

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

The Center for Church Multiplication and Ministry in the midst of a cultural shift in the way the denomination works with regions, classes, and churches. Where once Reformed Church in America (RCA) staff were producers of programs and materials, we are now equipping and resourcing leaders in different ways. We can assist churches in identifying tools and models that are helpful for discerning ministry direction in the local context. We seek to network churches in similar circumstances that often span traditional boundaries of an assembly.

We are seeking to be in a posture of listening well to the church. This includes reading all of the Consistorial Report Forms, attending classis and regional synod meetings, talking to pastors and church leaders, and responding to inquiries. The center is seeking to walk with classes, pastors, and churches on their ministry journeys. We can assist with church multiplication, church health assessment, leadership training, expanding hospitality, multicultural dynamics, women and men serving together, engaging the next generations, and resource identification.

In most churches, health and renewal are no longer accomplished by tweaking existing activities or adding a clever program observed in another church. It calls for deep and costly change. It challenges us to move beyond “serving our members” to connecting with those who are not actively following Jesus. Here is one story of a courageous ministry that demonstrates the extent of change many churches are exploring.

The Adventure Church

The Adventure Church launched a new way of being the church in 2023 by turning its Muskegon, Michigan, building into a genuine third space for the surrounding community that is heavily resistant to churches. They opened up The Community House, a coffeehouse and social space to connect and engage people throughout the week. Aside from regular coffeehouse hours, gatherings include senior socials, Mixitup Social dry bar nights, board game nights, open mic/karaoke nights, and family date nights.

Within this ecosystem of relationships, the church is called and equipped to live on mission in these spaces by engaging and building relationships, and ultimately inviting others to discover Jesus with them in discovery groups, alternative disciple-making gatherings, or worship on Sunday. This is not a pretend coffeehouse in the narthex of the church. The church gathers at The Community House during the week for worship and community. This is a legitimate coffeehouse with locally, fresh roasted coffee, made-in-house syrups, and even cold drinks on tap. It says something when baristas from local chains come in for their coffee fix before heading to work.

Since The Community House opened in September 2023, the Adventure Church has multiplied its engagements by five times. More than 90 percent of these

engagements are with people outside the church, with meaningful daily interactions. As of January 2024, the Adventure Church has seen over 40 new people engaging in the life of the church who were unchurched or de-churched. They believe this is just the beginning of a mission and multiplication movement.

Church Ministry

The staff departments and teams formerly called Transformed & Transforming now work under the broader name called “Church Ministry” (another way of saying church revitalization). They focus on three essential areas of discipleship, leadership development, and local mission. Church ministry approaches discipleship, leadership development, and local mission as parts of a holistic system within the local church rather than viewing them as three separate and distinct areas of ministry. Just like a person’s brain, bones, and nerves function interdependently with each other, so these key components cannot be divided, categorized, or separated.

One way of equipping and resourcing churches for revitalization is through an intentional process called “**Stronger Churches**” (through a formal agreement with Multiplication Network, a global movement that “equips leaders with the tools to strengthen and multiply healthy churches”). It utilizes module-based, action-biased coaching that includes workshops, retreats, and mentoring that provides biblical instruction, practical ministry tools, and action plans that provide a strategy for moving the congregation toward greater health. The congregation evaluates its ongoing progress using a congregational feedback report.

In a similar way, **Renovations** is a congregational discernment tool designed to help congregations live into their mission and values by starting something new. This ministry, created through the generous gift of Lilly Endowment, is offered for free. It promotes online learning, coaching, and discussion processes to help further contextualize the growth and establish ongoing transformation. Over the past two years, twelve congregations from a variety of geographical regions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sizes have participated.

Another means of equipping and resourcing church revitalization is through smaller, cohort-based **learning communities** that meet every month. Each group is based on a specific affinity, such as urban churches, pastors of medium-size churches, women/BIPOC pastors, and first-time senior leaders. Starting in January 2024, eight different churches have signed up for these peer-learning coaching groups (as of March 1, 2024); conversations are pending with eighteen other churches and pastors, two classis leaders, and a regional executive about starting one of these learning communities.

A final means of equipping and resourcing churches is responding to various specific needs of individual churches such as consistory training, pastoral searches, strategic planning, leadership development, discipleship pathways, and more. Upcoming work will include webinars and specific training for smaller churches in particular.

One pastor asked the center staff about whether their congregation should spend \$5,000 for a coach (outside the RCA). Instead, center staff were able to get him connected in a learning community with other pastors where they have been discussing important and practical topics for senior pastors such as finances and budgeting, best practices for staff management, ideas for creative missional outreach, discipleship movements in the Global South, and more.

Another congregation hoping to empower its younger leaders turned to **Generation Spark**. After a few months of discussion, the congregation empowered a 23-year-old to serve as the director of the church program. This young leader has reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging, she is actively engaging more young leaders, and she has stepped into a level of leadership made possible by her congregation's willingness to reflect and live into their commitment to raising up the next generation.

All the above-mentioned resources are available free of charge for all churches that belong to the Reformed Church in America.

Church Multiplication

Church multiplication envisions three priorities with regional synods and classes. These priorities will also be our mission and vision for 2024.

