

6

Next Steps

by Mary Clark

Scripture reading

Matthew 28:18-20

Opening prayer

Lord, thank you for the insights we have gained as we have gathered to learn more about responding to your call to renewal and growth. Give us the desire to continually seek and follow the leading of your Spirit. Amen.

You have just completed reading about and discussing the five components of the RCA's ten-year goal. Now what? What will you do with the information you have studied and talked about? How will you use what God has planted in your heart? Perhaps now is a good time to examine why we have set out on this journey as followers of Christ.

For years the RCA has been declining in members. In addition, many of us worship in congregations whose members are more and more “on the senior side of life.” Often our young people are not present in large numbers on Sunday mornings. Why is this? The music is great, the preaching relevant, and the building beautiful. So why don't more people attend worship services? At times it seems we must jump through so many hoops to be attractive to the nonbeliever or nonattender that we are losing the essence of who we are as a body of professing followers of Christ.

What makes this all the more frustrating is the knowledge that North Americans are hungry for spiritual answers. Walk into any major book-

Mary Clark is coordinator of women's ministries for the Reformed Church in America.

store these days and check out the number of books written on spirituality. Now remember back a few years—we've gone from a few books to an overabundance. Ten years ago there was a shelf; today there are aisles of books written by anyone who has come across what he or she believes to be The Answer.

How can we reach those who are searching for answers? How do we share the difference our faith in Jesus Christ makes in how we live each day, in how we respond to the world around us?

One of the gifts Christ has given us is that, in our passion to follow him, we are committed to giving ourselves to those less fortunate. As followers of Christ we are called to seek justice for the oppressed and attend to the needs of our world. But how can we expect the world we serve to understand our behaviors of service and servanthood if they do not comprehend our commitment to Christ? He is the reason we serve and seek justice.

Our good deeds are not sufficient to buy us a place in heaven. Our hope comes through our commitment to Jesus Christ, and that relationship leads us into fulfilling his mission on earth. The story in Acts 3 and 4 of Peter and John healing the lame man tells us good deeds are the unstoppable result of faith in Jesus Christ.

When our churches were full, it was easy to become complacent about spreading the gospel in our communities. We focused less on evangelism, and our congregations declined. At the same time, there were so many issues to take our attention. The list of needs and concerns in our neighborhood and the world beyond is long, and the abilities of this denomination to assist are enormous. We are a body of believers who want to help. We raise money, build shelters, go on mission trips, buy blankets, feed the hungry, and work against injustice. We don't need our name on the project if partnering with others will create a better solution. We are really good in the ministry of service, and have been for a very long time.

Someone once said that visiting our churches is like attending another family's reunion. The people are friendly and serve great food, but you know you would never be accepted as a full member of the family.

We greet our guests well; we attempt to include them in small groups; but until we are willing to invest our lives in their lives and move beyond just remembering their names to inviting them into our homes and fellowship, they will remain outsiders. And if they remain outsiders, we lose the greatest gift a congregation can receive: the eyes of the new believer, to help us see how we can be the authentic presence of Christ to the communities we live in. It takes a new vision to move people to change from a close-knit family into a community of believers who are actively living out the Great Commission.

Revitalizing existing congregations and starting new ones has never been more important. The world needs people of faith who are eager to share the gospel that gives meaning to life. As Christ's disciples we must be willing to study, share, learn, and grow into leaders willing to step out in his name. As women and men of the Reformed Church in America, we must be willing to look in the mirror and acknowledge that in our desire to keep our churches comfortable for ourselves, they have become uncomfortable for those outside our doors.

We can't treat the Great Commission as a nice suggestion. It is much, much more than that.

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).

This is Christ, the Son of God, giving us his last commandment.

Go...Make...Baptize...Teach. Through Christ, you have been empowered do this. Your church can be revitalized; you can assist a new congregation; as a child of God and a sister or brother in Christ, you are a leader; you can grow as a follower of Christ; and your passion for following Christ will be the fuel that fires mission across the street and around the world.

The RCA Statement of Mission and Vision describes it like this: "A thousand churches in a million ways doing one thing—following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

You are called to be one of the million ways in which the RCA is following Christ in mission. What will your next step be?

Questions

1. What do you consider special or unique about your congregation?
2. How can you use these qualities as a tool for evangelism in your community?
3. Read Acts 3:1-16 and Acts 4:8-12. Why is Christ the reason we do good deeds?
4. How can you encourage more adults in your congregation to attend a weekly Bible study or discipleship group?
5. Who does your church exist for—its members, or unbelievers? If your answer is both, which group gets priority?
6. During coffee hour, who do you spend your time with—a visitor? Your best friend? The newest members? Why?
7. How much time do your leaders (pastor[s], staff, elders, deacons) spend thinking about, planning for, and doing things for nonbelievers? How can you support them in these endeavors?

Closing prayer

Lord God, you have given us the gift of salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ. Forgive us for holding this precious gift so closely to our own hearts that we neglect to pass it on. We acknowledge our tendency to keep our congregations safe, familiar places. Open our eyes to the spiritual needs of our neighbors and communities. Give us the insight and resources to change what needs to be changed in our church and the courage to follow through. In your name we pray. Amen.