Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

The Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education has four amended mandates, which received their second approval at General Synod 2016 as required by the Book of Church Order in Chapter 3, Part I, Article 11 (2016 edition, p. 121). The amended responsibilities (listed below) maximize the relevance of the work of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education.

- 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.
- The commission shall monitor, evaluate, and report on the RCA’s progress in ministries of education and discipleship with children, youth, adults, and families.
- The commission shall collaborate with RCA staff, assemblies, agencies, and institutions to promote and strengthen the next generation in discipleship within RCA congregations.
- 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; 2016 edition, p. 117)

Our work began with research—each member chose a book about discipleship in our current culture with a goal of getting a better feel for the current reality and trends in spiritual formation in order to be more effective in our work. We found that four significant themes emerged from the books we read that are vital for the church today:

1. Life lived in discipleship with one another in a one-to-one nature across all generations is vital.
2. Story and relationships with one another are crucial.
3. Intentional, authentic relationships in a solid community are essential.
4. Discipleship is a timeless, continual process through life that happens continuously beyond our structured plan.

While the word “discipleship” is often tossed about, many of us have different concepts of what we mean when we say it. As a commission, our operational understanding for the work we did is summarized well in the following passage from We Make the Road by Walking, by Brian McLaren:

Disciple ... to be a follower, a student, an apprentice, one who learns by imitating a master ... to be sent out to teach others, who will in turn teach and train others in this new way of life. This revolutionary plan of discipleship means that we must first and foremost be examples. We must embody the message and values of our movement. That doesn’t mean we are perfect—just look at Peter. But it does mean we are growing and learning, always humble and willing to get up again after we fall, always moving forward on the road we are walking. As Jesus modeled never-ending learning and growth for us, we will model it for others, who will model it for still others. If each new generation of disciples follows this example, centuries from now, apprentices will still be learning the way of Jesus from mentors, so they can become mentors for the following generation.

For further reading, we have compiled the list of books we shared in our commission at the conclusion of this report.
In line with our fourth mandate, “the commission shall advocate for the ongoing preparation of those who carry out the church’s teaching ministry,” the CCDE continues to urge churches to provide continuing education money and study leave for all paid staff in the ministry of Christian discipleship and education and urge classes to include time and money allotments for continuing education in their published guidelines for congregational positions. The Association of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) annual event was held in Denver, Colorado, this past January. Two members of the commission, Jane Schuyler and Bethany Popkes, attended with the Christian Educators of the RCA (CERCA) group. (CERCA can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/CERCA-489640711071946.) They cannot say enough about the value of this conference.

Regarding her experience as a first-time attendee, Bethany wrote: “A community of full-time ministers who know how to reflect yet aren’t afraid of play is a gift that is so very rare in our world. Space was given to process in playful ways as well as in stillness, silence, and deeply thoughtful reflection. It is rare for conferences to have this balance done so well and for conferences to be able to laugh at themselves while still offering such valuable content.”

The 2018 APCE annual event will be held in Louisville, Kentucky, from January 31 to February 2. RCA Christian educators are invited to come for enriching experiences and engaging spiritual practices that will open doors to demonstrate boundless hospitality in our congregations, our communities, and our world. Scholarships for first-time RCA attendees are available through the SEED fund (contact Joann Koning at jkoning@rca.org for more information on the SEED fund). For more information on the APCE annual event, see www.apcenet.org.

The RCA’s camps provide a valuable place for discipleship and faith formation to happen throughout our denomination. Countless lives have been changed through these ministries. Our commission would like to not only lift up the ministry of these camps, but also urge greater utilization of the camps for youth and adults alike by our RCA churches. Many churches are willing to underwrite a portion of the cost for kids to attend summer camp or retreats. We hope to see more churches adopt this investment into one of the greatest discipleship tools we have.

Here is one minister’s story of the value of our RCA camps:

My family was moderately involved in a church as I was growing up. When I was in third grade, they saw a flyer at church promoting summer church camp. The flyer stated that the church would cover half the cost for any children of the church. They signed me up. As a third grader, I found something uniquely special and spiritual about camp. I saw God in new and amazing ways that I had never seen before. I came back year after year.

The summer of my eighth grade year, the counselors performed a skit that demonstrated what it meant that Christ died for my sins. For the first time I saw my place in the gospel—that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. My heart awakened to the gospel in a personal way and I responded. My life would never be the same after that moment. I came back from camp passionate to live out my faith and share the good news of the gospel with those around me. I developed a passion for learning and obeying the Word of God. In early high school, I felt God calling me to ministry to teens, just as the counselors had ministered to me. I spent four years working at Christian camps through my college years and have now spent 15 years serving in youth ministry. I now support camping ministries by serving on the board of Camp Manitoqua.
I will be forever thankful for camping ministries and for my church that saw the discipleship value of camping ministry and chose to pay half the cost for any families wanting to send their kids. My life and discipleship journey is just one example of the fruit.

Dennis Colton

CCDE continues to deepen its working relationship with RCA staff in discipleship and next generation ministries and is pleased to see the growing interest and collaboration through learning communities.

Further Reading

- Confessing Christ in the 21st Century, by Mark Douglas
- Making Disciples in Messy Church: Growing Faith in an All-Age Community, by Paul Moore
- Insourcing: Bringing Discipleship Back to the Local Church, by Randy Pope
- Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus, by Mark Dever
- Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution, by Diana Butler Bass
- The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving, by Lisa Miller
- Faith Formation 2020: Designing the Future of Faith Formation, by John Roberto (www.reimaginefaithformation.com)
- We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation, by Brian D. McLaren
- Live the Story Not the Dream, by Jackie Smallbones
- The Discipleship Difference: Making Disciples While Growing as Disciples, by Robert E. Logan
- Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church, by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin
- Live Your Calling: A 40-Day Devotional for Women Leaders, by Amy Jackson

Respectfully submitted,
Dennis Colton, moderator