

First Reformed Church of Bethlehem, Selkirk, New York
 Grace Christian Church, Staten Island, New York
 New Hackensack Reformed Church, Wappingers Falls, New York
 New Hope Reformed Church, Yonkers, New York

North Carolina

First Reformed Church of Cary, Cary, North Carolina

North Dakota

Red River Reformed Church, West Fargo, North Dakota

Ohio

New Hope Reformed Church, Powell, Ohio

Pennsylvania

Newtown Reformed Church, Newtown, Pennsylvania

The Reformed Church, Willow Grove, Pennsylvania

South Dakota

Bethany Reformed Church, Canton, South Dakota

Valley Springs Reformed Church, Valley Springs, South Dakota

Tennessee

Franklin Fellowship Church, Franklin, Tennessee

U.S. Virgin Islands

St. Thomas Reformed Church, St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands

Washington

Trinity Reformed Church, Kent, Washington

Church of the Good Shepherd, Lynnwood, Washington

East Valley Reformed Church, Yakima, Washington

Wisconsin

Bethany Reformed Church, Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Hope Community Reformed Church, West Bend, Wisconsin

Report of the General Synod Council on Revitalization and RCA Congregations

[Jesus said,] "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

That command of our risen Lord calls the Reformed Church in America to renewed obedience in a new day. It recalls us to our deep, historical commitment to constantly be reformed according to the Word of God, which is also the foundation for our deep, historic commitment to church revitalization. The Great Commission calls every congregation to re-form its ministry and mission by God's grace and with God's direction.

What is a revitalizing congregation?

A revitalizing congregation is a body of believers, responsive to God's call, developing a faithful and fruitful life through new mission, new ministries, and new members.

Each congregation brings this call to renewal to life in its unique setting as it:

- Nurtures a missional mindset resulting in externally focused ministry.

- Multiplies new disciples, new leaders, new teams, new mission, new ministries, new worship services, new sites, and new congregations.
- Intentionally develops a growing community of servant leaders who are equipped and empowered for ministry.
- Grows deeper in its love of God and wider in its love of the people among whom God has called it to serve—living by grace; practicing radically inclusive love; showing Christ-like hospitality; embracing the gifts of every person, race, and culture; seeking to become increasingly diverse as a reflection of the kingdom of God; and intentionally developing a growing community of servant leaders who are equipped and empowered for ministry.

The result is that lives are transformed by the love of Jesus Christ, the hungry are fed, the broken are made whole, hurts are healed, and hope overcomes despair. Neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities become healthier, more just, and more gracious for all people as they experience God's expanding realm of grace, mercy, love, and justice.

Forty-Year Commitment Transforms Church and Community

In 1980, Paramount, California, was voted the fourth worst city in the U.S. among cities with a population of fewer than fifty thousand. The ranking was based on ratings for crime, gang activity, schools, businesses, and local neighborhoods done by the Rand Corporation.

But a few years earlier, Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount had made a commitment to stay in the city for forty years. The church became part of the effort to turn the city around.

“In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, we painted about five hundred homes in our city, and that led to three or four thousand homes being painted by neighbors,” says Ken Korver, now the senior pastor at Emmanuel. “Our own area of the town changed as we stayed and did faithful ministry.”

In 1991, Paramount earned the “All-American City” designation. “We give God the glory, and we give a lot of credit to our city staff and our city council. God used them powerfully,” Korver says. The city manager of Paramount called Emmanuel Reformed the catalyst for the transformation that took place.

Paramount's population has been changing for five decades. “In 1960, there was a strong Dutch community in Paramount; in 1970, there was a strong European American community; by 1980 it was beginning to shift rapidly to being primarily a Latino community. By 1990, it was strongly Latino along with every other ethnic group, and whites were a minority,” says Korver.

“The trick is to keep loving your original people while embracing the community fully. We continually seek to do both at the same time.”

At Emmanuel, that means preserving tradition while reaching out in new ways. At two of the five Sunday worship services, for instance, the “original” people feel like it's their church. “They're still hearing songs from back in the day, still in the same building, still have some of the same pastors—we honor our prior senior pastor [Ken's father, Harold Korver], our Reformed roots, our Dutch people,” Korver says. But, he adds, the church has started three other services—contemporary, Spanish, and multicultural. Korver says the original people don't always feel comfortable participating in these services, but they still rejoice in them.

