

**FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION:
THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR
REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA CHURCHES**

BY

JILL K. VER STEEG, M.DIV., D.MIN.

INTRODUCTION

A church in Michigan was recently at a crossroads. The pastor wondered what he and his congregation had accomplished in the past year. He couldn't remember the last time he was excited about his leadership and the church. He didn't want to have another conversation about the church not growing or listen to another person lament, "Where have all the young people gone?" It felt like he spent more time putting out fires than planning for spiritual and numerical growth. He knew that many of his volunteers were overworked and underappreciated. The church's limited community engagement produced little evidence of real or lasting change in the life of the church. There were no adult baptisms or new people.

The pastor wondered what happened to the vigor and energy that his congregation once had for reaching new people. He felt like he was working harder than ever before, but with worse results than the church had ever experienced.

This church had plateaued.

This church is not unlike other churches across the Reformed Church in America (RCA) today. It is not a surprise that some RCA congregations are aging and dying and many struggle to see real transformation in their context. The world is changing. The people that God is calling into relationship with Jesus and with local congregations through the work of the Holy Spirit look very different. These people love Jesus, but they are often less interested in the church. They are eager for personal growth and transformation, but they don't look primarily to local congregations to find it.

Many congregations are trying to respond to this new reality. They desire to provide pathways for all the people that God entrusts to them to begin a life with Jesus and then to experience deep change through their life in Christ over time—for their sake and the sake of others.

Congregations all over North America, including this one in Michigan, need to engage in prayerful discernment and careful planning in response to these societal changes. In order for churches to move off plateau and into transformation, they must engage in an adaptive change process called a learning community.

MINISTRY CONTEXT

One word describes the current reality of the Reformed Church in America: decline. Not only are churches declining because of aging members, but many congregations are also seeing millennials leave the church. The challenge is to identify and understand the current landscape of the church and then to map a way toward vibrant, growing, and healthy churches.

How drastic is this decline? According to the Pew Research Center, adults in the U.S. who identify as Christians fell from 78 to 71 percent between 2007 and 2014.¹ Simultaneously, those who identify as “religiously unaffiliated” (meaning atheists, agnostics, or people who are “nothing in particular”) jumped seven points, from just over 16 percent to 23 percent.² In that same seven-year period, mainline Protestant adults declined from 41 million to 36 million, a decline of approximately 5 million.³

Unbelief has become the default option. For many people, nothing seems to be missing from their lives, which means that we cannot come proclaiming that there is a God-shaped hole in their hearts. In the postmodern society in which we live, people have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives. God is unnecessary.

Moreover, today’s millennials have absorbed a new kind of religion. Christian Smith describes this new religion as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or MTD.⁴ This is the dominant religious belief system of today’s culture. MTD can be summarized as follows: “(1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth. (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about myself. (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. (5) Good people go to heaven when they die.”⁵ MTD is a doctrine of a God who is available only in crisis. This is a vision of God that is more about us than about God.

¹ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (May 12, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 162.

⁵ Ibid, 162.

As the church, we must ask ourselves who we are in this secular age. How shall we be faithful to our gospel witness? The secular age and its foundational assumptions are the air we breathe. In such a world, investing in faith just does not seem relevant.

Churches on a plateau

RCA pastors and leaders are fully aware of the frenzied, consumer-driven, and technologically saturated culture in which they minister. The reality is that many RCA churches have been in maintenance mode—keeping the church running as it's always run—which is why they find themselves among plateaued churches.

What does it mean to be a church that has plateaued?

First, plateaued RCA churches have lost their passion for mission. They posture themselves to keep the programs of the church running. They stay internally focused rather than externally focused on the place and the context that God has placed them. When the *modus operandi* are simply to continue doing church as it has always been done, then changes in demographics and shifts in population affect churches unfavorably.

Second, plateaued RCA churches use the wrong methods for ministry and mission. One of these methods is the attractional model of church, when it's all about getting people to come to you. Another approach, the consumer model, tends to focus on programs that try to make a church successful rather than processes that are a pathway to significance.

