

Thrive Supplement: Thriving Congregations—A Pathway for Church Renewal

I. Introduction

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) has been engaged in an ongoing conversation regarding congregational renewal for decades. The CRCNA's most recent journey began with the Healthy Church strategy in 2005. Several additional initiatives were offered to CRC leaders and churches including Ridder Church Renewal beginning in 2012, the Church Renewal Lab launched by Calvin Theological Seminary in 2013, and the Vibrant Congregations collaboration between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America in 2018. Congregations that engaged the renewal offerings report mixed outcomes as a result of the programs. Churches that experienced some measure of growth from the programs attribute the success to intentionally engaging a process of discernment to define their mission, clarify their vision, and implement their commitments through a renewed ministry plan.

The church renewal mandate from Synod 2023 (*Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 975-76) and the church planting mandate from Synod 2025 (*Acts of Synod 2025*, pp. 707-9) provide a renewed invitation for congregations to prioritize activities that nurture the spiritual growth and missional engagement of their members and align ministry with God's invitation to participate in his mission. Dallas Willard, philosopher and Christian spiritual formation author, explains in *The Great Omission* (p. xvi):

The mission [of God] naturally flows from the [Christian] life. Mission is not an afterthought, or something we might overlook or omit as we live the [Christian] life itself. The eternal life, from which many profound and glorious effects flow, is an interactive relationship with God and with his special Son, Jesus, within the abiding ambience of the Holy Spirit. Eternal life is the Kingdom Walk, where, in seamless unity, we 'do justice, love kindness, and walk carefully with our God' (Micah 6:8). We learn to walk this way through apprenticeship to Jesus. His school is always in session.

Local congregations are in the best position to disciple their members in deepening their relationship with God and widening their witness of the transforming power of the gospel. The various CRCNA ministry agencies (especially Thrive and Resonate) can provide support, resources, and coaching that will help congregations grow in faithful, holistic, missional discipleship, which tends to lead to numeric growth over time. However, Thrive and Resonate cannot do for the local church that for which the local church was designed by God to do. Thrive's role is one of equipping and encouraging congregations and their ministry leaders who have the relationships and responsibility to cultivate discipleship and kingdom growth in partnership with the Holy Spirit within their respective local contexts.

That being said, Thrive is eager and well positioned to work alongside congregations towards renewal. Trained coaches and experienced consultants will help assess the vitality of your congregation and recommend a personalized renewal pathway. Wherever your congregation is in its lifecycle, the Thriving Congregations renewal pathway invites your church on a journey to discern a missional path forward and supports your congregation's commitment to walk the path God has laid out for you.

II. Theology

The theological foundation for congregational renewal begins not with human strategy, but with a return to the mission of God, recognizing that mission is a fundamental attribute of the triune God. This theocentric and trinitarian framework shifts the focus from the church as the primary agent of activity to God as the initiator of all redemptive work. In this paradigm, renewal is defined as the church's committed participation in the Father's mission to reconcile all things through the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the work of the local congregation is to continually orient itself toward discerning what the Spirit is already doing in its midst and responding to the invitation to join God in his redemptive work.

This movement toward renewal is anchored in the central events of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. At the heart of this gospel is the inauguration of the kingdom of God, a reality that signals the renewal of all things and the creation's liberation from the systemic effects of sin. To seek the renewal of a congregation is to replant this gospel, forming communities that serve as both a sign and a foretaste of the coming kingdom. This requires a holistic fusion of the cultural mandate to care for the world with the commission to make disciples, recognizing that the gospel is meant to be embodied by a community whose collective life announces and demonstrates the lordship of King Jesus across every social, political, and psychological dimension of society.

Ultimately, the goal of congregational renewal is gospel saturation, a state in which the church serves as a kingdom of priests within its local context. This identity compels the gathered community to move beyond its own walls, ensuring that every individual has repeat opportunities to encounter the transformative power of the gospel through a community that is "blessed to be a blessing." By situating its life within the grand arc of Scripture—from creation and fall to redemption and the final consummation—the renewed congregation finds its true identity as a missionary people. We work tirelessly toward this end, participating in God's redemptive purposes for the sake of the world until the return of King Jesus, when all things are made new.

