

Report of the General Synod Council on the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry

Encompassing the strategic priorities of Transformed & Transforming, Church Multiplication, and a Multicultural and Multiracial Future Freed from Racism

Over the last year, the general secretary presented a compelling vision to unite Transformed & Transforming with Church Multiplication; the goal was to create a more cohesive approach to supporting congregations and helping them flourish. This vision has come to fruition as the Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry, announced at General Synod 2022.

The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry is a significant step forward in the mission of making disciples of all nations, as it provides a platform for collaboration and cooperation among various groups within the church. Through this center, churches work together to create an environment of growing disciples, learning from one another, sharing resources, and supporting each other in their common goal of making disciples and building a discipling culture.

The center's unified staff team is composed of experts who are equipped to provide the resources to assist every classis in its work of supporting congregations. The team walks alongside each classis, taking a personalized approach tailored to the unique needs of each context. This approach recognizes that every congregation is at a different stage in its journey toward growth and flourishing, and thus requires a unique set of resources and support. In the report that follows, you will read about ministries that have committed to this collaboration, seeking to transform the culture of congregations in an effort to prioritize discipleship-making for kingdom impact within their communities.

Church Renewal

This year, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) partnered with Church Renewal Lab, Multiplication Network's "Stronger Churches" curriculum, and others to help equip regions, classes, and congregations, enabling congregations to thrive. We have also partnered with congregations in New York and California that were seeking out new pastors and seeking new strategies for strength. Through coaching, we have worked with congregations like Christ Community Church in Pompano Beach, Florida. This 45-year-old congregation is seeking to better reach its community with a fresh vision and new ideas for the future. We are committed to helping classes in their work to help congregations thrive.

Women's Transformation and Leadership (WTL)

This year marks the fifth decade of women in ordained ministry as elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and sacrament in the RCA. Throughout the year, we are all invited to witness the powerful movement of God's calling through women's stories being shared in written and video form, at virtual and in-person events, and through

the resources included in this report. General Synod events include a special evening plenary with dessert reception and a celebration dinner. A special thanks to our planning team partners: General Synod president Rev. Dwayne Jackson, General Synod vice president Rev. Judy Nelson, Commission for Women moderator Rev. Deb Rensink, and Commission on History moderator Rev. Dr. Steven Pierce, along with Rev. Kristin Brouwer, Rev. Flo Dekker, Rev. Katlyn DeVries, Rev. April Fiet, Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier, Rev. Cedric Nelms, elder Barbara Victoria Pimentel, Ms. Grace Ruiter, and Rev. Liz Testa.

The She Is Called Women of the Bible study series, created by the WTL guiding coalition to help raise biblical literacy around women's stories in Scripture across the whole church, released its third volume in late 2022. All three volumes are being used in print and digital format across the RCA and beyond, in English and in Spanish. Dozens of congregations have used these resources in small groups, accumulating over 924,000 users and 1.3 million page views on Faithward since 2020. Since the digital chapters have been available in Spanish, this readership has continued to climb, garnering close to 60,000 views since their debut in late September 2022. Leaders are reporting how Scripture is being illuminated in fresh ways around women's leadership and empowering women to embrace their own callings. The #sheiscalled biblical women "& Me" T-shirts promote biblical literacy and also help women feel a sense of ownership and belonging. At the recent APCE (Association of Partners in Christian Education) conference, partner members from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Moravian Church were inspired and impressed to learn that this is part of the RCA's commitment to the full inclusion of women's gifts, influence, and leadership in the church and beyond.

The She Is Called seminarian cohort at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) continues to grow with its certificate program and master's pathway as Women's Transformation and Leadership continues to support women from all backgrounds, ages, and stages of life as they courageously step into God's call on their lives and get further equipped for ministry. This has been a true partnership with our historic seminary, classes, regions, and, of course, the women themselves. Elder Devonna Cousins, for example, was one of the first two She Is Called cohort certificate program graduates in May 2022. She plans to pursue a master's degree as soon as she completes her chaplain residency program, and she continues to grow in leadership as vice president of her consistory in Brooklyn, New York, and of Brooklyn Classis.

The We Are Speaking statement marked five years in January 2023. An open invitation was issued for all RCA members to commit or recommit to the important work of ending harassment, abuse, and sexual violence against women and girls. Updated resources include a seven-day devotional written by Rev. April Fiet and Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier.