Third, plateaued RCA churches resist change. It is not that churches do not want to change but that they do not know how to change. Some congregations see a pattern of decline but are convinced they are on the verge of turning a corner toward effectiveness in reaching their communities. These churches might make minor incremental changes and experience a brief upturn before the decline resumes.

Finally, plateaued RCA churches exhibit stagnant leadership. These pastors and leaders are on autopilot or may even be incompetent to lead the church. When leaders discover that they must look inward in order to change—rather than rely on external factors such as role reassignments, performance reviews, or leadership training—they often become threatened.

Given this composite of plateaued churches, what is the response of the Reformed Church in America? It is clear that doing nothing is not an option. The call for congregational transformation is urgent. If RCA churches are going to not only survive but thrive, the church must stop working harder at what it has always done and instead be courageous enough to risk and to innovate.

The need for Transformed & Transforming

God wants to transform the church for the sake of the world. This means learning new ways of being the church in the twenty-first century and offering an opportunity to live into what it means to love and serve Jesus. Leadership is about transformation *and* mission, about growing *and* going, about personal development *and* corporate effectiveness—all simultaneously. How would our world look different if RCA churches had a discipleship pathway, growing disciples who made reproducible disciples? If we looked at our neighbors as fellow image-bearers of God?

For the RCA, the journey toward transformation began in 2009, when the General Synod Council instructed then-general secretary Wesley Granberg-Michaelson to lead the church through a process of discernment of the RCA's continuing call to mission and ministry. This grassroots process engaged thousands of RCA members over more than three years, culminating in the adoption of *Transformed & Transforming*, the RCA's fifteen-year vision for ministry.

The vision is big: in fifteen years, the RCA will be characterized by a culture that fosters transformation in Christ as a foundational value, where every congregation is equipped to provide pathways for all people to experience deep change through the power of the Holy Spirit. Transformation is the common thread that runs through the future we espouse—the future we believe God has called the RCA to. In order for congregational transformation to become a reality, leadership must first be transformed.

From plateaued to transformed

The Reformed Church in America has been around a long time—since 1628—and its history has included growth, decline, and plateau. Prior to the beginning of the *Transformed & Transforming* discernment process, the continual decline in membership was a glaring reality and deep burden. Between 2010 and 2013, many regional synods of the RCA reflected a decrease of 8 to 11 percent in confessing membership.⁶ Not only were there fewer confessing members; there was also a decline in average worship attendance. The RCA had a choice to make. Maintaining the status quo was not one of the choices. This would not be a quick fix, but rather slow, steady, and intentional. Adaptive change would be needed to bring about transformation and revitalization.

In order to shift the narrative from plateaued churches to transforming churches, four shifts would need to happen. These shifts would be denomination-wide and would inform the fifteen-year *Transformed & Transforming* goals.

The first shift is from *program* to *process*. The idea of process serves the vision that RCA churches are on a journey where movement exists—where ministry and mission is changing as churches take their next faithful step. Processes that include information, reflection, action, and reflection on the action will ensure greater congregational buy-in and systemic ownership.

The second shift is from *institutional* to *missional*. For generations the RCA has been engaged in building the RCA as a denomination, which also has value. But the shift from institutional to missional requires embracing the mission of God, being sent as the church of Jesus Christ, and being empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the gospel. Being a missional denomination is being committed to radically following Christ in mission together.

The third shift is from *structural* to *contextual*. The church is more than a structure. In order to make disciples and live out the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, a church must understand the ministry context into which God has placed it.

⁶ RCA Constitorial Report, "Church Statistical Data," <http://crf.rca.org/public-stats>

The fourth shift within Transformed & Transforming is from *doing* to *equipping*. This is a shift in mental models. Rather than operate with a top-down approach—assuming that the denomination knows what local congregations need—the denomination will listen to the local church in order to equip.

The hoped-for outcome of these shifts is that RCA congregations will be thriving, missional, and culturally relevant. Churches will thrive as they live out God’s call for the congregation in their context. Churches will be missionally driven, embodying sacrificial service, authentic relationships, and spiritual transformation. And churches will be culturally relevant, equipped for ministry that serves their context.

