Report of the General Synod Council on Discipleship

Each spring the general secretary is required to report to the General Synod Council about progress on the various ends policies established by the GSC. The monitoring report for ends policy E-2: Cultivating Transformation in Christ follows.

ENDS POLICY E-2: CULTIVATING TRANSFORMATION IN CHRIST

The RCA will engage, equip, and encourage congregations and missional communities in the work of cultivating transformation that results in faithful and passionate disciples of Jesus.

GENERAL SECRETARY’S INTERPRETATION

“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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus’ command to make disciples is the church’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. Transformed disciples become more like Christ as they read and reflect on God’s Word, pray and listen to God, spend time in community with other Christ followers, and engage in Christ’s mission. The RCA’s commitment is to help in providing accessible environments, processes, resources, and relationships that can be used by local congregations to foster—in cooperation with the Holy Spirit—more fully devoted followers who willingly and boldly live and love like Jesus.

The discipleship pathways uniquely created by congregations will foster transformation in both hearts and minds, exhibited in changed actions in the lives of equipped and empowered disciples. These growing disciples will make contributions as leaders, teachers, and people of influence within their congregations. Transformation will be manifest in our relationships with one another, our increasing love for each other, our sacrifice for the cause of Christ, our willingness to influence our world for the gospel, and how we advocate for justice with compassion in communities where we live and serve. As we live and love like Jesus, it will impact how we reach out to those who live on the margins, to those who have been disempowered in our society, and to those who have no voice in the broken world in which we reside.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

“Go and make disciples of all nations” is a pretty clear instruction from Jesus. In Transformed & Transforming, the discipleship priority area is called Cultivating Transformation in Christ—with Jesus’ words at its heart. As we follow Jesus as disciples, both leadership and mission follow.

The Transformational Processes (discipleship) guiding coalition, led by Jill Ver Steeg, is a team of people who are passionate about changing lives and communities for greater kingdom impact. This is a team of 12 practitioners in the field of discipleship who help shape the goals of this priority area and the approach to accomplishing them through coaching, webinars, resourcing, writing, teaching, and facilitating. The guiding coalition is working passionately toward the goal of every RCA congregation having a discipleship pathway, process, or environment in place to grow disciples who make disciples who bring
greater kingdom impact and deeper transformation, both personally and systemically.

The Transformational Processes guiding coalition is focusing on the following seven processes to help congregations create a discipleship pathway in their context.

**Discipleship Coaching**

The purpose of discipleship coaching is to explore the question, “How am I growing in my capacity to participate in what God is doing?” This question is asked of the individual being coached in order to get at the next question, “How is the church growing in its capacity to participate in what God is doing?” The goal is to guide the person being coached toward greater discipleship in his or her own life in order to facilitate discipleship movements in his or her church and community. Coaching often happens monthly for 12 sessions, based upon the need(s) of the person being coached.

**Discipleship Connection (Taste and See) Events**

The purpose of a discipleship connection event is to help congregations discern and dream about what future ministry could look like. It serves as an on-ramp for a discipleship learning community. This is a group of 12 to 20 churches in relatively close geographical proximity who share current discipleship challenges and celebrations, together creating a sense of urgency around seeing greater transformation in their context. The goal of a discipleship connection event is to paint a picture of a future with greater ministry impact and invite churches to take a next faithful step toward that future.

**Discipleship Pathway Learning Communities**

A discipleship pathway learning community is a cluster of eight to ten RCA congregations in relatively close geographical proximity that each gather a team of three to five people, including the pastor, to learn about discipleship together. Each congregation in the learning community will develop its own unique pathway(s) through which people will be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into passionate, outwardly focused followers of Jesus who live for the sake of others.

**Discipleship Leadership Communities**

Teams of three to five staff and leaders from RCA congregations engage in this two-year process; each leadership community will have between five and seven congregations, drawn from all geographic regions of the RCA. Teams from the pilot group of eight RCA congregations completed their two-year process at the end of April 2016. Reports from all eight congregations were extremely positive. Four of those eight congregations are now serving as “discipleship bases of operation” where ongoing learning, coaching, resourcing, and partnerships are happening for wider impact. Another discipleship leadership community launched in October 2016.