Spanish resources for Building God's Church Together (Construyendo Juntos) and She is Called (Ella es Llamada) women's leadership development workshop (Vida con

Proposito taller de mujeres) and Bible studies were debuted at the Hispanic Council meeting in Chicago, Illinois, in August 2022. WTL guiding coalition members and pastors Israel and Karla Camacho, along with pastor Sonia Asbei Loera Casto and husband Alberto, presented these resources to the gathered body of the council. They shared the recent pilot process done with their leadership and the powerful breakthroughs that had been experienced for both men and women. This team is now moving to the second generation of small groups at their church of both Construyendo Juntos and Vida con Proposito taller de mujeres.

WTL has partnered with women leaders, classes, regions, and seminaries to create spaces for networking, equipping, and mutual encouragement. Virtual small groups on Monday and Thursday evenings provide space for women to study Scripture, champion each other in their gifts and callings, and pray together. The seventh annual Women's Stories Day, a collaboration with the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, honored women's callings as elders and deacons. In-person gatherings were co-hosted with local leaders at Faith Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan; First Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan; Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; Oakland City Church in Oakland, California; and Warwick Conference Center in Warwick, New York.

A story of hope from Building God's Church Together (BGCT) comes from the Classis of Minnesota. Elder Patti Van Dorp realized that her church was being torn apart by their new pastor. His challenges with women in office emerged, causing Patti to call on WTL for support and encouragement. The BGCT four-part study was offered as a resource, and she and other consistory members decided to engage their members in a virtual small group to learn and grow together. Dr. Rob Dixon, part of WTL's guiding coalition and an expert in this field, joined them for the session on the "complicated" scriptural passages about women in church leadership. Elder Patti credits the BGCT process and the support she received from WTL with helping their congregational decision to stay in the RCA. What's more, Patti has recently been taken under care of classis to become a commissioned pastor and plans to start work on her MDiv at NBTS following completion of NBTS's two-year certificate program this May.

In early 2023, the *Lavish Hope* podcast wrapped up four seasons of diverse guests (women and men) from different cultures and callings. Hundreds of listeners from the RCA and beyond have been inspired by powerful testimonies, wisdom, and practical inspiration for navigating today's complex world. Season four includes stories of being resilient and obedient to God's call, from writing a much-needed book on faith and grief, to following the Spirit's leading to come to America from Indonesia to become a pastor in New Jersey, to becoming a certified spiritual director and founding a girls-empowerment non-profit. These stories of resilience and overcoming are available through Faithward, Apple, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, and share God's hope in fresh, relevant ways to women and men of different generations, cultures, and geographic locations.

Disability Concerns

In April, we celebrated the decades-long work of Terry DeYoung, who faithfully led the work of RCA Disability Concerns in partnership with Christian Reformed Church in North America Disability Concerns. Terry retired in early April after 14 years of service in this role. Previously in Terry's career, he served as the managing editor for the *Church Herald* and associate pastor of Central Park Reformed Church. In his role for Disability Concerns, Terry has been a strong champion, promoting awareness of ableism and offering support for those who have been marginalized by an ableist society. He gave a voice to the voiceless and helped advocate for the full inclusion of those with all forms of abilities.

From August 11-12, 2022, RCA-CRC Disability Concerns held a training event, Let's End #AbleismAtChurch. The event was open to anyone who wanted to learn more about ableism and consider ways to reduce the impact of ableism in churches. This virtual event modeled accessibility in a variety of ways, and three of the four speakers were people with disabilities. This event attracted 170 participants over two days, including a dozen General Synod Council staff members.

This event served as the kickoff to Disability Concerns' 2022-2023 emphasis on reducing the impact of ableism in RCA churches. The goal of the emphasis is to initiate a variety of conversations that educate and train church leaders to identify ableist practices in RCA and CRC churches and systems, and provide resources to support efforts in the RCA and CRC to dismantle and replace these with equity-based practices that lead to full inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities. This addresses a key focus of the RCA's Race Relations and Advocacy team (which encompasses Disability Concerns, Women's Transformation and Leadership, and Race Relations) to help the RCA become a denomination freed from racism, sexism, and ableism.

The RCA-CRC Disability Concerns Book of the Year for 2023 is *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* by Amy Kenny. Thanks to a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Disability Concerns is making up to ten free copies available to any church or group that makes a commitment to read and discuss the book (<https://network.crcna.org/topic/justice-inclusion/disability-concerns/advocacy/disability-concerns-book-year-my-body-not>). Disability Concerns staff hosted an online book club in January 2023 that included about 20 regular participants over three weeks and concluded with a live Q&A session with Amy Kenny that drew about 50 participants.

