RCA Worship Resource Toolkit:  
Sermon on transformation

Written by Denise Kingdom Grier, lead pastor  
at Maple Avenue Ministries, Holland, Michigan
Transformation: Doesn’t It Sound Wonderful?

Can you see it?
Tell the truth, doesn’t it look good?

I’m wondering, can you see it?

Healthy churches making disciples, growing indigenous leaders, finding innovative ways to move saints from “ain’ts” to giants in healthy neighborhoods.

After all, healthy churches are in healthy neighborhoods—if our neighborhoods aren’t healthy—really, how healthy can our church be?

I see it though—can you see it?

Healthy schools and healthy businesses and healthy people walking in and out of healthy churches.

I see it...pastors and principals at coffees shops in communities.

I see prayer meetings filled with confessions and thanksgiving.

Transformation sure looks good.

Like that lady who shows up on the TV screen—on the left she’s wearing frumpy clothes, a downcast gaze, and with a slice of pizza in her hand—

But on the right she’s 100 pounds lighter, sleek, slim and smiling.

Transformation sure looks good to me—
As I sit on my couch with a tub of Ben and Jerry’s Pistachio Pistachio ice cream in my hands, viewing the remarkable testimony of transformation.

And transformation looks good to all of us when someone is drawing us pictures and telling us stories of transformation.

It looks good to us from where we sit.

But from Rome, where Paul’s letter is delivered, transformation looks differently.

It looks like a system based on logic and reason. Steeped in pride and the sure notion of righteousness. His is not a world pulling toward faith, grace, love, and absolute trust in God.

It looks kind of like it does for us—programmatic, law-driven, privilege prevailing, and
“Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

At some point we must leave the safety and comfort of our theories, anecdotes, and imaginations to return to Rome—the real world, where the gospel is real, attitudes and values are real, and the call of Christ to a lost broken world is real.

In the real world there are consistory meetings, board meetings, travel schedules and agendas, tight budgets, energy-sapping buildings, and tired volunteers.

On top of that, we realize the work of transformation—though it looks good from a distance—is like... boot camp. It takes 13 weeks to move from a recruit to a Marine—the perseverance, the sweat, the work—it’s like the lady on the right side of the TV screen—

It requires time—feeling like you are going to pass out—wanting to give up—wondering why you would ever sign up for this and who in the world would dare to choose this for themselves.

What kind of God would ask for such a thing?

Until, then, with trembling hand and sweat dripping from the eyelids, we read the label on the box and see that this process of transformation is what exercise guru Shaun T calls—Insanity.

That’s what they call the workout that promises to sculpt your body in just 60 days—Insanity—

Jump-clap, kick and do a push-up in one smooth movement—Insanity!

That’s what it is—that’s what God, through the apostle Paul, was calling the church in Rome and all of us to—Insanity.

“Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed.”

How— “by the renewing of your mind” —?

That’s insanity—but then—

But then, the gospel is insane—

Speaking nothing into something—is insane
Breathing breath into a handful of dust—is insane
Destroying the earth with water and a colorful bow in the sky—is insane
The virgin birth is insane
The healing of the blind is insane
The raising of Lazarus is insane
An innocent man dying on the cross for the sins of the guilty—insane
An empty tomb is insane
Resurrection of the body—insane

Insanity is God’s mode of operation—

We can get excited about transformation—as a vision, as a picture, but in order to pull it off everyday—one would have to be insane.

Can you see Elijah up on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal: Call your god, call him! Maybe he is in the bathroom—Elijah taunted, as the prophets of Baal cut themselves and did all they could to get the attention of their god—

After many hours of calling—Elijah asks his servants to bring water—barrels of water to the altar and pour water upon it—

Ummm…who does that?
Who pours water on anything they hope to catch on fire? That is insane.

But they poured and poured and poured—and Elijah prayed and he asked God to transform this idolatrous people into a faithful remnant because of the demonstration of God’s power—and fire fell from heaven, licked up the water, the wood, and the entire altar—
That’s insane.

Jesus in John 6—He had fed the multitude on the mountainside. They had sat all day, listening to his teachings. They had come from all over the region to lay eyes upon him, some seeking healing, some seeking merely to be in the midst—and he saw that they were hungry and miraculously fed them.

After this, Jesus stole away to a secluded place to be with his disciples—but the crowds found him and began to come over to the side of the lake where he was.

Jesus said this to them:

You do not come to me because you saw the signs but because you ate of the bread and the fish—do not work for food that spoils but for that which endures—but I tell you, unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no part of me.

Sounds like “Do not be conformed to this world…”

And they threw up their hands, questioning, “Who can do this?” and “This is too hard for us!”

It was good for them to hear about Jesus and eat all that he fed them—but now that the Lord was calling for transformation—to stop thinking of spiritual food and to instead long for the food that will not perish—
Well, this Jesus’ request was absolutely, positively, nothing short of—insane.

Transformation is an insane process.

The process of transformation is best witnessed in the life cycle of a butterfly.