On an average Sunday in 2008, about 1,750 people worship at Emmanuel. Just over 1,000 are white—still 200 of Dutch descent, with about 800 of other European ancestry—and 750 are people of color. Korver estimates that 610 are Latino, 120 are black, and 20 are Asian.

“Sometimes things come up because our cultures are different. I had to learn to preach differently at the different services. If I preach at the noon service the same way I preach at [the traditional] 9:00 and 10:30 services, they don’t think I care. If I preach at 9:00 or 10:30 the same way I preach at the noon service, they think I’m shouting at them.

“You have to make slight adjustments. Are there ever tensions? Sometimes. But mostly there’s celebration.”

Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Grant from the Lilly Endowment Supports Revitalization Efforts

In November 2003 the RCA was notified that it was the recipient of a grant through the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., in Indianapolis, Indiana. In January 2004 the denomination received the \$2 million grant.

The major components of the grant are:

- Formation of pastoral networks (now called coached revitalizing networks) for pastoral renewal, congregational revitalization, and increased ministry and mission effectiveness.
- Intentional interaction between pastors in networks and the leaders of the congregations the pastors serve.
- Up to six hundred RCA pastors will receive a \$1,000 Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant. Grant proposals must demonstrate a partnership between the pastor and congregation and indicate how the grant will be used in the congregation’s revitalization efforts. The intent is to encourage the pastor and consistory to discern congregational needs and opportunities together.
- Training of coaches throughout the RCA, both Natural Church Development coaches and network coach/facilitators.
- An RCA staff position, coordinator of leader renewal and networks, and partial funding for the coordinator of church health and coaching along with administrative support for this office and all other attendant costs.

In November 2008, the RCA received a \$1 million continuing funding grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. for the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program. This grant will support the program and allow it to continue through 2013.

Working Together to Revitalize Existing Congregations

Initiatives designed to encourage, resource, equip, and empower congregational revitalization have begun in a number of key areas.

Natural Church Development

The Natural Church Development (NCD) process is like an annual physical that results in a change in eating habits, exercise commitments, or sleep patterns. It isn’t like a diet to achieve a short-term goal; it’s an ongoing, long-term process.

After carefully studying 32,000 congregations, pastor and researcher Christian Schwarz

identified eight “quality characteristics”—eight factors that affect the life, effectiveness, and growth of congregations. Each characteristic also reflects an important dimension of how the Bible describes a fruitful church. The eight characteristics are:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships

Research shows that if any of these eight quality characteristics is underdeveloped, it limits the fruitfulness of the congregation. After a congregation takes the NCD survey, it forms a church health team and works with an NCD coach to use its strengths to address its lowest-scoring characteristic in an organic and systemic way. The goal is to use the NCD process or another health assessment tool to release the potential God has implanted in the congregation.

Congregational Ownership Is Crucial to Revitalization

“Congregational ownership of the NCD process is vital,” says pastor Randy Knoll. “If it’s just the pastor doing it, 99 percent of the time it will fail.

“I want to give a lot of credit to the congregation for the success we are experiencing. I’m strong on recognizing your talents, which ones you have and which you don’t. I realized that some of the things that needed to be done to engage NCD didn’t fall in my range of talents. I asked for volunteers to get the NCD team together.”

Silver Creek Reformed Church, where Knoll has been pastor for over thirteen years, is located in German Valley, Illinois, a farming community of around six hundred people. They began NCD a little over a year ago. Through the NCD survey, they learned that their “minimum factor” was inspiring worship.

Recently they began implementing what they had learned through the NCD process. Members of the congregation’s NCD team came up with a list of people they believed had gifts in the area of worship and asked them if they would be interested in forming a worship team. Now nine members of the congregation meet as a worship team.

“Right now we’re semi-blended,” Knoll says of Silver Creek’s worship service. “We sing traditional hymns with an organ and also some praise songs that incorporate drums and a bass. Our goal is to make worship more inspiring to all age groups.”

Knoll believes NCD is superior to another revitalization process that his congregation and others in his classis were involved in years ago. He says churches put a lot of work into that earlier attempt, but that it was confusing and they got little out of it.

