



Eastern Regional Ministries Newsletter

Connecting, Coaching, Consulting, and Resourcing Churches & Ministries on America's East Coast

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A New 'Believer'—by Carl Bergman

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Those who know me best are aware that serving as a delegate to Synod is a task that I would prefer not to have. I have always preferred action to sitting indoors. So, as the day for heading to Chicago as one of Synod's delegates from Classis Atlantic North East drew near, what I was most eager for was Synod's adjournment. If I could have found a time machine to take me ahead one week, I would have jumped on it. Although I was aware that the work of Synod is important, my expectation was that the process of accomplishing that work would involve long days of un-inspiring discussions and debates. The schedule promised that we would be meeting each day nearly from dawn 'till dusk. There was just so much to do at home in my own church that I love doing, and there was so little at Synod that I thought would be "my cup of tea".

But I am a 'new believer'! Our week at Synod was not at all what I had expected. I now see how important it was for me to be there and see the amazing ways that God is at work in the CRC. I now know that Synod is not just an arduous

week of long meetings but a powerful experience of seeing the greatness of our God. Again and again throughout the week, I was amazed at how a denomination the size of the CRC is being used to have such a huge impact around the world. I have been renewed as a 'believer' that, in spite of all the piles of printed reports and methodical administrative procedures, where the Spirit of God is—there is joy.

The press releases that were sent to keep everyone informed about Synod's actions simply can not recount the real story of what happened that week. It was a week of inspiration, worship, praise, and marveling at the goodness and the power of God. The reports from our agencies on the health and growth of our ministries and the opportunity to personally pray with the various ministry directors was a special privilege. But what really puts tears in my eyes was to see the beautiful diversity of the people who were delegates this year and to see how committed they all are to the mission of God. There are just so many wonderful people in our church. The CRC is simply not the same as it was when

I was a delegate at Synod 15 years ago. For years we have prayed that God would enrich us with those from other backgrounds, and I was so deeply blessed to see that He has answered those prayers. I repeatedly said to those around me, "I love this church!"

Perhaps it is because of the number of denominations that we are surrounded with in New England who no longer share our passion for the Truth that I noticed how frequently the Scriptures were the basis of the comments being made by the various speakers as they addressed Synod. But it was a powerfully moving experience to see the commitment to be guided by the Word. It gave me renewed hope for the future to be surrounded by those who are dedicated to Scripture as the source of answers for the issues of our church and our world. I feel so encouraged and hopeful of what God has in store for us. Although I returned home physically exhausted, it was a week of spiritual inspiration and refreshment.

SCE Technology and Equipment Grants are available for churches to purchase, lease, or update technology and equipment resources for their congregations. Resources can include a computer, copies, telephone, answering machine, hearing assistance equipment, fax machine, sound system, power point projector, or other equipment that will assist the congregation in its ministry. Please note that the Sustaining Congregational Excellence (SCE) program is predominantly for smaller CRC congregations, which consist of 150 or less adult professing members based on current year book data. The SCE deadline is the 1st of every month. To download an application, go online to <http://www.crcna.org/pages/sce.cfm> or call 1-877-279-9994 ext. 0805.

When a church transitions and closes its doors, it is never easy. Often much pain and many tears go into the decision to no longer have a body of CRC believers meeting in a particular location.

A number of years ago, Hope Church in Framingham, MA, decided to close its doors. They were faced with the decision of what to do with the church's assets. Several ideas were considered, but finally a decision was reached through a great deal of discussion and much prayer. A church planting fund was set up and the Hope Fund was born.

Since this million dollar fund began ten or so years ago, many churches have greatly benefited from this fund. Currently, nine churches have begun with the help of the

Hope Fund and there are over 500 people who are now a part of the Christian Reformed Church in New England, in part because of this fund. Many are new believers or those who had not been part of a church for many years.

What this fund has shown is that even though churches die, there can be life that springs forth from it. The churches that have benefited from the Hope Fund are incredibly grateful to the members of Hope Church for their choice to support church planting. God has used these resources in a powerful way and with \$800,000 remaining in the fund, we know that He will continue to use it for many years to come.

Comeback Churches By Drew Angus, Eastern Regional Leader

I often get asked by Home Missions colleagues how the Christian Reformed churches are doing in the Eastern Region? (Classes Atlantic North East, Hackensack, and Hudson.) I am naturally fairly optimistic, so it's not difficult for me to point to the many ways that God is blessing our region. Recently, however, I decided that I needed a better objective handle on our churches. The following is data obtained from CRC year books dating from 1990-2007. What we have discovered may surprise you also.

1. How many churches were in the Eastern Region during this time frame? In 1990, 41; and in 2007, 69. In the last 18 years, 26 new churches have been planted and 2 have been re-birthered.
2. How many churches have disbanded over the last 18 years? 17 churches have disbanded. Of those 17, 11 were church plants and 6 were established churches.
3. What was the total adult membership of established CRC churches in 1990? There were 7,626 adult members in 1990 in established churches and in 2007, the number of adult members in established churches dropped to 4,951.
4. From 1990-2007, how many adult CRC members left the CRC for another denomination? 3,287 CRC members left the CRC for another denomination from 1990-2007.
5. What was the total adult membership of CRC new church plants in 1990? In 2007? There were 174 adult members in church plants in 1990 and 1,094 adult members in 2007.
6. How many of our churches have not had more than incremental membership growth over the last 18 years? 30.
7. How many of the pastors currently serving in our 69 churches are over 60 years old? 21 of our churches have pastors who are over 60 years old. 1 of these pastors is a church planter.

While statistics don't tell the whole story, they are still helpful to give us an overall picture of patterns and trends. Many of our churches have plateaued and others are in decline. Some churches are in an exciting process of being renewed. Other churches are in serious trouble and may not survive. We all know that change can be very difficult—but with God's help all things are possible. I recommend to you Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson's book, Comeback Churches, which is a practical, Biblical, and research-based book offering helpful counsel for churches that may need some guidance. The following are some valuable quotes from Comeback Churches:

"One of the challenges in changing a church is its history—not because its history is bad, but because it provides an idealized memory of what things once were rather than a path into a future that *must* be. And the more successful a past was, the more likely people want to return to it—which is why those who were most successful in a past paradigm have the most difficult transitioning to the next."

"Basically, churches and people don't respond to change well—they often react with anger, denial, and working harder, rather than dealing with the real nature of change."

"People usually don't change their attitudes until the pain of functioning in the 'same old, same old' way is greater than the pain of making necessary changes."

"When you consider making changes, keep the process of making disciples as the key priority in the church."

"The greatest asset to change will be God's people being renewed and revitalized in their relationships with Jesus Christ. The highest rated item by comeback leaders in the study of comeback churches was 'renewed belief' in Jesus Christ and the mission of the church. Do not underestimate this simple but powerful dynamic."

The church, like a human body, has a life span. Some churches will have great healthy capacity to grow old and continually change and mature into a ripe old age. Other churches run their course for a season and will then close their doors. We have seen some great examples of churches like the Hope Church use their resources after closing to plant new churches. The people from Hope Church have the satisfaction of seeing their gospel legacy live on into the next generation as more people have the opportunity to come to faith in Christian Reformed Churches. We have also seen churches that have gotten tired become re-energized and experience what Stetzer calls 'a comeback'.

The regional team is available for consultation wherever your church may be in its life cycle. Change is hard and it is our desire for no church to be alone in the process. Sometimes a church needs someone from outside itself to come in and give perspective—reality checks—encouragement—support—and to pray for a dynamic future.