**Faithwalking Learning Communities**

Faithwalking is the personal transformation component of Ridder: Churches Learning Change (formerly Ridder Church Renewal). Many RCA congregations lead Faithwalking experiences with neighboring congregations as one dimension of their discipleship pathway. A long-term goal will be to expand Faithwalking to non-Ridder congregations through the development of learning communities.
3DM Learning Communities

3DM learning communities consist of ten to twelve RCA, CRC, and other neighboring congregations that gather four times over the course of two years, implementing what they learn between gatherings. Each congregation will learn and employ the 3DM missional community process as a primary way to focus on multiplying disciples, leaders, and mission. The RCA also partnered with 3DM to train a total of 12 pastors in 3DM by June 2017.

VantagePoint3 Learning Communities

This is a one-year learning community of three to five RCA congregations in which each congregation will learn from and with one another as they employ VantagePoint3’s primary introductory resource, The Journey, which focuses on discipleship and leadership development.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Launch two discipleship learning communities with ten to fifteen RCA and CRC congregations.
- Launch four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities.
- Train five to seven pastors for leadership in 3DM.
- Twelve to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a 3DM learning community.
- Launch one to two Faithwalking retreats, involving six to eight RCA and other congregations.
- Hold five connection events focused on cultivating transformation.

Progress

- Discipleship learning communities:
  - The discipleship learning community that launched in East and West Sioux Classes in September 2016 at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, Iowa, continues. Nine congregations are involved in this learning community.
  - A discipleship learning community launched in the Rochester, New York, area in June 2017. Two congregations are participating in this learning community.
  - A discipleship learning community launched in George, Iowa, in January 2018. Two congregations are participating in this learning community.
  - A discipleship/local missional engagement learning community launched in Fulton, Illinois, in February 2018. Six congregations are involved in this learning community.
- Four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities have launched, one each in Albany, Mid-America, New Jersey, and New York. A total of 18 congregations have participated.
- Fifteen pastors (from California, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin) are in the process of being trained for leadership in 3DM.
- Thirteen RCA congregations—from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, to Okoboji, Iowa, to Edmonds, Washington—are participating in a 3DM learning community.
- Approximately eight Faithwalking retreats, involving 25 RCA congregations,
have been held in classes such as Albany, Canadian Prairies, New York, and Wisconsin.

- Discipleship connection events have been held in Orange City, Iowa; Holland, Michigan; Rochester, New York; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Fulton, Illinois; George, Iowa; Ames, Iowa; and Bridgewater, New Jersey. A joint next generation/discipleship connection event was held in Pella, Iowa.

**Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)**

- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Forty to fifty RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Five to ten RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- Two Growing Generosity leadership communities will be in process or completed.
- Six Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities will have been launched or completed.

**Progress**

- Fourteen RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Nineteen RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Fifty-five to sixty-five RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Fifteen RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Eleven RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- One Growing Generosity leadership community with four congregations concluded in May 2017.
- Four Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity learning communities have been completed, representing eighteen congregations.
- One joint next generation/discipleship learning community has launched.
- One joint discipleship/local missional engagement learning community has launched.
- One joint discipleship/leadership development learning community with Native American Ministries has launched.
Thirty-five to forty-five congregations have participated in a discipleship connection (Taste and See) event.

Twenty RCA pastors are currently in a discipleship coaching relationship.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

- Twenty to twenty-five RCA congregations have completed a two-year discipleship leadership community and are providing other congregations with resources for discipleship as requested.
- Forty to fifty RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship learning community and are implementing their own unique disciple-making pathway in their congregation.
- Sixty-five to seventy-five RCA congregations are engaged in Faithwalking as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Twenty-five to thirty-five RCA congregations have participated in a joint RCA and 3DM learning community and have launched missional communities focused on discipleship, leadership, and missional living.
- Twenty to thirty RCA congregations have participated in a VantagePoint3 learning community and are using VantagePoint3 resources to develop disciples and equip leaders.
- Eighty-five to one hundred RCA congregations have participated in a discipleship connection (Taste and See) event.
- Forty to fifty RCA pastors are currently in a discipleship coaching relationship.
- Ten to fifteen RCA congregations have participated in the discipleship/leadership/mission pilot in the Far West Region.
- Fifteen to twenty RCA congregations have participated in Organic Outreach as a core process for cultivating transformation in Christ.
- Seventy-five to one hundred RCA pastors and/or ministry leaders are involved in discipleship coaching.
- Two Growing Generosity leadership communities will have convened between 2018 and 2020. The first one will launch in November 2018 (there will be four sessions between November 2018 and May 2020).
- Ten Creating Congregational Cultures of Generosity (CCCG) learning communities will be facilitated from 2018 to 2023. The next two CCCG learning communities will begin in the fall of 2018.