“Since then, my church is the only one in this area that actually went into NCD, because other churches had such a negative experience,” he says.

Coached Revitalizing Networks

A coached revitalizing network is a way to involve four to seven pastors in developing deep, sustaining friendships that will help them live on the front lines of ministry. A network offers a safe community where pastors receive encouragement, coaching, and accountability to help them:

- Grow deeper in Christlike character.
- Gain increasing clarity and focus in their calling.
- Develop new leadership and ministry competencies.
- Lead their congregations with courage.

Three elements that help sustain pastoral excellence are essential to coached revitalizing networks:

- **Transformational learning** in relationship with peers under the guidance of a network facilitator provides an essential foundation for the lifelong learning required of pastoral leaders today.
- **Covenantal accountability** helps pastors translate good intentions into concrete action, apply new learning in their own lives and the lives of congregations, and integrate their sense of calling into their calendars.
- **Collegial support** by a pastor's peers builds trust and creates a safe space for pastors to pray for one another, care for and encourage one another, raise questions, express doubts, celebrate God-given successes, and learn from failures.

Coached revitalizing networks are places where pastors clarify their personal mission and are equipped with knowledge and skills to serve their congregations as transformational leaders. When pastors participate in a coached revitalizing network, we expect that both pastors and congregations will:

- Deepen their discipleship through intentional spiritual formation.
- Grow more passionate about new mission, new ministry, and new disciples as they become more externally focused.
- Develop increasing competence as transformational leaders and intentionally multiply leadership.

It's called a "coached" network because coaching is central to coached revitalizing networks. An ongoing coaching relationship built around regular coaching sessions helps pastors address their specific opportunities, challenges, and issues with the assistance of a trained coach. Through coaching, pastors and congregational leaders are empowered in their ministry; are helped to discern how God is calling them to serve their community and world; and are equipped to multiply new disciples, leaders, ministries, mission, and congregations.

Pastoral Network Draws Congregations Together for Ministry

Pastor Brian Taylor is involved in a network of pastors that has changed the way he does ministry.

"There's more of a sense of cooperation," he says. "Prior to our network, we were all kind of doing our own thing. Now there's more of a sense that we're all in this for the sake of the kingdom."

Taylor is associate pastor at First Reformed Church in Oostburg, Wisconsin. His network includes eleven other pastors from Sheboygan and Washington Counties, and once a month they gather over lunch at the Pizza Ranch in Oostburg to catch up, pray, share ideas, and talk through the joys and frustrations of ministry.

Taylor values the sense of camaraderie in the network, and he says it's been helpful to share ideas and resources. The network has been meeting for nearly four years, and it includes pastoral staff from nine RCA churches: Bethany and Hope Reformed in Sheboygan, Hingham Reformed in Hingham, First and Faith Reformed in Cedar Grove, Hope Community Reformed in West Bend, Gibbsville Reformed in Gibbsville, First Reformed in Sheboygan Falls, and First Oostburg.

Pastor networks are a critical component of RCA efforts to revitalize congregations. "Pastors are put on a pedestal," says Rodger Price, the RCA's coordinator of leader renewal and networks. "It's about perfection, yet they're humans. Networks give them a place to be real; the other pastors are in the same boat. They're healthy places to grow and be renewed."

Jonathan Meester, pastor of Hope Community Reformed Church, echoes the need for the support that comes from meeting together. "As a new pastor with less than three years in ministry, being able to share with colleagues about the joys and struggles is a necessity," he says. "It's been a tremendous gift to know that I don't walk this path alone, that like Paul and Timothy I have more experienced ministers to turn to in times of difficulty."

Coaching

Coaching is a central discipline within Our Call. Trained coaches support and enhance coached revitalizing networks by empowering congregational leaders for ministry and helping them discern how God is calling them.

Trained Natural Church Development coaches work with a local congregation's church health team to help them receive the maximum benefit from the NCD process. Other coaches are trained to work with networks as coach/facilitators.

Across the RCA people are being identified who have the passion and the aptitude to coach. Once they are identified, the coordinator of church health and coaching trains them in coaching skills and skills related to networks or to NCD. Other coaching applications will also be developed as the RCA continues on the journey of revitalization. You can learn more about coaching in the leadership section of the GSC report to the General Synod.

