

Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

The commission shall develop and advocate for strategies for people of all ages to be fully included in the mission and life of the RCA. –Book of Church Order (BCO), Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b(1) (2021 edition, p. 121)

Education and Discipleship During a Pandemic (reproduced from 2020–2021 report)

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 the parishioners and communities. 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 aid 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 (RCL). God was able to use our difficult situations to broaden our understanding of ministry, outreach, and inclusion in profound ways.

Now that we are beginning to see more of a return to what life looked like before the pandemic, the tendency can 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?

The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families. –BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b(2) (2021 edition, p. 121)

Consistorial Report Forms

In order to more effectively report on our ministries of education and discipleship, the commission has previously gained approval for contact information for a point person at each church in these areas to be requested on the annual Consistorial Report Form. Unfortunately, some of our attempts to use this data have called to our attention that many churches are still not providing this information. Our desire is not to misuse this information or to insist on

promoting some agenda. Rather, our hope is to support our churches and these individuals. This is an easy, quick thing that you can do to help the commission be able to connect with, encourage, and support your staff or volunteers who are helping with education and discipleship. We urge all churches to pay closer attention to this in the coming year, that we all might work better together.

Adult Education Opportunities

The commission is encouraged by the work being done throughout the denomination to support lay leaders in their studies around theology, church leadership, and governance. Preaching elder and commissioned pastor teaching programs, along with workshops for elders and deacons, are crucial to keeping our churches equipped with lay leadership well-versed in these areas and able to support churches in a variety of capacities and settings.

The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship with RCA congregations. –BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b(3) (2021 edition, p. 121)

Next Generation Discipleship

The commission has been working this year to connect with staff member Anna Radcliffe to work cooperatively to promote next generation discipleship. Many individuals may be aware of the regular newsletters that are disseminated by Anna Radcliffe and Ruth Langkamp advocating for resources like the Growing Young cohorts and Generation Spark programs that challenge our churches to look at how we are or are not prioritizing next generation engagement in our congregations.

Of particular interest to the commission are RCA camp ministries. We have been trying to gauge the status of our camp ministries, specifically during the time of this pandemic but overall as well. We know that these ministries have been significant formation for campers and counselors and have been foundational for future engagement in congregations and even leadership. The commission is looking into ways we can better connect churches with the RCA's camp ministries going forward.

The commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church's teaching ministry. –BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b(4) (2021 edition, p. 121)

Children's Ministries Training and Safety Resources

The commission has been in communication with staff member Shelley Henning in the area of KidMin to look more closely at how we might collaborate to provide support to our local congregations. Shelley has expertise in creating children's messages; the commission plans to collaborate with her to provide models and training for the construction of sermons packaged appropriately and accessibly for children of all ages.

The commission would also like to strongly recommend the implementation of a high-quality screening process and child abuse prevention training in all congregations. Many individual churches have done this, and others have not. The commission is working to find accessible training that can be available for all congregations.

APCE and CERCA

In February 2022, many CERCA (Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America) members were able to gather in Chicago as part of the APCE (formerly Association of Presbyterian Church Educators, now Association of Partners in Christian Education) Annual Event. Though the event was delayed for a year and was still impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, CERCA celebrated 40+1 years in existence while APCE celebrated 50+1 years. The annual event was co-chaired by Rev. Kirsty DePree with the theme of “Widening the Circle of Faith,” featuring Rev. Jacqui Lewis as one of the plenary speakers.

Approximately 40 CERCA members joined in person, with more online, to remember and celebrate the past, present, and future of discipleship and education in the RCA through a meaningful workshop and celebration dinner. Scholarships were made available especially for this celebration, but every year specific monies are set aside to assist people in attending this educational event. Next year’s event will be held January 25–28, 2023, in Birmingham, Alabama.

Annual CERCA Scholarship Funds

Pursuant to the action of General Synod 2019 (DE 19-2, *MGS 2019*, p. 216), 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 who have not previously received monies from this fund.

To apply, complete the application and send it with a letter of support from your consistory (governing board) to Kris Woltjer (kwoltjer@rca.org). Applications can be requested from the commission.

Caring and Concern for Educators (reproduced from 2020–2021 report)

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, and youth workers 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,⁴ 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

⁴ 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.⁵

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 the commission would 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 that 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 opportunities for extra rest and renewal. This could be an extra week of vacation or the ability to attend another conference. Find ways to let them know that their personal health, physically, mentally, and spiritually, is just as important as everything that they do for your church.

⁵ 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>.