NEXT GENERATION ENGAGEMENT

Rick Zomer assumed leadership of this team as the coordinator for Next Generation Engagement in February 2016. Rick was called to serve in another capacity outside the RCA in February 2018. Currently, the next generation work for the RCA is being executed by the discipleship guiding coalition. The purpose of Next Generation Engagement is to empower young adults, ministry teams, and congregations to create a culture where people of all ages serve in leadership positions at the church, classis, and denominational levels. The goal is to create an environment where the emphasis moves from merely keeping people in the church when they reach adulthood to equipping congregations both to fully include younger members in the church and to reach out to those who have left the church.

Next Generation Connection Events

Clusters of RCA churches in the same geographical area gather for a one-day process to examine their current reality regarding young adults’ presence and involvement in their congregations. In addition, participants are given the opportunity to envision ways to increase the number and involvement level of young adults in their church.
Next Generation Learning Communities

Plans have been developed and clusters of churches have been asked to consider an 18- to 24-month process focused on three specific goals: creating a shared understanding of their congregation’s current reality as it relates to young adults, considering steps for connecting across generations, and developing plans to commit to ministry with young adults in their church and regions.

Growing Young Learning Community

Growing Young is a transformational process that is offered by the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), housed at Fuller Theological Seminary. RCA churches are given the opportunity to engage in a one-year process with other congregations from across North America. The goal is to have congregations identify and implement specific steps to engage young adults in connection and leadership in their church.

Year Five Goals (June 2017 to June 2018)

- Launch one high-quality learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Recruit and complete a Growing Young learning community with at least two RCA churches.
- Design and execute six connection events focused on involvement and leadership pathways for emerging adults in the local church.
- Recruit a Next Generation guiding coalition composed of individuals with a diversity of ages and contexts within the RCA and begin meeting quarterly.

Progress

- Two central Iowa churches began a Next Generation discipleship learning community in February 2018.
- One RCA church from Zeeland Classis is participating in a Growing Young learning community with Fuller Theological Seminary.
- Connection events were held in Lafayette, Indiana, and Sheldon, Iowa. Congregations were given the opportunity to consider collaborating on a learning community focused on next generation engagement.
- Three people are currently part of the Next Generation guiding coalition.
- A Next Generation presentation and discussion was featured during the fall meeting of Rocky Mountain Classis.
- The RCA, CRCNA, and Fuller Youth Institute developed a strategy and cost structure for a shared Growing Young/Next Generation learning community to be held in 2018–2019 at the RCA’s Michigan Regional Center.
- The director of Next Generation Engagement was invited to attend a Regional Synod of New York event with a faculty member from Fuller Theological Seminary focused on emerging adults.

Five-Year Goals (June 2013 to June 2018)

- Thirty congregations will have participated or will be participating in a learning community and will have a next generation ministry that is resourced.
- One hundred fifty congregations will have attended a Next Generation connection event and will have been invited to participate in a learning community as a next step toward developing a next generation strategy and ministry.
Onboarding of the FYI collaboration is complete and Growing Young resources have been introduced to 20 congregations through participation in the onsite cohort experience or through specific FYI-resourced connection events.

Progress

- Ten congregations have participated or are participating in a learning community and will have a next generation ministry that is resourced.
- Sixty to seventy congregations have attended a next generation connection event and have been invited to participate in a learning community as a next step toward developing a next generation strategy and ministry.
- Fifteen congregations have been introduced to the Growing Young resources through the cohort experience or FYI connection events.

New Five-Year Goals (June 2018 to June 2023)

Due to the change in leadership, new goals will be set once a new leader for Next Generation Engagement is in place.