

A motion was made to further amend R-54 as follows (additions underlined, deletions stricken):

To affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps are not ~~helpful~~ a preferred course of action at this time; and further,

recognizing the appropriate authority of assemblies, to encourage assemblies, when possible, to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue, to be monitored by the GSC, for report to the 2011 General Synod;

VOTED: To amend R-54.

R-54

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recognizing the appropriate authority of assemblies, to encourage assemblies, when possible, to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue, to be monitored by the GSC, for report to the 2011 General Synod; and further,

to recommend that officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)

Report of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship

The Discipleship Team of the RCA has defined discipleship as “the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming more like him in all we think, say, and do, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

The Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship describes discipleship as “deep” and “rich.”

- Discipleship is deep when it is transformational at personal, communal, and institutional levels.
- It is deep when it is incarnational, that is, when the gospel is not simply known intellectually but embodied and lived out in daily life.
- Discipleship is rich when it is both educational and missional, when the movement is both inward and outward.
- It is rich because it is relational, involving all generations teaching each other and learning from each other.

A vision of a Reformed Church where discipleship is deep and rich:

- Is a church that involves everyone—adults, youth, children.
- No one is left out; all people belong because all have a place to serve in ways that best suit their gifts and abilities and limitations.
- Deep and rich discipleship happens in a place that doesn't avoid difficult issues, but confronts them and teaches a way of freedom and grace.
- Is engaged in meaningful prayer at all times.
- Deep and rich discipleship happens when the adults model lifelong learning to the children and youth. Adults remain engaged in teaching and learning opportunities, deepening their faith in God.
- Its people are actively involved in the ministry of Jesus—bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free.

The following questions were presented last year at General Synod for round table discussion:

1. Share a story of a time when discipleship was deep and rich for you. Where were you? Who was with you? What was happening? What did you learn or experience?
2. Describe education and discipleship in your congregation. Is it deep and rich? Transformational? Incarnational? Missional?
3. What resources are necessary for deep and rich discipleship to be experienced throughout the RCA?

Some of the responses at that synod were:

As a small boy [I lived] in a home next to a church. A man named Mr. Atway saw me and acknowledged me, a young boy. I went to church and found people who cared for me. They talked to me and invited me in. With this small action, these people had a huge impact on my life. Some small action and words, but a great impact for my future.

I had a Sunday school teacher who took time to face and answer questions honestly and challenge us in our personal lives.

In college the guy next door was two years older than I and not a mature Christian. I decided to mentor him through a once a week Bible study. He became a leader, leading other Bible studies.

Leaders are equipped to recognize their call and develop a personal calling statement, leading to greater effectiveness.

Our congregation has a multi-age-led worship experience, engaging children and adults.

Transformational—working with special needs people who give us the grace of Christ more than we can ever give.

We need time and a plan for what to measure, measuring spiritual growth—how can we do that?

Following the round table discussion, the synod passed a recommendation for the General Synod Council to work in collaboration with the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship to design a denomination-wide Season of Discipleship (*MGS 2008*, R-55, p

232). The responses above and others were given to the group that was subsequently formed to inform their work.

Seasons of Discipleship Update

The group that has undertaken the commission's Season of Discipleship study has been meeting to begin to determine its shape and design. Keeping at the forefront Christ's directive to his own disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), the commission continues to hold up the value of a deep and rich relationship with Jesus Christ in all encounters in life as the task force charts this course of fostering an ongoing, meaningful, and significant commitment in the lives of congregations, consistories, small groups, and individuals throughout the Reformed Church in America.

The task force's highest goal for this new venture is that it be definitive of discipleship in every sense of what being a disciple of Jesus means. Discipleship permeates every aspect of the life of a follower of Christ and every stage of his or her life. It is a continual awareness of God's presence and a constant striving to emulate that Presence, no matter at what chronological or spiritual stage of life one may be. Hence the word "season" has been changed to "seasons," suggesting an ongoing, fluctuating cycle of growth, prosperity, struggle, and rejuvenation.

The next objective that stands at the forefront of our discussion is that the experience be uniquely prescriptive. The realm of discipleship, while it has its basic essentials, becomes unique as it begins to take root and flourish in different places and situations. The intent is for congregations all over the denomination, large or small, healthy or struggling, young or aging, to be able, after exploring the definition of discipleship, to determine for themselves what is the best way for their people to engage in discipleship in their own cultural contexts.

The study must be innovative in its format. In order to link the most congregations with the largest number of resources, and to provide the most impact for our efforts, we are exploring new ways to communicate and collaborate with others who are on the same journey throughout the denomination. Conversations can take place, with the interaction of ideas and stories, sharing successes and challenges. These innovative delivery systems can be the catalyst for the positive changes that encourage and enhance discipleship practices that are deep and rich.

An experiential emphasis is intended to encourage people to become more communal in their journey. Discipling itself is an engagement with all of God's people, both in mentoring and in upholding those who are on the journey with each other.

"Seasons of Discipleship" is a vision that expects inclusivity, potentially involving every worshiping body in the denomination, in every season of their chronological and spiritual journeys. At the same time, that vision also expects an expansive outcome, where all people who consider themselves disciples of Christ are traveling on a road that not only nurtures their own individual hearts but invites, plants, waters, and feeds the needs of each and every other person traveling alongside them on that road.

