Report of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education

Children and Worship and Children’s Ministry

At the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education’s February 2019 meeting, members of the commission were informed that the RCA’s support of Children and Worship (C&W) is ending June 30, 2019. Contracts with the RCA coordinator and RCA trainers will not be renewed.

The commission is very disappointed to hear this sad news. In light of this change, the commission wants to highlight how Children and Worship transforms the lives of children and adults. The aim of C&W, as stated by Sonja Stewart (Reformed Worship, #12, pp. 25–29), “is to create an environment that enables children to encounter and worship God; to abide in God’s love as experienced in biblical stories, parables, and liturgical presentations; and to live as Christ’s ministers in the world.” Children and Worship became a ministry of the RCA under the leadership of Kenneth Bradsell, who was, at the time, the RCA minister for education and faith development. Before Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman’s book, Young Children and Worship (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), was published, the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and Western Theological Seminary (WTS) had formed a partnership for training. Sonja Stewart developed the training program that was used in the RCA- and CRC-sponsored centers around the U.S. and Canada. This partnership continued until 1994.

In 1994, the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) became a partner with the RCA and the CRCNA for the oversight of the Children and Worship training program in the three denominations. Training and equipping events for leaders include introductions, basic trainings, enrichment events, and specialized trainings. In 1996, the RCA, at the request of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, sent Sonja Stewart and Rebecca Mead to South Africa, where they held two Children and Worship training events. The RCA provided materials for two complete Children and Worship centers to be left in South Africa for future training events.


In 1998, Willa Brown (at that time, RCA associate for children’s ministry) and Phyllis Palsma (a former Children and Worship trainer) attended the World Council of Churches Jubilee Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, and provided an introduction of C&W. In his president’s report to the 1999 General Synod, Fritz Kruijthof proposed that the RCA “explore the possibility and potential for establishing a world outreach team for the Children and Worship ministry”; in response, a recommendation was passed. At the fall meeting of GSC that year, a proposal was accepted, and Children and Worship International, in partnership with RCA Global Mission, was created.
RCA missionaries Ruth De Haan and Jane Van Es participated in C&W training in 2000 and went to The Gambia, where they used the program in the Anglican Church, an RCA partner. When the De Haans and the Van Esses left The Gambia, Jane Van Es moved the materials to Kenya, the location of the Van Esses’ next missionary assignment.

Edna Pick, from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, participated in Sonja Stewart’s Children and Worship class at WTS and also participated in a training event led by RCA trainer Marcia Floding. After two years of fundraising and planning, Willa Brown and RCA C&W trainer Ellen Vellenga traveled to Paarl, South Africa, where they partnered with Edna Pick and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa to train leaders for the C&W program. Edna translated *Young Children and Worship* into Afrikaans and led many training events throughout South Africa.

Martha and Jaime Amaro and Midiam Ramos were trained by Sonja Stewart in a one-week personalized event in 2003 and then participated in a C&W training event led by Marcia Floding. Martha is an RCA missionary whose main work is to lead C&W introductions and training events in Mexico and to provide support for churches and seminaries using the C&W program. Martha translated *Young Children and Worship* into Spanish. The RCA contracted with Westminster John Knox Press to publish the Spanish and Afrikaans translations of *Young Children and Worship*. Hector Silva, a dean at one of the seminaries in Mexico, said, “What a blessing to have access to this class. This is going to be a perfect tool to recover our Reformed tradition.”

Following the death of founder Sonja Stewart in 2006, the training partnership joined with Journey at Western Theological Seminary to resume the annual International Children and Worship workshop. These annual events were held at WTS with trainers from each of the denominations. At each event, trainers and participants would always share stories from their Children and Worship centers. “I remember when Trenton, a visitor, walked out of the worship center and enthusiastically said to his parents, ‘Can we do that again next week?!’”

“While sitting at the Sunday dinner table,” one parent recalled, “I noticed that my son, Sam, was moving peas around on his plate. Watching and listening to him, I discovered that he was retelling the Bible story from his worship center.” When a college student returned home during a break, a concerned parent asked him about several recent deaths in his community. Having participated in C&W as a child, he responded, “Mom, I know who goes with me in the dark places” (“The Good Shepherd,” *Young Children and Worship*).

Nozomi Brownell, RCA missionary in Japan, received training from RCA trainer Marcia Floding in 2007. Nozomi was able to assist with the Japanese translation of *Young Children and Worship*. In a thank you note to the RCA, Masayoshi Nishimura (publisher in Japan), stated,

> Considering the hardship that the current Japanese churches are facing, it was not an easy decision to publish such book as this at this time. However our company has determined to publish this book for the sake of the future of the Japanese churches and their children. We are greatly encouraged and inspired by your strong support for this project.