Church multiplication's three crucial priorities are:

1. **Disciples who can make other disciples:** The first priority in church multiplication is to develop disciples who have a deep understanding of the gospel and are equipped to share it with others. These disciples should be trained to effectively make disciples themselves, following the model of Jesus's ministry. This involves teaching them how to grow in their relationship with God, study God's Word, and share their faith with others. In addition, it will involve investing in discipleship programs, small groups, and mentoring relationships to cultivate a culture of multiplication within the church.
2. **Church growth:** The second priority is to focus on the growth and expansion of existing churches. This includes intentional efforts to reach out to the community, invite new people to church, and provide excellent worship experiences and relevant teaching, as well as developing strategies to assimilate new believers into the church community and help them mature in their faith. Effective outreach and evangelism initiatives are essential in ensuring the growth and health of the church.
3. **Church health:** The third priority is to ensure the spiritual health and maturity of the church. This involves cultivating a strong foundation of biblical teachings, maintaining unity and healthy relationships within the church body, and fostering an atmosphere of love, grace, and accountability. The focus should be on prioritizing pastoral care, discipleship, and spiritual formation programs that help individuals grow in their relationship with God and live out their faith authentically. A healthy church will naturally multiply and reproduce disciples and churches.

These priorities are interrelated and should be pursued simultaneously. By developing disciples who can make other disciples, prioritizing church growth, and nurturing church health, we lay the foundation for effective church multiplication and kingdom impact.

Women's Transformation and Leadership

Women's transformation and leadership helps the RCA pursue the vision for the full inclusion of women's gifts, influence, and leadership in all areas of the church and beyond. This is done by encouraging, equipping, and empowering women to live into their God-given gifts and callings, and equipping faith communities to create healthy environments where men and women of diverse backgrounds can freely, fully serve together and flourish in ministry. As women's transformation and leadership marks ten years of ministry, we continue to celebrate five decades of women in ordained ministry, all women's gifts and callings, the many ways men and women are flourishing together in ministry today, and the many collaborative relationships the RCA enjoys with like-minded organizations. It was an honor that New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) presented the "Women of the RCA" with a Presidential Service Award "for their years of service and commitment to the church and the wider community" in 2023. Women's transformation and leadership delights in a close partnership with the Commission for Women and the Commission on History.

Over the past year, the ministry of women's transformation and leadership has encouraged and equipped hundreds of diverse RCA leaders through virtual gatherings; leadership trainings; seminary cohorts; transformational, Sabbath rest, and hospitality retreats; *We are Speaking*, "Five Decades", and *Women in Ministry* Sunday web resources; the *She is Called/Ella es Llamada Women of the Bible* study series; "five decades" celebration events; annual Women's Stories Day with NBTS' Reformed Church Center; and Building God's Church Together connection opportunities with regional synods, classes, NBTS and Western Theological Seminary, and Northwestern College. Several of these were made in partnership with General Synod president Judy Nelson, deepening relationships and especially seeking to encourage those congregations and leaders feeling the weight of other churches' departures. In the coming year, women's transformation and leadership will continue to equip leaders and congregations with these resources, expanding globally, and including the development of women-focused missional experiences to places like Mescalero, New Mexico; the U.S. Virgin Islands; and Upstate New York, where diverse women's stories and experiences will be engaged. This summer, all are invited to join us at CBE (Christians for Biblical Equality) International's conference "Tell Her Story: Women in Scripture and History" in Denver, Colorado, on July 25-27, 2024.

There are many Spirit-led stories of impact. Three are highlighted here:

The "Honoring Our Stories/Honrando Nuestras Historias" retreat for **East Coast women of the Hispanic Council** ignited their desire for further equipping; leaders from six congregations are currently engaged in the "Transformational Journey Workshop for Women," being trained by our guiding coalition master facilitators,

Karla Camacho and Asbei Loera Castro, to facilitate the process in their own churches.

Our *She is Called/Ella es Llamada Women of the Bible* study series has been accessed by over 2 million people globally, and dozens of RCA churches are engaging it for small group study. The **women of St. Thomas Reformed Church, U.S. Virgin Islands**, were so inspired by the biblical story of Deacon Phoebe (Volume 1) that they decided they, too, were called to travel and are planning a trip to visit a sister missionary and her family in South America.

In March 2024, a regional celebration of women's gifts came to **Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan**. This church ordained one of the first women in the RCA, Rev. Kathy Jo Blaske, as a minister of Word and sacrament on Reformation Day 1979. Today it has Rev. Janelle López-Koolhaas (the first woman ordained in the Regional Synod of Canada) as one of its pastors; the church just ordained its first Latina deacon and has many other women leaders! This worship celebration and festive reception, based on the General Synod 2023 "five decades" plenary, lifted up the legacy of women's leadership past, present, and future, with shared stories of trailblazers from across the RCA, as well as affirming the men who helped open doors and model the vision of shared leadership. A museum-like display held self-curated mementos from dozens of women who have served God's church as missionaries, pastors, Reformed Church Women's Ministries leaders, and more. God's promise of a future with hope was palpable, and people left uplifted and encouraged.

Diversity and Belonging

Over the past year, our office has diligently worked toward fostering an environment of belonging and a culture of honor throughout the RCA, with various initiatives aimed at promoting unity in Christ through the lens of diversity and reconciliation across all facets of the denomination.

One of our primary focuses has been on implementing comprehensive diversity and belonging training programs for General Synod delegates, GSC staff, and volunteers. These trainings are designed to raise awareness of unconscious biases, promote cultural competency, and provide tools for effectively engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Through these efforts, we aim to create a more welcoming and understanding environment for all.

Additionally, we have actively worked to ensure that our policies and practices reflect our commitment to diversity and inclusion. The antiracism policy adopted at General Synod 2022 has been effective in holding one another accountable to our covenant to honor one another, each person made in God's image. By prioritizing inclusivity in our policies, we are striving to create a culture where every individual feels seen, valued, and respected.

Furthermore, our office has facilitated various outreach initiatives to engage with marginalized communities both within and outside of our denomination. Through these pillars of sankofa journeys, dismantling racism prayer gatherings, the Breaking

Barriers newsletter, and the racial and ethnic leadership cohort, we are working to build bridges and foster connections with all members of our wider community.

As we move forward, we remain committed to being a multiethnic denomination, where all the family of God are not only welcomed but celebrated.