As of late February 2023, 34 groups were reading the book, and 225 print copies had been mailed, in addition to 18 e-books and 17 audio books.

RCA-CRC Disability Concerns convened an online event called "Get in the Loop" on February 6 that helped churches (including audio/visual technicians) learn more about the benefits of hearing loop technology for those who use hearing aids and cochlear implants. Two experts, Dr. Juliette Sterkens and Dr. David Myers, explained how churches can support people living with hearing loss through hearing loop

technology. Following 45 minutes of presentation, a lively Q&A was cut short after 20 minutes and has continued offline with Sterkens, a knowledgeable, articulate, and seasoned audiologist who retired from her audiology practice in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, after 40 years to begin her “encore career” as the professional hearing loop advisor for the Hearing Loss Association of America. The video recording of this practical and informative session has been archived and can be shared with churches and individuals interested in learning more about this technology that is widely preferred for its clarity and ease by those with hearing loss who have experienced the technology first hand.

Next Generation Engagement

Next Generation Engagement is committed to helping congregations create intergenerational relationships. Through awareness, equipping, and unleashing resources, the team offers partnership and collaboration to bridge the barriers between generations and promote healthy, thriving relationships.

To promote awareness of generational barriers that exist within the church, Next Generation Engagement distributed an electronic newsletter to over 600 readers. Often the resources promoted by this newsletter sought to equip readers for the current realities or shifting realities for young people as they seek to navigate faith and leadership. This newsletter was ended in March 2023 in an attempt to streamline other avenues of communication, such as the News and Resources and Faithward newsletters.

The Next Generation Engagement team has also partnered with Faithward to continue creating awareness and equipping resources that are geared toward all generations and their interests. Our team edited our original Thanksgiving Day toolkit to be more inclusive for Canadian churches and Indigenous People’s Day. We also partnered to create a Deconstruction Toolkit to promote awareness of what young people continue to endure as they discern their faith in an ever-changing world. The Next Gen team also partnered with a collaborative group of young leaders focused on writing about particular areas of interest like creation care, racism, discipleship, and leadership.

The Next Generation Engagement team, in partnership with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, has been working on a mentoring program called Generation Spark that is designed to promote relationships across generations. Generation Spark has thus far served more than 50 congregations during its five years of existence. The team hosted a collaborative learning event in Minneapolis, Minnesota, composed of congregational leaders, classis leaders, and emerging adults all committed to further including young people into leadership in all levels of our two partner denominations. In addition to promoting learning about mentoring, Generation Spark also helps congregations support younger leaders to step into ministerial leadership. Out of this learning event, the Generation Spark team formalized an emerging leader advisory group that serves to inform denominational decisions as well as program decisions for Generation Spark.

We also celebrate the many years of work by congregations that are committed to elevating all generations of leadership. Many of the stories we hear come from congregational participation in the Growing Young Cohort, a partnership that was established with Fuller Youth Institute. One example is Jeff Watson's story. As of January 1, 2023, Jeff is officially the senior leader of First Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan. This story began four years ago when the congregation hoped to start addressing intergenerational ministry more effectively. The senior pastor at the time, Bud Pratt, wanted to leave a legacy that was committed to helping more young people stay connected to their faith throughout their lifetime. First Reformed participated in the Growing Young Cohort and devised a strategy that included leadership development of key young leaders like Jeff. Together they developed a transition plan for Bud to step into retirement while naming Jeff as the next senior leader. Congregations like First Reformed are experiencing deeper engagement and leadership of young people, greater attendance of younger leaders, and, most importantly, enriched relationships that have offered all generations a greater spiritual walk.

This past year has also resulted in greater partnership with the Tenx10 Collaboration, a discipleship movement that is geared toward making faith matter more to young people. This movement partners with more than 20 denominations and more than 40 church and parachurch organizations and is committed to offer resourcing for every ministry context. The Next Generation team has presented Tenx10 to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education, and we've continued to introduce youth ministry leaders around the RCA to the Tenx10 resources. The team also invited the Tenx10 team to present at the joint meeting of the racial and ethnic council executive teams in January 2023 to promote awareness of the importance of faith formation to youth and emerging leaders and also present a possible tool as a resource for our denomination.

The Next Gen team pays special attention to equipping ministry leaders working with youth and young adults. The team sent out a survey to all RCA congregations recorded to be using the Children and Worship program in order to better understand how to support the ministry and the faith formation of children. In partnership with staff liaison Carol Jones, the Next Gen team has continued to wonder how to best support our congregations and trainers that use Children and Worship. Shelley Henning, who partners with the Next Gen team, launched an online course for children's ministry leaders called Foundations; 12 congregations participated in this course and learned how to holistically engage and form the children entrusted to their care. To better support youth ministry leaders, the RCA is contracting with a youth ministry leader with more than 30 years of experience. He is serving as a youth ministry coach to help support and coach new youth ministry leaders.