THE THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

The biblical understanding of transformation means that humanity is changed because of a relationship to Jesus Christ. Theologically, transformation is understood as confessions of sin, outward expressions of grace, repentance, forgiveness, and ultimately lives that have been changed. In the RCA, the idea of transformation is also found in the creeds and confessions.

In the original Greek language of the New Testament, the word “disciple” is *mathetes*, which means “learner.”⁷ What Jesus invites people into is a lifelong journey of learning. If one is not learning from Jesus, then that person is not a disciple. Nowhere in Scripture is humanity invited to receive Jesus as Savior and then do nothing about it.

Before Jesus ascends into heaven, he tells his disciples to continue the work he started: “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” (Mt. 28:19-20).

Jesus’ command to make disciples is the RCA’s mandate to help all people grow and deepen their faith as they live it out in everyday life. To “cultivate transformation in Christ,” one of the basic tenets of Transformed & Transforming, means that the church is actively “developing passionate disciples filled with the Holy Spirit and the truth of the Word who effectively make followers of Jesus who live and love like him.”⁸ Thus, being a disciple of Jesus ought to produce visible expressions of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22).

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see him leading the disciples through adaptive work. Jesus’ method of teaching and leadership development includes both invitation and challenge, thus creating a safe environment for the disciples to learn the ways of the Rabbi. In this way, Jesus helps the disciples to “become true learners who are ready to adapt to whatever comes before [them].”⁹ This incarnational immersion—being with Jesus in order to learn from Jesus and grow more deeply

⁷ Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁸ “Transformed & Transforming: Radically Following Christ in Mission Together” (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church in America, 2013).

⁹ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 27.

as a Christ follower—represents a core part of the development and adaptive change a leader must undergo in order to move to the next level of leadership.

Jesus' model for learning is a synergy of teaching, practice, and reflection. Through his teaching, Jesus invites the disciples into an intimate relationship with him. In the language of adaptive change, he is able to get the disciples to maintain disciplined attention, even when it is painful. When he observes behavior that is contrary to God's will or attitudes that are wrong or unhealthy, he directly challenges his disciples. Jesus immerses his students in an environment of invitation and challenge, giving them space to process their learning along with their doubts, hopes, and fears.

LEARNING AND ADAPTING IN COMMUNITY

Historically, learning has been seen as something that happens when a person attends a conference, reads a book, or attends a lecture—and, by doing so, solves a problem. But merely receiving new knowledge isn't enough to bring about deep change. Rather, lives are transformed by inward learning. When leaders are willing to change themselves, then they are able to learn.

This is a central dilemma for most Christian leaders. They are called to help people to grow, change, and be transformed, but unless they themselves are growing, how can they expect the congregations and organizations in their care to grow? Many pastors in North America are worn down from trying to bring change to churches that are stuck and declining, churches that are clinging to the past, or churches that are jumping at quick fixes for what clearly are bigger challenges. Though leaders cannot anticipate the situations they will encounter, they can change their mindset to adapt to those situations.

Adaptive change is the result of responding to what Ronald Heifetz calls an “adaptive challenge,” which must be distinguished from a “technical problem.”¹⁰ Technical problems are fixable and those solutions are readily available. Things return to the way they were. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, require a new mindset. Adaptive challenges create a multiplicity of opportunities for leaders and their congregations to learn. This learning involves practice and reflection, allowing the learners to control the process. Thus, a readiness to learn and embrace uncertainty is a necessary prerequisite to doing adaptive work. Adaptive work surfaces when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the success of the past. These challenges demand that leaders make hard choices about what to preserve and what to let go.

The deep and sustainable change that churches who move from plateau to transformation is internal and systemic change. But for too many, the fear of making a mistake prevents learning, which prevents this change. It is a daunting reality to think that many pastors or church leaders remain on auto-pilot for months, or even years, in an unproductive holding pattern, failing to realize that they are not being good stewards of their gifts and call to lead the church. For many of these churches, the pain and loss that comes with change is just too great.