Accepting the Challenges of Deep Change for the Sake of the World God Loves

At the heart of congregational revitalization is the reality that missional engagement with the world God loves requires challenging choices and deep change. This is why pastors and congregational leaders are encouraged to come together for learning, accountability, and support in networks and to enter into the deeper reflection and more intentional action that comes through a coaching relationship.

The revitalization journey is challenging, but the stories that emerge from that journey are exciting.

GSC REVITALIZATION ENDS MONITORING REPORT

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council (GSC) on progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report for revitalization follows:

Revitalization Ends Policy

The RCA will be a fellowship of externally focused congregations where lives are being transformed and communities are being renewed.

General Secretary's Interpretation

This ends policy calls the GSC staff to collaborate with regional synods and classes in ways specific to each region to make a difference in three distinct ways:

- Help congregations become healthier and more missionally focused.
- Empower healthy, missionally focused congregations to be a means by which lives are transformed.
- Support healthy, missionally focused congregations as they work with a wide variety of partners to renew their communities.

This ends policy is focused on the long-term horizon—2013 and beyond. It is my responsibility as general secretary to ensure that measurable outcomes for 2013 are established and yearly benchmarks between the years 2009 and 2013 are developed and monitored. To that end I have established the following goals, outcomes, and strategies.

Goal for Congregational Fruitfulness: By 2013, at least five hundred RCA congregations already existing in 2005 will:

- *Exhibit missional fruitfulness through stories of transformed lives.*
- *Show clear evidence of impact on their communities.*
- *Employ statistical criteria that confirm that they are making more and better disciples.*
- *Further, among these five hundred congregations:*
 - *At least forty percent will celebrate a cultural and racial mix of congregational members that closely resembles their communities.*
 - *At least three hundred will have made a commitment to multiplication.*

Outcomes

- Between 2009 and 2013 the number of adult confessions of faith and adult baptisms per one hundred confirmed RCA members will increase by 25 percent in at least five hundred RCA congregations and by 10 percent in the RCA as a whole.
- Between 2009 and 2013 new ministry and new mission activities as reported in the annual consistorial report will increase by 30 percent in at least five hundred RCA congregations and by 10 percent in the RCA as a whole.
- By 2013, at least 20 percent of RCA congregations (existing and new) will meet the generally accepted criteria of a multiracial congregation.
- By 2013, at least 75 percent of all RCA pastoral leaders will be multiculturally competent.
- By 2013, at least three hundred RCA congregations that existed in 2005 will either have already planted a church or will be actively involved in the multiplication movement and will be ready to be a parent church.

Strategies

- The strategies that will lead to these fruitful outcomes are described in the goals and strategies for revitalization below and in the GSC leadership ends monitoring report, so they won't all be enumerated here.
- In partnership with our racial/ethnic and multicultural ministry staff we will develop a variety of means to help RCA pastoral leaders gain a deep biblical grounding in the multiracial, multicultural future God is bringing to the RCA and to equip them to be multiculturally competent.
- We will work with the coordinator for multiracial initiatives and social justice and the Multiracial Congregational Team to develop training processes in cultural competence.
- In partnership with Global Mission we will draw on the experience and expertise of our mission partners in cross-cultural ministry.
- We will continually ask appreciative questions about what is happening when we are at our best and develop ways to measure our outcomes so we learn and adapt our activity as we go.

Data

- The data required to assess our strategies and measure the achievement of our outcomes is not yet available. This is primarily because there is not enough data collected in Part II of the consistorial report and other data-collection processes aren't yet in place. Some early data for this goal will be available in the 2010 revitalization ends monitoring report.

Revitalization at Faith Chapel Reformed Church

What's going on at Faith Chapel Reformed Church in Paterson, New Jersey, can only be described as congregational revitalization. Under the leadership of pastor Raymond David Timms, this little church with a big heart is experiencing spiritual revitalization through its worship experience. Focusing on the spiritual growth of its members rather than on numerical growth has led to both spiritual and numerical growth.