III. Context

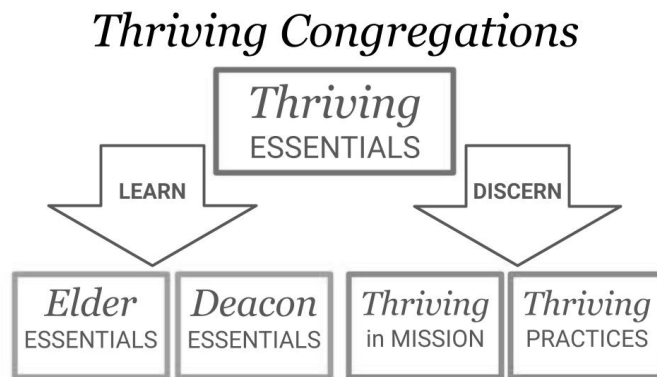
The Gather initiative (2024–2025) served as the critical listening and discernment exercise that provided the empirical and spiritual foundation for Thrive's renewal plan. The results from Gather show that there is a strong

correlation between the milestones of the *Our Journey* ministry plan and the practices of congregations experiencing renewal. This is not surprising since the milestones were informed by CRCNA members through the yearly denominational survey. Churches experiencing renewal are seeing growth in prayer and spiritual practices (milestone 1), increasing discipleship and ministry engagement between generations (milestone 2), a deepening commitment to be welcoming to diverse community members, including immigrants (milestone 3), and passion for the congregation’s holistic gospel mission to its local community and across borders (milestone 4). The Thriving Congregations pathway does not replace the ministry plan but appropriately supports congregations who discern the need and opportunity to grow in the milestone areas as part of their renewal journey.

Data from Gather highlighted significant gaps in congregational health, revealing that only 24 percent of participants felt their church programs flowed from a clear mission, and a mere 12 percent reported having a clear disciple-making process. One of the most pervasive disappointments identified was a severe lack of leadership and volunteerism, with many churches struggling to retain pastors and lay leaders who often felt they lacked proper theological training. Participants expressed a strong desire for more connection and cooperation with other local churches. They also admitted that their outreach was often ineffective, with many congregations becoming inwardly focused “spiritual country clubs” where only 11 percent believed the church had a hands-on commitment to the unchurched. Denominational data also showed that while ethnic, diaspora, and multilingual communities are the fastest-growing demographics, they often feel un-integrated or face significant cultural barriers. Additionally, the context is defined by a struggle to retain younger generations and the unique challenges faced by aging congregations navigating legacy and transition.

IV. Pathway

The Thriving Congregations renewal pathway is a relational and ongoing process grounded in the principles of intentional discernment, personal spiritual renewal preceding congregational renewal, and walking together in shared ministry.



Thrive provides tailored support for congregations at the beginning and the end of their life cycle. Emerging churches refine their purpose and build leadership capacity. Aging congregations can explore their mission and legacy, navigating significant transitions that may include the decision to replant or restart their ministries with the help of specialized assessment and coaching.

The journey begins with **Thriving Essentials**, a one-day course designed to align leaders on the four key paradigms of mission, discipleship, discernment, and leadership, emphasizing that mission is participation in God's work. Thriving Essentials is designed for everyone who cares about the life and vitality of their congregation. Whether they are a pastor, elder, volunteer, or active member, they will walk away with focused clarity, shared language, and practical tools to help your church flourish. Churches that have completed Thriving Essentials say it sparked new energy, led to deeper conversations, and instilled a stronger sense of unity in their ministry.

From there, congregations can focus on leadership development through the Elder Essentials and Deacon Essentials workbooks to unpack the "why" behind the council's charge to oversee congregational ministry.