If RCA churches are to do the adaptive work of moving off of plateaus and into places of transformation, they will need something called a holding environment—a space to experiment, explore, confess, pilot, and move into new ways of being. A psychological space that is both safe

¹⁰ Heifetz and Laurie, “The Work of Leadership.”

and uncomfortable. In a holding environment, leaders have a safe place in which to be transparent and, at the same time, a challenging space in which to identify and absorb the painful realities of their plateau, where they have not changed—where they are stagnant. This is not easy work. As mentioned before, part of the adaptive change is loss. The ministries that a church held dear for so many years may need to end. The position held by a beloved staff member may no longer serve the church's vision. Pastors and leaders hold the responsibility to motivate, organize, and focus the attention of their congregation on the adaptive problem the team is seeking to address.

The way the RCA is approaching transformation is through learning communities, which serve as holding environments for congregations that want to be transformed. These learning communities are groups of congregations that “work together to discern, design, and implement experiences and unique pathways that will enable all the people they are called to serve to be transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into passionate, outwardly-focused disciples that live for the sake of others.”¹¹ These congregations learn from each other and with one another as they engage the process, invest in the provided accountability through coaching, and ultimately discern the pathway that grows disciples who make reproducible disciples in their unique context.

Learning communities serve to foster adaptive change by introducing congregations to other churches, which may have different approaches to ministry. When these narratives differ within the learning process, two things happen: tension surfaces and new learning emerges. Writes Jim Herrington, “There are two kinds of heat that arise in a holding environment: the heat of creative tension and the heat of emotional tension (aka ‘anxiety’).”¹² The goal is to move into creative tension, which means people need to manage their anxiety. Leaders must work to raise the temperature that comes from creative tension in a way that allows people to manage their emotional tension.

By offering a place where creative tension can serve as a catalyst for innovation and risk-taking, learning communities help to move churches from places of plateau to places of transformation.

The importance of community

Scripture offers again and again a picture of humans created to be in relationship with other humans. Hebrews depicts such a community: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25, NIV).

The writer to the Hebrews also acknowledges that the purpose of community is to spur one another on. The word “spur” carries both challenge and invitation. The challenge comes because loving other people and doing good deeds aren't always easy. But it's an invitation because doing those things can bring about beautiful relationships and a more just world. In that sense, Jesus certainly spurs his disciples on to love and good deeds.

Likewise, a learning community seeks both to challenge churches and to invite them into a new way of being, into an adventure of “looking at our problems differently,” and into opportunities to love

¹¹ Tom De Vries, “2015 General Synod Council Monitoring Report,” (2015).

¹² Ibid, 48.

and serve Jesus with greater intentionality and purpose.¹³ Within this community, we are called to reflect Christ to one another so that beyond this community, we reflect him in all the places God sends us. A community is a spiritual family, a place not only of belonging and loving, but a place of resurrection and new life. It's a place where we accept one another for who we are—sinful, limited, and broken—and a place of transformation, where we see one another's gifts and capacity to grow.

Part of what makes a learning community a transformative process is that participants are learning from and with one another. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). When churches come together to share best practices or to share pilot experiences that failed, mutual learning occurs. Mutual learning leads to growth and change.

The RCA sees learning communities as the mechanisms through which churches are transformed. Within the RCA, the Transformational Equipping team has prayerfully discerned a fifteen-year vision for its work: "In 15 years, the RCA will be characterized by a culture that fosters transformation in Christ as a foundational value; where every congregation is equipped to provide pathways for all people to experience deep change through the power of the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ The team is focused on developing learning communities of congregations that learn from and with one another as the congregations create discipleship pathways for the people God entrusts to them.

FROM PLATEAU TO TRANSFORMATION

As previously mentioned, in order for RCA churches to move off plateau and into a place of transformation, they need to engage in a learning community process. Remember, a church that has plateaued is experiencing some or all of the following symptoms: the congregation has lost its vision, its passion for making reproducible disciples has diminished, pockets of dysfunction may exist within the body, and the church has turned its focus from reaching out to maintaining itself within the church walls. There are very few vital signs left.

But all is not lost for a plateaued church. Transformation is possible. Throughout the pages of the Bible, transformation—deep life change—shows up again and again: a blind man receives sight, a dead little girl comes back to life, a lame man walks, a bleeding woman is healed, the chains of a prisoner fall off, thousands of believers are added.