The church's worship experience has had a positive effect on youth, the young in Christ, and lifelong members alike. In response to the increase of new members, the church installed a baptismal pool a little over a year ago. Since the installation of the baptismal pool, Timms has baptized fourteen new Christians. Faith Chapel's dance ministry and choir have united to enhance the praise and worship experience. This development in the worship experience has spread throughout other church ministries. Faith Chapel Reformed Church is truly demonstrating Scripture in action.

Goal for Congregational Faithfulness: By 2013, at least five hundred RCA congregations already existing in 2005 will have clear and compelling statements of mission, vision, and values and will be prayerfully orienting their congregational lives and imaginations toward faithful and collaborative participation in the mission of God.

Outcomes

- By 2013, at least five hundred RCA congregations will be engaged in ministry partnerships aimed at community impact with other RCA congregations, other Christian congregations and faith groups, or other community partners God provides.
- By 2013, members in at least five hundred RCA congregations will be equipped to engage in incarnational ministries through which they serve people who aren't yet disciples of Christ and are trained to engage in spiritual conversations with them.
- By 2013, at least one hundred previously declining RCA congregations will have become "turn-around" congregations.

- By 2013, at least five hundred RCA congregations will be active, vital houses of prayer.

Strategies

- Collaborate with the coordinator for discipleship to develop a variety of ways to help deepen discipleship among congregational leaders and members.
- Collaborate with the HOPE Team to develop and support more RCA congregations as houses of prayer.
- Develop processes that will equip congregations to see their communities through God's eyes, to creatively join Jesus in ministry in their communities, and to remain open to new opportunities the Holy Spirit will reveal to them.
- Develop and empower processes that will equip congregational and pastoral leaders to discern their congregation's mission, vision, and values and to develop the missional imaginations and faithfulness needed to be vital outposts of the reign of God.
- Initiate an online assessment to identify pastors with the gifts, passion, and drive for "turn-around" or "redevelopment" ministry, with the goal of identifying one hundred such current and emerging pastoral leaders.
- Develop a training process for turn-around pastors and congregational leadership teams similar to "Thrive," to be called "Revive."
- Encourage classes to evaluate their lives together in light of our shared mission in order to discern how God is calling them to work together to renew lives and transform their communities.

Data

- More than three hundred RCA congregations have identified a prayer coordinator.
- The HOPE prayer team is working with congregations across the RCA to form networks of congregations that desire to become houses of prayer.
- In collaboration with the Gallup organization and a group of ecumenical partners, an online assessment for people with the gifts to be "redevelopers" or "turn-around pastors" was launched on April 1, 2009.
- "Revive" is being designed for churches that have been declining at a five-year rate of 10 to 50 percent. It will be piloted in the fall of 2009. Revive will include a bus trip with several stops at places where both the need for revitalization and revitalization itself may be experienced. Similar in style to multiracial ministries' Sankofa (a bus trip focused on racial justice), time on the bus will be used as classroom and processing time.
- We are collecting stories of classes that are examining their lives and ministries through the eyes of mission; various models are being shared as requested.

Goal for Pastoral Networks: By 2013, at least five hundred ordained or commissioned pastoral leaders of congregations will participate in a coached revitalizing network for at least five years as a way to equip them to lead revitalizing, missional congregations.

Outcomes

- Five hundred pastoral leaders will develop a personal calling statement that informs and guides their ministries.
- Five hundred pastoral leaders will have coaches helping them live out the mission, vision, and values God revealed to them in their personal calling statement.
- Five hundred pastoral leaders will be in clear and explicit covenantal partnership with their congregational leaders for missional engagement.
- Five hundred pastoral leaders, in covenant partnership with their congregational leaders, will be committed to do what is needed to place participation in God's mission at the center of their personal and congregational lives and ministries.

Strategies

- Seven hundred pastoral leaders will participate in networks for at least one year in order to retain five hundred who participate in a coached revitalizing network for five years.
- One hundred twenty five high-quality network coach/facilitators will be trained, supported, and held accountable for their work.
- One hundred twenty five additional pastors will be trained to share coaching skills in networks.