The head of Kyodan Publishing House, who is a WTS graduate, told Nathan (Nozomi’s spouse), “this Children and Worship group has a potential to have a major breakthrough among Japanese churches.” In their 2018 ministry review, the Brownells report that, in addition to the training center at Yokohama, another one has been established northeast of Tokyo in Saitama. Nozomi says,
We have been introducing C&W to the wider Japanese church and to various pre-Ks, kindergartens, and in other contexts for the past 10 years. Now we are in the second stage and we are raising up a team of worship leaders and trainers. They come from various places across the country. Presently, there are 16 certified C&W worship leaders in Japan. We see this investment in people as most important...

Mariko, who was one of the first certified C&W leaders in Japan, recently had an opportunity to lead worship at a children’s summer camp. She was able to hold two sessions with some 20 children each. On the last day of camp, the children wrote reflections about the camp. Several of them wrote that their favorite time during the camp was the Children and Worship time. She reports that one of the girls even wrote, “I loved the story so much that when I grow up, I want to become a Bible storyteller. I want to be just like Mariko!” What a compliment! This type of report gives us hope for the next generation. We must keep focusing on raising up Christians who will carry the light of Christ to the future.

This rich and ongoing experience for children is used around the world. Thus, the commission is disheartened over the loss of support (and RCA trainers) for Children and Worship in the United States (Children and Worship International is continuing within RCA Global Mission).

What it demonstrates is the RCA’s depletion of emphasis on the spiritual formation of children. The church has a biblical and theological mandate to care for children, each of whom is precious to God. At baptism the congregation is asked, “Do you promise to love, encourage, and support these brothers and sisters by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer, and service?” (Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America). Jesus encouraged his followers to welcome the children, feed his sheep, and care for the least of these. Education about the needs of children in our congregations and in the world is the foundation of our ministries with, by, and for children (Matthew 19:14, Deuteronomy 11:18-19).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada conducted a study that showed that 60 percent of congregations that had no Sunday school in 2006 also performed no baptisms. Furthermore, 36.8 percent of congregations without Sunday school and celebrating no baptisms were closed within 15 years. The Presbyterian Church in Canada concluded that congregations that did not reach children and their families with the good news of Jesus had difficulty maintaining ministry of any kind. Thus, having a ministry to children is one of the most effective ways of growing a community of faith.

In her book The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving (St. Martin’s Press, 2015), Lisa Miller provides research that shows that children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality are 40 percent less likely to use and abuse substances, 60 percent less likely to be depressed as teenagers, 80 percent less likely to have dangerous or unprotected sex, and more likely to have positive markers for thriving and high levels of academic success.

The National Council of Churches, in its policy statement “The Church and Children: Vision and Goals for the 21st Century,” states:

Habits developed in childhood will be present throughout their lives. Relationships in childhood affect one’s ability to trust and to hope. Experiences
of childhood shape a person’s attitude toward racism, intolerance, violence, and other challenges to a people striving for true justice and peace. A child’s faith grows as the child grows. Adults who model faith and provide opportunities for children to participate positively in a faith community influence children’s future involvement in worship, education, stewardship, and service to others. If we are to grow and nurture the church of the future, children must be primary participants.

John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner, writing in *Lifelong Faith* (Fall/Winter 2007, Lifelong Faith Associates, pp. 1–13), identify six best practices that congregations are using to provide more holistic and comprehensive faith formation for today’s children:

1. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multisensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

3. Effective faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

Roberto and Pfiffner add, “It goes without saying that an essential practice for making the six best practices effective is that congregations dedicate significant resources—space, people, finances, programs—to a wide array of children’s faith formation activities.” To that end, the commission urges the RCA to dedicate itself to the same goal: commit substantial resources to the ongoing religious development of children.

**Directory of Christian Educators**

The commission is tasked with the work of overseeing the RCA’s progress in the ministry of discipleship. As the commission has taken on this work, we have realized the importance of the connections and the relationships that we have with others who serve in the teaching ministry of the church. Much of this type of work is completed relationally by having conversations and meeting with those who serve the teaching ministry of the church. In our conversations about how to complete this work, we have discovered that a valuable tool for us would be to have a directory of those serving the educational ministries of the church. Similar data on youth ministry leaders is already collected through the annual consistorial reports, and the commission would benefit from having such a directory, so that members of the commission could work on developing relationships with church educators throughout the RCA. Therefore, the commission makes the following recommendation:

**DE 19-1**

To direct the General Synod Council to add a section to the annual Consistorial Report Form that will collect the same information for those who serve in the spiritual formation,
discipleship, and/or teaching ministries of the congregation as that which is currently collected for youth ministry leaders; and further,

To make the data available to the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education for its work of advocating for and monitoring discipleship ministry throughout the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED)

The following is how the request would appear on the annual Consistorial Report Form.