Before a congregation can be a transforming agent in the world, it must first be transformed in Christ. In order for a congregation to move from plateau to transformation, it must engage in adaptive change—a process that, in the RCA, happens through a learning community.

So how do we know if the learning community was successful? What does a transformed congregation actually look like?

Outcomes of transformed congregations

¹³ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 34.

¹⁴ "Transformational Engagement Strategic Priority Area" (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Church in America, 2014), 2.

The first outcome of a congregation that has experienced transformation is that the people will be active participants in Christ's kingdom mission, both locally and globally. A church that is focused on Christ's mission advocates for justice and mercy, is on the front lines of serving the poor, and proclaims the gospel faithfully and boldly in both word and deed each week. Such a church claims its identity as a sent church, an identity that is rooted in the call of Abram in Genesis 12. The church that participates in Christ's kingdom mission on earth embodies cultural relevance. This does not mean a watered-down delivery of the gospel; rather, it means the church translates an unchanging gospel, communicating it boldly and properly in an ever-changing world. This church makes prayer a priority and has a passion for sharing life with those who are far from God.

The second outcome of a transformed congregation is that members love one another. This congregation of people with an increasing love for each another will put the love of Jesus into action. A transformed church looks not to its own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:4), with a love that overflows outward. The church sacrifices its own comfort to accomplish the task.

A third outcome of a transformed church is the visible behavior it produces. In what ways will ministry and mission be strengthened in a manner that is noticeable? The transformed church acts in faith as it makes decisions, stewards the people of God, and takes appropriate risks out of obedience to God. The transformed church acts out kindness as it advocates and speaks up for people who suffer injustice. The church works for the good of others in the world with no expectation of return.

A fourth outcome of a transformed church is that it develops emerging leaders and mobilizes the next generation. A transformed church identifies potential leaders and convenes them in order to equip them for ministry inside and outside the church. These people become catalysts for change as they are trained through information, imitation, and immersion. The transformed church has moved from multigenerational to intergenerational—a place where different generations are invested in each other. Young people are prioritized in all areas of the church. The transformed church creates a culture where youth and young adults can experience belonging, explore their purpose, and experiment with and exercise leadership in a safe and affirming place.

Another outcome of a transformed church is that it has a clear and compelling picture of God's preferred future—of what God wants to do in and through the church. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV). Every time a leader talks about what could and should be, he or she is talking about vision. A clear vision helps a church move from ideas to reality. It incites hope in the life of the congregation and encourages them to participate in something larger than themselves. Every member of the church, from young children to senior adults, should be able to articulate why the church exists and what it is called to do. As the level of understanding grows, so do buy-in and commitment.

A sixth outcome of a transformed church is its passion for reproducing leaders. This commitment has its roots in the early church. Throughout the apostle Paul's missionary journeys, he disciplined, invested in, and empowered leaders, church planters, and evangelists. The multiplication of leaders, ministries, and churches is in the DNA of the transformed church. These churches reproduce not only leaders and ministries but also whole churches. The transformed church understands itself as sent and consistently works to help plant new churches to reach more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What differentiates the transformed church from the rest is that it engages conflict redemptively; this is yet another outcome of transformation. What is redemptive conflict? It takes place when one person says to another, “This disagreement will not undo us. The bond we have in Christ is stronger than this conflict.” When we take conflict personally, we can become blind to these redemptive opportunities. Instead, transformed churches and leaders embrace tension. When disagreement surfaces, individuals, teams, and entire church systems have the opportunity to evaluate their own positions, perspectives, and beliefs. A transformed church seizes this opportunity to learn rather than becoming resentful or defensive. It consistently evaluates its actions and intentions in order to bring glory to God.

The last outcome of a transformed church is to take risks and learn from failure. Only when churches take risks can a culture of innovation and creativity be sustained. Failure offers an opportunity for people to learn, if pastors and leaders can develop the tolerance for feelings that come with failure and have the skills to deal with these feelings. When a church staff, a consistory, a congregation, or a classis reflects and learns from its failure, then it can experience transformation. A transformed church assesses risks prior to taking action and is willing to take calculated risks based on what they have learned in order to change the course of action.

