

Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

“The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families” (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition, p. 121]).

Future of the Commission

The role of commissions has shifted throughout the history of the denomination, and the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education (CCDE) is no exception. This past year, the commission members have been asking if it is important to have denomination-wide, inter-classis conversations about education and discipleship, and the resounding answer is YES. The CCDE is a volunteer group with a budget much smaller than a single full-time staff person, and the commission wants to reiterate the value of a diverse and unique group of Reformed Church in America (RCA) leaders.

As the commission reflected on the changes throughout the denomination, it seems that the denomination needs to make a stronger case for the usefulness and value of a denominational structure to individual churches. Commissions have been doing good and important work, but how many churches and classes are aware of the work that is being done? Promoting the visibility of education and discipleship seems to be as important as the actual work so that churches and RCA organizations can see the value of belonging to an institution with resources and expertise. When it comes to facing the core issues of the early 21st century, the RCA is well-equipped to engage with the mental health crisis, intergenerational mentoring, and intergenerational conversations.

The denomination has so much knowledge, training, and resources, as well as seminaries and institutions of higher learning, and the CCDE can be vital in connecting churches with these sources. There are conferences for continuing education like APCE, sabbaticals, and grant funding for research and programs. The denomination has a wealth of information on adult ministries, mentorship, and intergenerational conversations, as well as youth and children’s ministry curriculum. But how many individual RCA churches know about the CCDE or the larger RCA resources?

The CCDE would love to raise the visibility of this commission by making a more concerted effort to connect with individual churches in each of the regional synods and find out what they need to do their work in education and discipleship. This connection can also be a catalyst for fostering and opening relationships of support in overwhelmed and understaffed churches. While acknowledging the shared significant undertaking, the commission would love to expand its size to include members from each synod. The RCA version of the body of Christ may be smaller, but the work still requires unity among our diversity, and there is still much work to be done.

“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” (BCO Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 12b [2023 edition, p. 121]).

“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 [2023 edition, p. 121]).

Denominational Resources: Generation Spark and Renovations

At the commission’s January in-person meeting, Annalise Radcliffe and Ruth Langkamp were welcomed to share about the work they have been doing in education and discipleship through Generation Spark and Renovations. These are exciting programs that are bearing good fruit in many churches throughout the RCA. The commission is excited about the future of these programs but also concerned that many churches still do not realize they are eligible to participate. For example, Ruth shared about one church in the Generation Spark program with only one young person leading the program in her church. This young person was using Generation Spark to empower the older people in her congregation to share their stories of God’s faithfulness in their lives, as well as recognizing the continuing work they can be a part of in the church. The program also offers training for mentors and could be helpful for congregations looking for young people. These are both examples of churches that could participate in the program but might not have realized they were eligible. The commission would like to work with Renovations and Generation Spark to expand communication with churches.

Another way the commission envisions connecting churches with RCA staff, assemblies, and institutions is through conversations and resources about primary identity in Christ, as well as hospitality training for churches in discussing issues of gender identity. The commission has found that there are abundant resources and learning opportunities available to churches, but mentorship and connection to these resources are needed. The commission is working on a plan to make these resources more accessible to churches by offering them in “bite-sized” pieces.

The commission was encouraged by conversations with these RCA staff who, among others, are doing important and meaningful work throughout the country, partnering with churches, finding grant money, encouraging innovation and intergenerational ministries, and ensuring that people of all ages are welcomed into faith institutions. The commission looks forward to a continued partnership as we look for ways to help churches access the fantastic resources the RCA has available.

Denominational Newsletter and Faithward

Another way the commission has sought to collaborate with RCA staff in the work that they are doing is by reaching out to Christina Tazelaar, chief operating officer of the RCA, to ask if there was any way that the commission could assist in the RCA News and Resources email newsletter. As the commission is always seeking ways to serve and equip our churches in the discipleship and education work that is being

done, the commission realized that this was a resource that already existed as a way to connect, equip, and provide resources to churches, volunteers, and staff. The newsletter follows themes for each season and in each of these themes there are, of course, ways that all can be leaning into Christian education and discipleship. The commission's goal was to help partner in the wonderful work the RCA staff, like Christina Tazelaar and writer and editor Becky Getz, are already doing, in helping create content alongside each topic that would be easily accessible to the average volunteer or church staff. The commission was wisely advised that a lot of our people are tired, and therefore long, drawn-out lists, articles, etc. would not be helpful. Instead, quick, easy reads and accessible resources have been the goal.

Along with partnering whenever possible with News and Resources, the commission has been creating content for Faithward, writing not just for the RCA but for a wider ministry context. As the commission is made up of a variety of people—college professors, pastors, social workers, elders, deacons, and volunteers—it gives each the opportunity to share their own perspective and experiences around the themes for each season. The commission is able to write as those who are serving churches and as those who are serving Christ out in the world in other spheres. In doing so, the hope is to be able to connect with others who are, likewise, serving churches in a variety of ways, engaging in the varied topics together.

As the commission is seeking to help serve and equip churches and members in all areas of Christian education and discipleship, it has been a joy to partner with staff in the work that they are doing to care for churches and those who are leading them.

“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 [2023 edition., p. 121]).

Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE)

As a commission, we strongly advocate for professional development as a way to support and encourage Christian educators. The Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE) is doing this work faithfully and is an excellent source for curriculum and resources. The 2024 annual conference was held in St. Louis and included visible RCA participation from event co-chair Rev. Jon Brown from Jersey City, director of women's transformation and leadership Liz Testa, preachers Phil and Stephanie Doeschot, Children and Worship leaders Carol Jones and Ellen Vellinga, and others.

These events are useful ways for Christian educators, whether they are volunteers, working part time, or working full time, to connect with others, encourage each other, find inspiration and resources, and fellowship together. One resource promoted at the APCE annual conference that is aimed at faith formation leaders in the Reformed tradition is Opening Doors to Discipleship (www.odtd.net), which represents an enormous amount of work and provides a wealth of useful resources to educators of all positions. The commission would like to highlight this resource.

We continue to advocate for Christian educators to attend this conference. The commission urges each congregation to show their love and support for Christian education by sending at least one Christian educator to the annual APCE event next year and providing financial support for them to attend. Next year's APCE event will be held in Memphis, Tennessee, from January 29 to February 1, 2025.

Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA)

In conjunction with the APCE annual event in January 2024, the Christian Educators of the Reformed Church in America (CERCA) held its 43rd annual meeting. With some approximately 30 RCA educators present, hailing from from Washington to New Mexico to New York and many places in between, a new vision for the RCA and CERCA is being cast.

We recognize that the look of the RCA is going to be different going forward, and we will need to do some things differently. Denominational staff are attempting to navigate this and are committed to listening and working with our congregations during this time of restructuring. Interim director of the center Phil Assink, director of diversity and belonging Jeremy Simpson, director of future church innovation Annalise Radcliffe, and coordinator of next generation engagement Ruth Langkamp all expressed their conviction of the importance of discipleship and education in our churches as we work together moving forward.

The CCDE also encourages those working in RCA Christian discipleship and education ministries to consider applying for a CERCA scholarship to help defray the cost of an educational opportunity that will provide personal and professional growth. The scholarship application can be downloaded at www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CCDE-scholarship-application.pdf.

Respectfully submitted,
Mark Swart, moderator