Data

- Three hundred ninety-eight pastors are currently involved in sixty-two networks led by RCA-trained and supported facilitators.
- Fifty-two pastors who took part in networks at one time have stopped for various reasons.
- Ten networks have stopped meeting.
- One hundred eighty five people have been trained to serve as coached revitalizing network coach/facilitators.
- A recent survey of network participation indicates that less than 50 percent of network participants have a clear covenant for revitalization with their consistories.
- Three hundred eighty people have received an orientation to coaching through Foundational Coach Training; 150 of those people returned for a follow-up training day six months later.
- Data is not yet available on how many pastors throughout the RCA receive regular coaching, whether through NCD, their network, or by some other means.
- A new affinity network is beginning to meet, made up of first-year pastors serving in the Synods of the Heartland, Great Lakes, and New York.
- Facilitator training has been redesigned with the intent of increasing the impact while reducing the resources used.
- Two facilitator forums are planned each year, in which network facilitators will have the opportunity to learn through webinar technology. In the first webinar, Woody Bedell will speak on the topic of pastors' health. In the second, Steve Smallegan will speak about best practices for networks.
- A multiracial affinity network facilitator training of five coaches took place in May of 2009.
- The Leadership Development Journey is an online course offering network facilitators the opportunity to develop their leadership identity and skills; nine pastors are currently taking part in two courses and five pastors took part in the pilot course.
- A book entitled *All Things New* is in production. The book is a resource to inspire pastors to join networks and/or enter a coaching relationship.

Goal for Natural Church Development (NCD): By 2013, two hundred RCA congregations will have completed two cycles of a coached NCD process and 150 churches will have completed three or more cycles of a coached NCD process. (This goal is significantly revised from a general church health goal to a goal concerning NCD. This change comes because of what we have learned and because NCD is the specific church health process the RCA is equipped to support.)

Outcomes

- By 2013, at least three hundred RCA congregations that were in existence in 2005 will have become healthy enough to become a parent congregation and at least two hundred will have multiplied or begun the process of planting a new congregation.

Strategies

- Continue to train and retrain NCD coaches so all congregations engaging in NCD for the first time have a well-trained NCD coach and all second-cycle congregations have access to a coach if they desire one.
- Partner intentionally with the regional synods in recruiting high quality coaches and share in the costs of training and supporting those coaches.
- Offer high quality coaches inter-regionally when regional coaches are not available.
- Tell NCD stories where greater health has resulted in increased missional faithfulness and God-blessed fruitfulness.
- Compare and contrast the data from the annual consistorial reports between congregations that improve their NCD scores and those that do not participate or do not show improvement.
- Offer opportunities for trained NCD coaches to refresh and continue to develop their coaching and content skills.

Data

- Since 2004, when the RCA coached NCD process began, eighty-seven congregations have taken the survey more than once.
 - Thirty-five have taken the survey two times.
 - Forty-six have taken the survey three times.
 - Six have taken the survey four times.
- The NCD training material has been rewritten to make it more accessible to both coaches and congregations. Training occurs in a workshop format, which is hands-on and allows for more relevant and timely interaction with other participants and trainers. Intentional conversations with regional staff about the use of NCD, the development of quality coaches, and sharing the cost of training have begun.
- NCD stories are being told through the *Church Herald*, the *RCA Today* magazine, the RCA website, RCA communication resources, and video clips at General Synod.
- IT staff and revitalization staff are developing a plan for accessing data that will correlate NCD scores with responses to certain questions in parts I and II of the annual consistorial report.

Goal for Direct Impact and Learning with Specific Congregations: *By 2013, forty RCA congregations that were plateauing (growing less than 10 percent in five years) or declining will enter into covenantal partnership with staff from the congregational mission cluster and will be growing spiritually, missionally, and numerically through their participation in Churches on the Grow.*

Outcomes

- By 2013, forty RCA congregations participating in a new program called Churches on the Grow will have clear focus for their participation in God's mission and will have developed and implemented processes to measure their outcomes.
- By 2013, forty RCA congregations participating in Churches on the Grow will have developed processes to deepen their discipleship and develop leaders, resulting in greater missional capacity.
- By 2013, forty RCA congregations participating in Churches on the Grow that were previously plateauing or declining will be growing numerically.
- By 2013, forty RCA congregations participating in Churches on the Grow will be equipped to share some of what they have learned with other congregations.

Strategies

- Staff in the congregational leadership cluster will serve as point persons in relationships with at least forty RCA congregations to help guide the Churches on the Grow initiative, with thirteen or fourteen new relationships initiated each year.