Transformed and transforming churches are focused on God’s mission in the world. Transformed and transforming pastors and church leaders are open to dream and willing to risk. As churches are transformed in Christ, they become the transforming agents of change in the world, bringing the truth of the gospel in real and relevant ways. They are innovative, confident, restorative, and attentive to their neighbors, their cities, and the world. They faithfully and boldly share the good news of Jesus Christ, all the while partnering with the Holy Spirit to bring transformation in the lives of people.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY FRAMEWORK

You may be wondering: how does a learning community operate? According to Ridder Church Renewal, a learning community process executed jointly by the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Western Theological Seminary, a learning community’s “transformation process is built on commitment (through covenant relationships), time, engaging information, practicing that information, and reflecting on the practice within your context. This process of receiving information, putting it in to practice and then reflecting on what happens leads to deep change not only for an individual but for the church.”¹⁵ A learning community helps a congregation discern and develop its vision and an action plan to achieve and execute that vision.

Parts of a learning community

The first component of a learning community is the idea of community itself, which we previously discussed. Churches learn from and with one another as they acquire information. The process is collaborative, which means that all participants are both teacher and learner. All involved need the support, challenge, and critique of the others. Each participating church also commits to the learning process. They commit to be present at each gathering, ready to invest in the hard work of adaptive

¹⁵ “Ridder Church Renewal Coaching Guide” (Holland, MI: Western Theological Seminary), 1.

change. They commit to keep the goals they set to accomplish between sessions. They commit to offer mutual support, reflective listening, and prayers for one another.

The second piece of a learning community is content: each learning community is typically focused around a theme that serves to bring transformation to participating churches. The content of a learning community is driven by what these churches care strongly about. Themes include, but are not limited to, leadership development, discipleship, local missional engagement, cultural competency, and ministry with people who have disabilities. The goal of the content is to help participating churches learn what they need to know in order to do what they need to do. The content provides churches with a greater understanding, which helps them develop greater ownership of the process. Participants also examine successful examples in their chosen ministry area to help churches think creatively and innovate thoughtfully.

A third part of a learning community is the spiritual dynamic. God is constantly at work transforming lives by bringing change, renewal, restoration, and hope. Thus the learning community is set within a missional context—a vision of the church as a covenant community in mission, loving God and loving neighbor as Jesus taught and modeled. Prayer is central throughout the entire process, providing an essential foundation. And, dwelling in the Word together helps strengthen community and serves to develop a shared mind. This practice also helps set the tone of the gathering, helping participants to center on the work ahead and on God, who is present in their midst.

The fourth component of a learning community is accountability in the form of a coach. Coaching has been a valuable resource in the RCA for years. Coaches are an essential piece of transformative learning; they create safe environments for leaders to reflect on call, purpose, and strategy. In a learning community, coaching is done on both an individual and a group basis. The coach does not exist to provide answers, but to ask the right questions. A coach might ask, “How are things going in the learning community? Where are you or your team stuck? What do you want to work on today?” Without coaching, it is challenging for pastors and leaders to maintain disciplined attention to the learning process amidst the daily pressures and demands of pastoral ministry. Coaching is not offering advice or therapy; rather, it is listening long enough and well enough to ask the right questions in order for the leader to take his or her next faithful step.

The fifth part of a learning community is strategic goals. The learning community process helps churches think, design, build, and analyze the strategic goals that serve the vision and mission of their contexts. The process involves setting both overarching goals and smaller goals to accomplish between sessions. For each participating church, naming a desired outcome from the start gives direction to the work and helps shape the process by providing a basis for measuring progress. Being able to visualize the goal helps the church team stay accountable to the commitment they made to their congregation, to one another, and to the process. With the end in mind, churches can report their progress honestly, and learn from that honest assessment.

Who and when?

Who is involved in a learning community? There are three main roles: the facilitator, the participants, and the coaches. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit is an active participant empowering and bringing transformation throughout the process.

The *facilitator* conducts the learning community sessions. He or she cultivates a safe and supportive environment for churches to do their work, fully embracing the vision of learning communities as processes that bring transformation to churches. Facilitators listen actively and ask good questions in both individual and group settings. They use a variety of small and large group activities to facilitate learning, and are skilled at reading the room and the participants. Facilitators often choose the coaches for the learning community.