- **Elder Essentials** provides a theological and practical framework for elders, emphasizing their calling as spiritual shepherds who participate in God's redemptive mission. Through six distinct lessons, the material outlines core responsibilities such as overseeing worship and sacraments, fostering hospitality, and ensuring robust faith formation for all ages. It also offers detailed guidance on sensitive tasks like pastoral care, visitation, and the restorative purpose of church discipline. By integrating scripture, the Belgic Confession, and Church Order, the workbook aims to cultivate leaders who are both spiritually mature and practically prepared. Ultimately, the sources serve as a roadmap for nurturing healthy congregations through gospel witness and principled, Christlike leadership.
- **Deacon Essentials** trains and inspires deacons through five core lessons that move from the biblical and confessional foundations of the office toward practical engagement in stewardship, mercy, biblical justice, and community partnership. Rather than viewing deacons as mere administrative functionaries, the workbook emphasizes their primary role as visionary leaders who equip and mobilize the entire congregation to participate in God's redemptive mission. By shifting from a scarcity mindset to one of abundance, the course encourages deacons to identify unique assets within their local contexts and to address the root causes of suffering through systemic change and relational benevolence. Ultimately, the workbook serves as a spiritual and strategic guide to help leaders embody Christlike service while pursuing the holistic restoration of their communities.

Congregations thrive when they have an intentional process for developing missionally engaged congregation members, acknowledging that discipleship is a lifelong endeavor that requires the ongoing transformation of both character and competency. The renewal path prioritizes the continuous development of leaders—from ordained officebearers to lay volunteers—by equipping them to own their influence and grow in their capacity to discern and participate in God's mission. Consequently, the strategy supports

churches in the creation of a robust discipleship pathway through the assessment of a variety of programs to find one that fits the local context and the implementation of the congregation's preferred program to build a sustainable leadership culture.

Alternatively, **Thriving in Mission** is a 9-12 month facilitated process to help churches define and live out their missional mandate. Rooted in God's redemptive story, the church identifies a guiding Scripture passage that stirs the hearts of their people and sparks a missional imagination. The process invites the church to envision its missional impact shaped by Acts 1:8 and our commitment to bear witness to the gospel "in Jerusalem" (locally), "in all Judea and Samaria" (regionally), and "to the ends of the earth" (globally). The creation of a five-year ministry plan integrates the mandate into the life of the congregation. Following the Thriving in Mission process, Thrive coaches congregations as they implement the plan and navigate the dynamics of change.

For collaborative growth, **Thriving Practices** cohorts allow groups of three to eight congregations to learn together on topics like intercultural ministry, parenting a church plant, community development, or creating a discipleship pathway. Drawing on extensive research and decades of grant work, Lilly Endowment Inc. reports that congregational vitality is significantly enhanced when faith communities move beyond isolation to embrace congregation-based learning. Research has demonstrated that creating learning communities allows congregations to navigate rapid cultural shifts more effectively by sharing wisdom, mission clarity, and adaptive practices.¹ The CRCNA's findings through Gather suggest that walking together helps leaders step back from daily busyness to gain new perspectives. By learning from one another's ministry contexts, congregations can move from simply surviving to thriving, sparking the creativity necessary to discover their missional mandate within their local communities and the world.

Throughout the renewal process, Thrive acts as a general practitioner for church health, maintaining the primary relationship while referring congregations to specialists like Resonate Global Mission, Reframe, or World Renew when expertise is needed.

Congregations need new ways of functioning that end the separation and compartmentalizing of mission tasks, such as outreach, evangelism, worship, preaching, faith formation, and more. To be God's covenant community in the world today, everything we do must be oriented toward proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of Jesus Christ concretely in a world alienated from God. The Thriving Congregations renewal pathway invites churches on a journey of growth and transformation as they align themselves with God's redemptive work.

Thrive
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¹ lillyendowment.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/thriving-2023-rfp.pdf