The information below will not be shared with any entity outside the RCA. It will be used to provide support for discipleship and educational ministries in RCA congregations in keeping with the call articulated in Transformed & Transforming.

Primary Christian Education/Discipleship Contact

Please provide information for the person who is the primary contact for discipleship and/or education in your congregation. This person could be a paid staff member such as a Christian education director or pastor of discipleship, or he or she could be a volunteer if your congregation does not have Christian education or discipleship staff. If your congregation has more than one person in this role, please designate one as the primary contact.

Name ___________________________________________

Address _________________________________________

_______________________________________________

☐ Christian Education Director ☐ Pastor of Discipleship
☐ Senior Pastor ☐ Volunteer
☐ Other

Phone (___) ___________________________ ☐ home ☐ work ☐ cell

Email ________________________________

☐ We don’t currently have a Christian education/discipleship contact

RCA and Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America

In June 2005, the General Synod, meeting at Union College in Schenectady, New York, recognized the faithful service to the church provided by the Children and Worship program (celebrating its 20th anniversary) and Christian Educators, Reformed Church in America (CERCA)—celebrating its 25th anniversary. In conveying the synod’s gratitude for CERCA’s 25 years of faithful service to Christ and his church, the general secretary was to “communicate the synod’s encouragement for their continuing service in the years that lie ahead” (MGS 2005, R-38, pp. 133–134).

In February 2018, more than 30 CERCA members gathered at the annual Association
of Presbyterian Church Educators (APCE) event in Louisville, Kentucky. The RCA and CERCA have maintained an affiliate relationship with the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators since 1983. At the annual event, four RCA members provided presentations. Terry DeYoung and Paul Smith offered workshops, and Carol Jones and Ellen Vellenga gave the mini-plenary, “Sharing God’s Hospitality with Children.” The late George Brown Jr. was remembered as the 2012 APCE Educator of the Year during the In Memoriam report. Eight RCA first-timers (five from Mescalero Reformed Church) received assistance from the Supporting and Equipping Educators’ Development Fund. During CERCA’s annual meeting at the event, Jill Ver Steeg (at the time serving as the RCA director of transformational engagement, a member of APCE’s Coordinating Council, and an ex-officio member of CERCA’s leadership team) provided an update on RCA discipleship ministries. CERCA members also enjoyed an evening of fellowship at the Old Spaghetti Factory during the free evening. All commission members except one were able to attend these events and meet with local church educators.

At the recent 2019 annual event, nine members from Mescalero Reformed Church attended. Attendees from Mescalero Reformed received scholarships and encouragement to attend last year; Mark Vellinga, Mescalero’s pastor, expressed appreciation for the conference and for the support received from the RCA. To share their enthusiasm and wisdom, they are considering offering a workshop at a future annual event. All CERCA participants are looking forward to 2021, when CERCA will celebrate its 40th anniversary while the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators celebrates its 50th in Chicago.

As a result, the commission makes the following recommendation to support the ongoing work of CERCA:

**DE 19-2**
To direct the General Synod Council to create a $10,000 fund for CERCA, to be used at the rate of $1,000 per year, in order to provide for professional and personal growth of those working in RCA education and discipleship ministries (continuing education scholarships, expenses related to continuing education events, etc.). RCA staff will make decisions on applications for funds in collaboration with the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education.

And further, to approve the $0.08 per member assessment to fund this initiative. (ADOPTED)

Respectfully submitted,
Bethany Popkes, moderator

The following motion was made and supported:

**DE 19-3**
That the RCA staff reconsider its decision regarding ending Children and Worship support and report its decision to the 2020 General Synod with reasons.

Reasons:
1. A thorough study of this ministry was not conducted prior to the decision.
2. The end of support of the C&W ministry is impacting thousands of lives worldwide. To do so without a thorough review seems unjustifiable.
A motion to table discussion of this motion after the report of the GSC on its review of the Commission on Christian Discipleship and Education was made and supported.

**VOTED:** To table discussion of the motion from the floor until the report of the GSC regarding commission reviews has been presented and acted upon.

Following the report of the GSC regarding commission reviews (and related vote to not adopt EC 19-6) a motion was made and supported to take the motion from the table.

**VOTED:** To take the motion from the table.

**VOTED:** To cease debate.

**VOTED:** To adopt the motion.

The final version of DE 19-3 as adopted reads as follows:

**DE 19-3**
That the RCA staff reconsider its decision regarding ending Children and Worship support and report its decision to the 2020 General Synod with reasons. (ADOPTED)