The *participants* come from seven to ten churches; each church sends a team of four to five people. These participants are key congregational leaders that represent the diversity of the church in terms of experience, gender, age, and race or ethnicity. It is important for a church to first discern whether it is ready to participate in a learning community, and then to assess and select qualified participants.

Coaches for a learning community know how to ask powerful questions and are equipped with a covenant structure to maximize the effectiveness of the relationship. Coaches themselves generally have a mentor to help them stay focused as they invest in the process.

When does a learning community meet? Because a learning community is a process that should not be rushed, it is preferable that participants meet regularly face-to-face for at least six months but no more than twenty-four months. Typically, participants gather quarterly. With the help of the facilitator, participating churches determine together how frequently they will meet and how long the learning community will last. These decisions are based on the needs of the group.

How?

In order to successfully execute a learning community, the following steps need to be taken.

First, discern interest. This happens as denominational staff members, regional staff members, pastors, and members of local congregations develop relationships with one another where trust is strong and congregations are able to share their hopes, struggles, dreams, and call within a safe environment. When RCA staff members talk with pastors and churches, the focus of the conversation is not on having the right answers but on asking the right questions. As these conversations take place, denominational staff will begin to see a group of churches that are asking related questions and are interested in similar themes.

The connection event is the next step in the process. It is a “taste-and-see” opportunity for churches interested in exploring a learning community. It is also a place for denominational staff to build trust. Participants usually include the pastor or pastors of a church and one or two key church leaders. At the connection event, pastors should be encouraged to reflect upon and share their church’s strengths, opportunities, and challenges. Participants also learn the logistics of the learning community to better understand to what they would be committing.

After the connection event, church leaders will discuss the invitation to join a learning community and determine whether the opportunity is right for their church. If the church decides to join the learning community, the consistory or administrative board appoints a team and team leader to participate, and empowers them to lead the process in the congregation. The denominational staff person follows up, typically by phone, with each pastor who attended the connection event, to help churches discern and finalize their commitment. The process of following up with each church can take three to five months.

Planning for the first learning community session begins at least six months beforehand. The RCA staff person establishes a design team, made up of a facilitator (who may be the staff person or a colleague), a knowledge capture leader (who records notes, photos, and video of each session), and an administrator (who oversees logistics), to start this planning.

The learning community should be designed with the end goal in mind. In the RCA, learning communities generally fall under one of three overarching themes—discipleship, leadership, and mission. So the corresponding end goal might be for participating churches to create a discipleship process that leads to reproducible disciples, to create a leadership development process that mobilizes emerging leaders for ministry, or to create clear on-ramps for members to serve their community a certain number of times each year. Every learning community session should work to achieve that end goal, which is ultimately to move out of plateau and into a place of transformation.

The design team structures each session with a balance of skill training, time for reflection and discussion for each participating church, large group report-out and discussion, time for prayer, and large and small group activities. The session content, which is incorporated into the entire learning community session, is driven by the needs of the churches and their end goal.

Measuring success

For a learning community to succeed, two things are key: accountability and evaluation.

Accountability produces results. Without accountability, goals can get pushed to the back burner. Even teams that are procrastinators in the early sessions get busy when they see engagement and results, and they become eager to share their own results with the rest of the group. This sharing is done through coaching and the group's Facebook page.

Evaluation is done regularly by the design team: immediately after a session, two weeks after a session, and at the conclusion of the learning community. The final evaluation is informed by participant evaluation surveys, as well. Participant testimonies and the final evaluation assist in recruiting participants for future learning community opportunities.

What next?

When the learning community wraps up, the work of transformation is just beginning. Participating churches return to their contexts and continue the adaptive challenge of shifting culture by, for example, piloting new leadership, mission, or discipleship initiatives; repurposing staff roles; or hiring new staff. They also continue to enjoy connectivity and a place to share best practices on Facebook and are encouraged to stay in relationship with their trained coach. The peer learning, the coaching, the resourcing, and the individual action plans serve the vision for transformation.