Oh, when you see him first, he is a furry cute little caterpillar, eating on a leaf. That’s all caterpillars do, you know? They sit on leaves and eat and eat and eat—

Sounds familiar to the church—
like someone who has been in church most of their life but has never served any committee.

Sounds like when the church and community helped someone raise well-behaved, God-fearing children, but that same someone won’t mentor, foster, or adopt another child to do the same. They just keep nibbling on the leaf.

Like somebody has been sitting in Bible study with all of the answers, but won’t teach the lesson. They eat at the dinner but won’t cook. They’re submitting prayer requests but won’t commit to a life of prayer—just eating like a caterpillar.

And if we didn’t know better, we would think a caterpillar was exactly what it was intended to be. I bet if that caterpillar had its way, it would be content to just remain there on that leaf, eating, eating, and eating forever.

The life expectancy of a caterpillar is two weeks to one month—afer that it must change or die.
How long can our churches live if they are just eating? How long can we survive chomping on the vision of the past, the prayers of our parents, the way we used to do it? How long can we live without transformation?

But who wants to undergo the insanity, honestly? I don’t claim to know the mind of the caterpillar, but I would imagine that when he looks upon the beautiful brilliant butterfly, he looks upon her with admiration and hope—but he would still choose to chomp on the Ben & Jerry’s or tree leaves and die, than to go through the process of insanity. It’s a natural choice.

But the caterpillar is only intended to be a caterpillar for a short time—he is created for transformation—

“Be not conformed to this world but be transformed …”

The world places a high value on the power and pleasure that comes from conformity.

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed…”
And transformation requires that the caterpillar change—from a consumer to participant with his creator in the fulfillment of his purpose. He must move to the next stage. The pupal stage.

That's where the RCA is: in the pupal stage.

This is the stage when the caterpillar creates a chrysalis, which essentially is the laboratory of insanity.

For in that chrysalis the caterpillar actually digests himself.

It reminds me of the instruction of a Jewish Rabbi, who told his followers:

“If anyone seeks to be my disciple let him take up his cross and follow me.”

He must digest himself—he must present his body, willfully, voluntarily, as a living sacrifice.

To digest oneself is to depart from what one is in order to become a different self—not a younger self, not a facelift or Botox—this is a complete digestion of the old self.

Anakainosis in Greek is the process of digestion that produces a different self. For the old has passed away and all things become new—he must digest himself. This takes time for the old greedy caterpillar to lose his old self in the insane process of anakainosis. He must consume his own fur, his own skin, his own eyes, his own self, until there is nothing else left of that caterpillar. NO one does it to him—he submits himself as a living sacrifice to the self-imposed process of anakainosis.

In fact, if you cut the outer layer of the chrysalis too soon, a gooey, liquidy substance will leak out—and you will think you have lost the caterpillar and you still have no butterfly.

But take heart, beloved—

For in that ooey, gooey mess is a compound of cells, which were deposited in the caterpillar when it was only an egg—To borrow the words from the RCA liturgy for baptism—when it “knew nothing of it yet.” Before it grew fur, or ears, or even before it began to eat on the leaf, the creator of the caterpillar placed within it everything it needed.

The psalmist testified of it in Psalm 139:
You created me in my inmost part—knit me together in my mother’s womb—

The prophet Jeremiah echoed the words of God, who said:
Before I formed you in your mother’s womb I knew you.
Indeed, the Creator placed within it everything it needed to grow legs and wings and brilliant colors.

And this insane process of transformation would successfully bring to pass the fullness of the Creator’s plan, in the Creator’s appointed time. Yes, the one who began a good work will faithfully complete it in this caterpillar.

And that same creator is Lord of the church, of the RCA, of your church—the one who knew us before the waters of baptism touched our forehead—who placed in us everything we need to endure the insanity.

The insanity workout program is a 60-day program—they guarantee results or you get your money back—

The caterpillar’s insanity process could take days, or weeks, or months—

So be warned, the Holy Ghost’s insanity program will take some time too. But heed these words: “There is a vision for the people of God and though it may seem to tarry, wait for it”—
Wait for it, wait for it—
And by faith and God’s grace it will come to pass.

We may not see it yet, but by faith believe that beyond the protective covering of the chrysalis—

The legs are already formed as churches begin leveraging foot soldiers into their community.

The wings are already shaped as the prayers of the saints are filling the heavens with praise and petitions night and day—
and filling congregations with repentance,
consistories with intercession,
and classes with reconciliation.

The chrysalis is ready to break forth a church:

The birthing stool of the kingdom is ready—
The extremities of the church are firm in her stirrups—
The chrysalis of insanity will soon run its course—

And this butterfly is coming forth:

Engaging communities in mission—
Launching emerging leaders—
Creating disciples for the church—
Soaring toward a future freed from racism—
This chrysalis is breaking into a new, beautiful, brilliant church.

A church—laying eggs, planting churches, creating new ministries, baptizing new believers—
This church, this butterfly was not created to consume—but to multiply—

With the wind of the Holy Spirit at her backs and the grace of God upon our life—
Insanely—transformed and transforming.

Radically, following Christ in mission—together.