant Congregations typically connects churches to outside organizations (e.g., Churches Learning Change [Ridder], Center for Church Renewal, and Vibrancy Pathway) to pursue their appropriate pathway.

Behind the scenes, Vibrant Congregations works to connect partner organizations to each other to learn, to grow, and to strengthen our work with congregations. It also sets tables of conversation around critical issues such as leadership for renewal. At these tables, Vibrant Congregations draws on people from the RCA, CRC, and others to learn how better to empower churches and their leaders for their fresh steps.

Progress

- The expected launch of Vibrant Congregations (Vibrant) to the RCA and CRCNA congregations at the two denominations’ synods did not occur due to COVID-19. A quiet launch happened in September and October 2020. We are presently working with both RCA and CRCNA congregations.
- A gathering of a dozen renewal organizations in June 2020 was held via Zoom to encourage and learn from each other.
- A new effort, Church Now Conversations, invites leading evangelical thinkers to speak to church leaders about what’s happening in the church and society in North America. In 2020, we hosted people such as Rich Mouw, Kara Powell, and Ed Stetzer. Zoom recordings and notes of all Church Now Conversations can be found on Vibrant’s website.
- Vibrant launched its website in 2020. The website offers multiple resources, including a 90-second survey to connect with Vibrant and the offer of a free U.S. demographic tool, MissionInsite.
- To respond to COVID-19, Vibrant created several resources for churches. These resources include a 30-60-90 day planning tool for congregations. Vibrant also led an RCA/CRCNA team that worked on responding to COVID-19. This team sought to keep an eye out for trends during this moment and pass on what it learned to both denominations.
- Vibrant has spent time this past year listening to the voices and concerns of ethnic communities. We are explicitly listening for ways Vibrant can serve ethnic communities in fresh steps in ministry and mission.

Current Goals

- Vibrant began a new cross-denominational team in 2021. The team has two people from the RCA and two from the CRCNA. The team works to share resources and ideas across the denominations.
- Vibrant is planning a “discernment center” for August 2021. The discernment center seeks to connect church leaders with their best renewal partner. One of the exciting pieces of the discernment center design is that it looks at the pastor or leader of a congregation and seeks to understand his or her leadership style and which renewal effort best fits that style.
- August will also see the first Church Now Cafe. The cafe will gather 50–100 leaders in an outdoor venue (COVID-19 permitting). These leaders will hear ministry practitioners describe what they learned this past year, and then participants will have conversations about what they’ve heard.
2021 will be a season of continuing to learn how Vibrant can better serve ethnic communities. Our goal is to work with one ethnic community in depth this year.

Follow us on Facebook (@Vibrant Congregations), or check out our website at vibrantcongregations.org.