The next step for the group will be to identify ideas that help focus its work, that have the most merit, and that will generate the most energy. This will be done through the summer so that a focused and detailed report can be given to the Commission on Christian Education at its fall 2009 meeting. Following the commission's modifications and approval, and with a clear and specific plan for funding from the commission, the "Seasons" vision can be launched.

Members of the Seasons of Discipleship group are Lois Fiegl, Nancy McNiven, Jane Schuyler, Arlene Sorce, James Steward, Deb Swanson, Mark Veldt, and Kirsty DePree (staff person).

Leaders of Christian Education and Discipleship

The commission recognizes rich and deep discipleship happens best in congregations where leaders are well equipped to lead in this area of ministry. The commission continues to have conversation on practical ways of training professionals in Christian education and discipleship, including youth ministry. Western Theological Seminary, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Northwestern, Hope, and Central Colleges may be invited into such a conversation.

The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship

The commission continues its support for the Belhar Confession and is committed to its core values of unity, reconciliation, and justice. The commission will continue to seek ways to help congregations use, understand, and live with this document.

“Observe All Things”: The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship

One way to tell which passages of scripture are beloved and influential in the church is by whether or not they have a name. Perhaps the two most identifiable in this way are the “Great Commandment” and the “Great Commission.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the first, and you will likely get fairly uniform versions of “love God, love your neighbor.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the second and chances are that you will hear a little more variety of emphasis: “Go,” “make disciples,” “make disciples of all nations,” and perhaps even “baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

While “baptizing” is the first clause, the second clause explaining how we are to make disciples is frequently and curiously overlooked: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” “Observe all things” is the way that the King James version renders it. Teach them. To obey. Everything. It is hard to find more sobering words in the Gospels. When G. K. Chesterton observed that the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, but rather found difficult and untried, he could have had this clause of the Great Commission in mind.

Because this task is difficult, we struggle with it. That is why we need help. From the perspective of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, the Belhar Confession offers help by way of its encouragement to live a Christ-like life characterized by unity, reconciliation, and justice. Given the fact that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the scriptures of the Old Testament, surely true discipleship is interested in obeying all the commands and teachings of scripture. Looking at these three central tenets of the Belhar confession—unity, reconciliation, justice—we find an articulation of what can be considered the heart and soul of what discipleship looks like. In fact, we are reminded of the Staples office supply store slogan, “Yeah, we’ve got that.” Unity? Yeah, we’re called to that. Jesus prays in John 17 that his followers would be one even as the he and the father are one. Reconciliation? Yes, we are called to that too. “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Justice? Yes, we are also called to that. God has shown human beings what is good and required: that we “do justice” (Micah 6:8).

In this way, the Belhar not only encourages us to continue to think well, but also to live well. It tells how to live in the world, how to live like disciples in unity, reconciled and reconciling, and seeking the justice that characterizes the reign of Christ.

As we reflect on our call to follow Christ in word and deed, we are reminded of how radical true discipleship really is. We may well wonder, can we do it? Or better, can we even come close to true discipleship? In our finite, fallible, sinful world our work will only begin to embody these kingdom principles in shadowy, emerging ways. But not engaging in these high callings is not an option, and what's more, at our weakest, we must rely on God's strength. If we despair at what seems to be a hard, if not impossible, task, we have the comfort of the final words of the Great Commission, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Those words of comfort can sustain us in the midst of the hard work of a discipleship which seeks unity in the midst of division, a discipleship which works for reconciliation where there is alienation, and a discipleship that rolls up its sleeves, in the words of Amos, to "let justice roll down like waters." In this way, then, the Belhar can serve as an effective shorthand for the church's passion for Christian education and discipleship.

Report of the Commission on Christian Unity

The General Synod is responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (*Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). In response to Christ's prayer that we may all be one (John 17:21) and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, General Synod has constituted the Commission on Christian Unity to oversee ecumenical commitments, to present an ecumenical agenda to the church, and to carry out ecumenical directives given by the General Synod. Since its creation in 1974 (*MGS 1974*, R-6, pp. 201-202) and its adoption by General Synod in 1975 (*MGS 1975*, R-4, pp. 101-102), this commission has served General Synod by coordinating a range of ecumenical involvements reaching all levels of mission in the RCA. The commission advises General Synod on ecumenical matters and communicates with other denominations, ecumenical councils, and interdenominational agencies. The commission educates the RCA on ecumenical matters and advocates for actions and positions consistent with RCA confessions and ecumenical practices as outlined in "An Ecumenical Mandate for the Reformed Church in America," adopted by General Synod in 1996 (*MGS 1996*, R-1, p. 197). General Synod refers ecumenical matters to the commission for study and implementation.

THE BELHAR CONFESSION

The 2000 General Synod voted to instruct the commission to commend the Belhar Confession to the church over the next decade for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA's commitment to dealing with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) and other Reformed bodies (*MGS 2000*, R-13 amended, p. 100). The commission has made the Belhar Confession and the church-wide study its highest priority for the last seven years. An overview of how the General Synod has studied the Belhar Confession is available in the 2007 report of the commission (*MGS 2007*, pp. 271-274). The following constitutes a further elaboration of what can be found there.

Introduction

(This section of this report is from an introduction to the Belhar Confession written by representatives of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America to introduce the Belhar to delegates at their respective synods.)

From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world: Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are,