Church Multiplication

In October 2022, we celebrated the retirement of Randy Weener, who served in Church Multiplication for seven years, most recently as director of Church Multiplication. Randy planted Spring Valley Church in Allendale, Michigan, served as a

youth pastor, and continues to prioritize coaching and leadership development of church planters.

This year, the Church Multiplication team developed and launched a new streamlined, online form in order to better assist RCA classis leaders as they develop new congregations. New congregations are emerging all over North America. In Sioux Center, Iowa, which saw many formerly RCA congregations leave the denomination in the past few years, Martha Draayer and Jason Lief, who both teach at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, have planted a new congregation that reaches both Spanish- and English-speaking people. A new congregation in New Hampshire led by Pastor Jelty Ochotan already has over one hundred adults and kids in attendance.

Church Multiplication has also launched a new coaching certification program in collaboration with Fuller Seminary that is being co-lead by Randy Weener. Leaders interested in coaching development are working in cohorts with Randy and leaders from Fuller who have ICF certification (International Coach Federation).

Church Multiplication also launched a beta program in three regions to help simple, fresh expressions of churches emerge. This program allows local leadership to curate grants that assist leaders to launch simpler forms of congregations (dinner churches or house churches, for example). This program aims to spur on leaders, pastors, and congregations that are feeling called to create new expressions of the church.

Race Equity and Justice

The Dismantling Racism Prayer Movement is in its third year. It emerged at the end of the summer of 2020, as the RCA bravely engaged in conversations around racial injustice and systemic oppression. This prayer movement is rooted in Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier's 1 Cor. 13 Project and seeks to pray into dismantling the sin of racism. This is a discipleship based, transformational process moving people to godly repentance and action. A keystone of this year's prayer gatherings is praying into white allyship and the RCA's new antiracism policy adopted at General Synod 2022. Already congregations, classes, and regional synods are moving to adopt, resource, and invest in this policy. The prayer team includes co-chairs Rev. Nancy Boote and Rev. Dr. Micheal Edwards, with elder Cynthia Peters, Rev. Dr. Joanne Van Sant, Pastor Jeremy Simpson, Rev. Liz Testa, elder Gerri Yoshida, and Rev. Dr. Gordon Wiersma. They come alongside a diverse group of RCA leaders and ecumenical friends who meet bi-monthly to learn, grow, share stories, and pray together.

The Race Relations and Advocacy team continues to gather with local churches to foster conversations and learning that eliminate barriers to belonging. Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, began a process of building a welcoming presence and learning ways to foster diverse worship experiences in the fall of 2022. Thus began a six-month journey of coaching that culminated in a four-week learning intensive of renewal and discovery led by Pastor Jeremy Simpson, Rev. Terry DeYoung, Rev. Anna Radcliffe, and Rev. Liz Testa. The focus was intergenerational ministry that is diverse, egalitarian, and embracing.

We are launching a diverse worship training that focuses on Revelation 7:9 and a global worship perspective; the training will provide support and resources. We recognize God's heart for diversity in the church, and we are excited to see that continuing to grow throughout the denomination.

In January 2023, the executive committees of the GSC's racial and ethnic councils met together in Orlando, Florida. This meeting was fruitful and significant as they decided to hold a full joint council meeting once every three years rather than every five years because of the need for more connection and partnership between the individual councils. It was a powerful time of racial reconciliation. The RCA's next Sankofa journey, in response to RE 22-2 (*Minutes of General Synod 2022*, p. 237) will be hosted in the fall of 2023 in partnership with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity. We remain committed to engaging the work of building a church freer of racism, ableism, and sexism.

As part of a multi-year focus on equity-based hospitality, a nine-session study has been created to help equip churches to "draw the circle wide" and welcome people in from the margins. This study is customizable for different contexts and offers scriptural, theological, and practical ideas for creating a culture of welcome and belonging, particularly around people with disabilities, the next generation, people with racial and ethnic diversity, and women. The study was written by Pastor Lauralyn Vasquez, with guidance and collaboration from Rev. Terry De Young, Ms. Ruth Langkamp, Rev. Anna Radcliffe, Ms. Grace Ruiter, Mrs. Stephanie Soderstrom, Rev. Liz Testa, and Dr. Peter Watts.