- The RCA staff point person, the consistory, and the pastor will enter into a comprehensive covenantal relationship for the duration of the initiative.
- Staff from the congregational mission cluster will offer services, equipping, and expertise as determined by the missional engagement of the congregation and at the request of congregational and pastoral leadership.
- Churches on the Grow congregations are invited into this process by RCA staff (usually in consultation with regional synod staff) with the goal of having participating congregations in all eight regional synods.

Data

- As of February 25, 2009, covenants have been initiated with six congregations and conversations have been started with six others.

Youth Outreach Begins at the Mall

Six years ago, Reformed Church of Cortlandtown had 20 people in worship on Sunday and tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid bills.

As part of a rebuilding and revitalizing process, the congregation called a new pastor, Doug Leonard, and studied the community to find the most underserved groups of people.

The survey revealed that youth should be a major priority for the church, especially middle class kids who were caught up in dealing and using heroin—but the church’s first attempt at reaching youth failed miserably. “Our youth committee sponsored a pizza and movie night,” Leonard says. “Only one student came, and she was already a member of our church!”

One day when he was dropping off his dry cleaning, Leonard had a breakthrough idea. “I noticed that there was a group of about forty kids at this strip mall pretending to be gangsters. Some of them were talking with the woman who worked at the dry cleaner’s. They were sharing their problems with her and she was offering a listening ear.”

June O’Dell, the woman at the dry cleaner’s, also happened to be a member of Leonard’s congregation. She offered to tell the youth about the new pastor and introduce him to them. The first time that Leonard spoke with them, the students said that they wanted to meet with him that day to talk about relationships.

The group, dubbed Kavana Kids after the name of the strip mall, has met every Tuesday since. In six years, more than 150 youth have been involved.

“During the first year we met at a bagel shop, but then we moved our meetings to the church, which was only a few blocks away. Every meeting starts with a check-in time, which is an opportunity for students to express whatever might be on their hearts and minds. We also invite speakers to come in and address various topics. These kids are dealing with pregnancy, domestic abuse, incarceration, and substance abuse. Our students say that they enjoy the check-in time the most because they feel like someone is really listening.”

Leonard attributes the ongoing synergy in the group to the acceptance students find there. “We don’t judge the kids. We treat them the way I think Jesus would have treated them—we accept them as they are.”

The youth program is carrying out the legacy of lifelong Cortlandtown members John and

Eleanor Kavana, who owned the Kavana strip mall for years. “Their life mission during the 1940s was to adopt at-risk youth. Three of their four children were adopted. Our work is like their legacy,” Leonard says.

“It’s about looking at what God is already doing and serving with his other partners in the community like the Methodist church, the fire station, the Lion’s Club, and the local high school. Forget about building our church. The question is, are we being faithful?”

Report of the General Synod Council on Discipleship

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:16-17).

Discipleship changes people, communities, and institutions as disciples commit to making disciples and more people become more like Jesus, embodying his teachings in their daily lives.

GSC DISCIPLESHIP ENDS MONITORING REPORT

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council (GSC) on progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report for discipleship follows.

Discipleship Policy Ends

The RCA will be a fellowship of congregations filled with disciples, nurtured inwardly, focused outwardly, becoming like Jesus in all they think, say, and do in order to show the love of God in all circumstances to all people.

General Secretary’s Interpretation

Disciples making disciples is the clearest and most precise way to state the vision and values of the discipleship office. Each disciple of Christ is committed to internalizing the gospel in his or her individual life, which results in a compelling desire to disciple another person. Through empowering, connecting, encouraging, and sustaining, leaders, teachers, pastors, youth, and children will be disciplined and will disciple others, and this will result in transformed lives.

This is also reflected in the mission statement of the discipleship team: “Christian discipleship is the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming like him in all we think, say, and do, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be the very presence of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God.” The youth team, the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, the HOPE prayer team, and the discipleship team are collaboratively strategizing methods to live into the definition that we have stated.

Disciples making disciples embodies the inward nature of growing in Christ as an individual and it incorporates the outward focus of discipling others. It is relational in its approach, missional in its nature, educational in its practice, incarnational in its witness,