Participating churches are in the best position to recruit new churches into a learning community because every day, participating churches can share stories about God's kingdom breaking into people's lives, about reconciliation and renewal, about growing disciples who make disciples, or about churches partnering across ecumenical lines for the purposes of providing water, caring for refugees, feeding the hungry, and serving the poor. This is the heart of the gospel to which God calls and continues to call us to. It is as churches participate in this gospel that they are transformed.

Transformation is the result of the church moving from “here” to “there.” Learning communities are not over when certain skills or competencies are mastered. Transformation is ongoing. It is a continual process that God calls the church to do in the world.

CONCLUSION

As members of the RCA, it brings us no joy to see congregations that have plateaued. But many churches are not prepared to thrive, much less survive in the postmodern, secularized world they inhabit. This reality presents a serious problem for the church. The way church used to work is no longer the way it works today. The pastor no longer holds the power to bring about the deep change that is needed. Nor does the congregation any longer ascribe that power to the pastor.

In order to be transformed, congregations need a new model for what church is and what it does. The church today cannot simply have the “right answers.” Ministry in the twenty-first century is about asking the right questions and allowing the hard work of deep change to be in the hands of the body of Christ—the church. The congregation must face adaptive challenges and submit to adaptive change. This is an arduous process, but it is necessary in order for churches to move to a place of transformation.

Transformation is what God has called us to do. It is the future we long for. As God’s Word says so well, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17). This new thing has come and is coming through the work of adaptive change. Transformed leaders are needed to lead congregations on a new path, one that moves off plateau and through a process of revitalization. Transformed leaders will bring about a renewed commitment to discipleship, leadership, and mission that produces transformed people who participate in Christ’s kingdom in new, fresh, and creative ways.

The adaptive work necessary to bring about deep change and transformation in churches and in leaders occurs in a learning community. Because the right answers are not what the church needs, the learning community process serves the local church by having denominational and regional RCA staff come alongside the church rather than direct it. The learning community acts as a holding environment to assist churches in discerning what God is calling them to do and be and in setting their strategic goals. It also provides resources to support their learning and holds them accountable through trained coaches.

Learning communities move churches from here to there by asking, session after session: *What is? What could be? What will be?* The work of change happens when church teams roll up their sleeves and do the heavy lifting together instead of having the pastor do all the work. The peer learning provides churches with an opportunity to speak into one another’s vision and mission, acknowledging that new mental models must be discovered and not imposed.

Before a church is willing to participate in a learning community, it must believe that the support provided by the denominational staff is different than simply passing along information. For some churches, this new way of thinking is challenging. A key way to live into this new way of deep change is through relationships—both the strengthening of current relationships and the investment of time into new relationships. These relationships will help create a foundation of trust so that

more churches open themselves to the learning community process. Once churches have joined a learning community, the denominational staff seeks to help them discover the dynamic relationship between their vision, values, and mission. In doing so, the church is able to develop a specific pathway that will empower leaders, launch them into ministry, and help them grow reproducible disciples. Through people, content, and process, the hope for the learning community is to bring about lasting change to set RCA churches on a kingdom trajectory for the twenty-first century.

Equipping the saints

Since its beginnings in the first century, the church's work has been "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). This equipping happens through the learning community process, as a body of women and men aspire to see their churches move off plateau and into transformation—to see their churches resist easy answers and work on wrestling with the right questions.

Imagine if each of the RCA's eight regions had multiple learning communities of eight to ten churches gathering in a space of mutual respect and trust, listening to one another, praying for one another, and pushing one another. Imagine if they were developing strategies to serve their neighbors, train emerging leaders for mission, grow reproducible disciples, and explore partnerships with one another. Then imagine if each one of the participating churches became a base of operation for future learning communities. This is a picture of greater kingdom impact.

As churches get clear about what it means to follow Jesus Christ in mission in their particular context, the Holy Spirit will transform not only the people but the place. The discipleship and leadership 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. As a result of transformed churches, neighborhoods and communities will be transformed. Missional movements will be created as a result of learning communities where new wineskins burst forth as the church begins to engage and fulfill her call to live into the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).